

The Academic Game

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The transition from high school to college is a difficult one for most students. This transition appears to be even more difficult for college athletes, since they have to make the change both athletically and academically. While the athletic transition may be difficult, athletes seem particularly unprepared for the academic transition. Many athletes mistakenly assume that college will be a continuation of their high school experience. They typically think that if they behave the way they did in high school they will be successful academically, or at least eligible to play. Much has been written about the poor academic performance of athletes, and various reasons such as low high school GPAs, the time commitment and requirements of their sport, and their lack of motivation are commonly cited. While we do not disagree with the commonly discussed reasons, we will discuss two additional reasons for athletes' poor academic performance.

We think that lack of information or ignorance regarding the role of the college student (how to act or behave like a college student) and how the academic demands of college are different from those in high school also are contributing factors. Because of their ignorance about college, not because of their intellect, many athletes act inappropriately in the classroom and hold on to erroneous assumptions and/or expectations about college work. Thus, they often behave in ways that are not only self-defeating to their individual academic success, but reinforce the "dumb jock" stereotype. In other words, because of their special star status in high school, many athletes never learn the student role and often have a distorted notion of what it means to be a college student.

We continue to be amazed by many athletes' lack of preparation for the academic demands of college. We are not referring to deficits in the basic skills, but to their lack of information concerning the amount of time and effort they will have to put into studying and their lack of the necessary study skills. Many athletes are amazed to find out that they will have to go to class, take notes, read assigned materials, etc. in order to do well in their classes. Consequently, unless they are provided with the necessary information about role expectations, or "the academic game," they will not only perform

poorly in their courses, but many will unfortunately assume that they are not doing well academically because they are not as smart as regular students.

Numerous student-athletes have indicated to us that they believe classes are easy for regular students and that they even look forward to and enjoy studying. We explain to them that we have never known anyone who enjoyed studying (including ourselves) and that even Einstein couldn't do well in a class if he never attended it and didn't complete any of the assignments. "What is the difference between reading and studying?", "I don't underline because I want to keep book nice," "They need me on the team, so I don't have to worry about studying," "I can pass the test because I have good common sense," "I don't have to read the book because the professor doesn't talk about it in class," "I know I can withdraw from the course because the professor knows that I am not doing well in the class," etc. are other examples of the sorts of comments student-athletes have made to us that indicate their ignorance about college.

We have also come to realize that student-athletes don't know how to act or behave like regular students. Regular students know how to convince the professor they are listening when they aren't, how to impress the professor with their intellect, how to "brown nose" the professor, how to convince the professor that the material presented is important (even if they don't think that it is), etc. Regular students know that grades are partially subjective and that how they behave in the classroom and relate to the professor will affect the grade they receive. In short, they know how to act or behave the way professors expect students to act.

Student-athletes, unlike regular students, often continue to act like athletes in the classroom and consequently behave inappropriately. It is not uncommon for student-athletes to arrive for class late, sleep during class, turn in assignments late, talk while the professor is talking, etc. We previously thought that student-athletes knew how to act appropriately and were choosing to behave in self-defeating ways for a variety of reasons; but, we are convinced that many have never learned the student role and therefore do not know how to behave appropriately. We have found that when student-athletes don't know how to behave appropriately that they tend to model the in-class and out-of-class behavior of other athletes (often self-defeating behaviors), rather than the behavior of regular students.

Checklist of Self-Defeating Behaviors and Assumptions

We have thus come to the conclusion that many athletes need to be taught the rules of the academic game, which includes the role of student and how college differs from high school. The Checklist of Self-Defeating Behaviors and Assumptions (See Table 1) is a simple device designed to provide athletes with information that may increase their awareness of self-defeating behaviors. This awareness may enable them to eliminate some of the self-defeating behaviors, and raise their credibility in the classroom as well as

Table 1

CHECK LIST OF SELF-DEFEATING BEHAVIORS AND ASSUMPTIONS. Check the items that are descriptive of what you do or think. Be honest, and check the item even if you don't do it all of the time.

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| — 1. Don't go to class. | — 21. Don't make out your own schedule. |
| — 2. Go to class late. | — 22. Make excuses for not turning in an assignment. |
| — 3. Sleep during class. | — 23. Say to a professor that you need a particular grade. |
| — 4. Sit in back of classroom. | — 24. Stop going to class when you aren't doing well rather than talking with the professor and/or withdrawing from the class. |
| — 5. Look bored or disinterested in class. | — 25. Party during the week. |
| — 6. Show up for class without materials. | — 26. Don't keep materials organized, lose syllabus, don't write down assignments and/or test dates. |
| — 7. Turn in assignments late. | — 27. Sit in class with a group of student-athletes. |
| — 8. Don't complete reading assignments. | — 28. Don't make up a schedule for studying. |
| — 9. Wait too late before you ask for help. | — 29. Start getting ready to leave the classroom before the class is over. |
| — 10. Try to complete assignments at the last minute. | — 30. Expect to be treated special because you are an athlete. |
| — 11. Complain about the amount of work assigned. | — 31. Let others think you are doing OK in your classes when you are in trouble. |
| — 12. Try to study in your room. | — 32. Still adding and/or dropping classes the 2nd-4th week of the semester. |
| — 13. Get up 10-15 minutes before class. | — 33. Cheat. |
| — 14. Talk in class while the professor is talking. | |
| — 15. Don't tell the professor ahead of time that you will miss class because of a road trip. | |
| — 16. Don't take notes in class. | |
| — 17. Don't get to know the professor. | |
| — 18. Act disrespectful towards the professor. | |
| — 19. Study about the same way in college as you did in high school. | |
| — 20. Don't underline. | |

their academic performance. The checklist consists of 33 items related to behavior during class, behavior outside of class, and student-athletes' expectations of what college is like and how they will be treated. We developed the Checklist after teaching a class (College Students and Their Culture) to first semester freshman football and basketball players, and football and basketball players on academic probation. It is based on our observations and discussions with student-athletes and their responses to a take-home final which included questions related to the self-defeating behavior and academic performance of student-athletes.

The Checklist is not intended to be inclusive and the specific items can be modified to better meet the needs of a particular group of athletes, however it does include what we have found to be some of their common self-defeating behaviors and assumptions. It can be easily and efficiently administered to individual athletes or utilized in a group context. Athletes complete the Checklist by indicating which of the items are descriptive of how they behave or what they assume (think).

It is assumed that most student-athletes, like regular students, engage in some self-defeating behaviors and therefore athletes should be encouraged to respond honestly to the Checklist rather than trying to appear less self-defeating than they are.

Following the completion of the Checklist, students are requested to select a specified number (usually 2-5 items) of self-defeating behaviors that they will work on eliminating. While the ideal would be to eliminate all self-defeating behaviors, it is unrealistic to expect anyone to modify or eliminate several self-defeating behaviors in a short period of time. It is therefore important to encourage the student-athletes to be realistic about how many and which behaviors they will attempt to change. Also, some of the behaviors on the Checklist, such as sitting in the back of the room, are easier to change when others, such as putting things off until the last minute, require more time and effort. The Checklist is not scored in any systematic manner, although you would assume that the number of items checked is related to the need for information and assistance (on occasion we have had student-athletes check all of the items). The follow-up will vary depending on whether you are working with an individual athlete or in a group or classroom setting.

Concluding Comments

The Checklist is one way to get some quick information about whether or not an athlete understands the difference between high school and college, and their knowledge and/or utilization of study skills. It helps student-athletes realize that poor academic performance is related to study skills as much as it is to intelligence. This is particularly important since student-athletes often feel inadequate intellectually because they too believe the "dumb jock" stereotype. It is also effective in helping student-athletes identify self-defeating things they do in the classroom and in so doing provides them with information about expected or appropriate classroom behaviors. In this way it can be used as the first step in the process of teaching athletes the student role and how to behave like students.

While all student-athletes will not choose to eliminate their self-defeating behaviors, it seems to be especially helpful in getting them to begin to take responsibility for their academic performance and in providing them with some structure or direction in reference to what they need to do to play "the academic game." Without this sort of information many student-athletes will continue to struggle academically with very little awareness of what they are doing wrong or how their behavior is in any way related to their academic performance.