

A Reconceptualization of Student-Athlete Education: Utilizing Critical Theory to Eliminate Perceived Conflict

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The purposes of this qualitative study were to examine how Division I football and basketball players were able to obtain a balanced, comprehensive college education, and to explore specific factors that enhanced the overall quality and symmetry of their experience. Results of this study highlight the inability of role theory to explain and manage issues related to student-athlete education, and suggest that critical theory may best explain how to secure a balanced, comprehensive education. Implications for personnel who provide personal support to student-athletes are discussed.

Over the past 15 years there has been increased interest in reforming college sport (Blum, 1992, 1994b, 1994c; Lederman, 1991a; Telander, 1989; Underwood, 1980). Reform efforts have focused on a variety of issues, but few have been more comprehensive or controversial than those directed at maximizing the quality and balance of the student-athlete experience. Some of the mandates directed specifically at this issue include the (1) eradication of athletic dormitories, (2) institution of a central academic eligibility clearinghouse, (3) certification of athletic departments, (4) passage of various propositions raising the academic standards necessary to maintain athletic eligibility (e.g., Proposition 16, Proposition 42, Proposition 48) (Blum, 1994a; Lederman, 1991b) and (5) publication of institutional graduation rate data. Such reform is not surprising, as both anecdotal and empirical evidence (Adler & Adler, 1991; Blum, 1993; Witham, 1995) suggest that student-athletes may not be afforded the benefits of a balanced and comprehensive college education.

While the academic achievement levels of certain athletes may equal, if not surpass, those of their non-athlete cohorts (cf. Benson, 1996), the grade point averages (GPA) and graduation rates of male student-athletes participating in revenue-producing programs at Division I institutions suggest that this group may have a more difficult time than others in taking advantage of all that a college education has to offer. For example, a 1988 study (Lederman, 1988) comparing the GPAs of student-athletes with non-athletes who were involved in time consuming extra-curricular activities, reported that the student-athletes had lower GPAs than the non-athletes, with football and basketball players recording the lowest GPAs of all athletes. In fact, the average grade for football and basketball players was one-quarter of a grade lower than students participating in extra-curricular activities. Examining a different measure of academic achievement, graduation rate, a 1996 study of Division I institutions indicated that the graduation rates of male basketball and football players who entered college in 1989 and matriculated within 6 years were 44% and 54 % respectively, compared to 55% for male non-athletes (Benson, 1996).

The concerns of those individuals or groups leading reform efforts are further reinforced by research on career development, which demonstrates an apparent willingness on the part of certain student-athletes to sacrifice career exploration in order to concentrate on sport. A study (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987) comparing the career maturity of male basketball and football players with non-athletes reported that college athletes exhibited lower levels of career maturity than non-athletes. In fact, the career maturity score of the athletes was no higher than that of the average ninth grader. Similarly, 65% of the Division I athletes involved in a more recent study (Murphy, Petitpas, and Brewer, 1996) recorded delayed or impaired career maturity scores, with males and those involved in revenue-producing sports recording the lowest scores of all athletes.

As the mandates listed in the opening paragraph suggest, concern about a balanced, comprehensive education for student-athletes extends beyond academic achievement and occupational exploration to include social-environmental issues as well. Findings support such a focus, suggesting that physical, demographic, and geographic alienation from the larger campus community may certainly influence the student-athlete experience. Research has shown that many student-athletes are required to dine at athletic department supervised "training tables," live with other athletes, and until recently, live in athlete-only dormitories (Adler & Adler, 1991; Petitpas, Finley, & Vottero, 1989; Witham, 1995). Inquiry into the friendship patterns of college athletes reinforces such claims, indicating that given a choice, male athletes tend to live and fraternize with teammates and/or athletes from other teams (Adler & Adler, 1991; Meyer, 1991). These findings suggest that athletes on many campuses are not afforded the autonomy that most college students expect, and as a result spend much of their time estranged from non-athletic peers and a variety of university activities. Social-environmental isolation such as this has a definite influence on the scope and quality of the educational experience (Ferrante & Etzel, 1996; Parham, 1993).

While reformers have proposed and passed legislation aimed at addressing the aforementioned issues, educators and researchers have devoted their time to exploring and explaining how student-athletes meet the demands and challenges they encounter in their complex daily lives. A theoretical approach used to understand and conceptualize this issue has been role theory, which is based on the premise that individual behavior results from the practice or execution of various role expectations (Adler & Adler, 1991; Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Mahar, 1993; Marks, 1977). The behaviors associated with particular roles or positions are determined and assigned by society to ensure a smooth functioning social order, with the expectation that these behaviors or actions will be performed by *all* individuals who occupy the role, with little if any individual variation (Connell, 1983; Giddens, 1979; Wentworth, 1980). Since individuals may occupy several roles simultaneously, there is the possibility that the demands of one role may be incompatible with the expectations or requirements of another role, thereby creating role conflict (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Connell, 1983).

Both empirical and anecdotal evidence support the suggestion that individuals trying to combine the student and athlete roles may frequently experience situations in which the requirements of them in the "student" role are incompatible with the expectations of them in the "athlete" role (Adler & Adler, 1991; Baillie, 1993; Chartrand

& Lent, 1987; DeFrancesco & Gropper, 1996; Gabbard & Halischak, 1993). From the perspective of role theory, then, the incompatible expectations associated with two or more demanding roles may contribute to a student-athlete's inability to obtain a comprehensive college education.

Based on this dichotomized and dualistic conceptual understanding of the student-athlete existence as a problem between two conflicting roles, researchers and practitioners have identified one general strategy for managing such situations which is often adopted by student-athletes and encouraged by others both inside and outside of the athletic department. That is, that the demands of incompatible role expectations can be diminished by reducing or eliminating the importance of one of the competing roles. By reducing, eliminating, or *foreclosing* on the importance of their obligations in one role, individuals *selectively optimize* their overall functioning in another role (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1992; Marcia, 1966). The problems inherent in this method of conceptualizing and managing the "incompatible" role expectations often encountered by student-athletes, along with the fact that many student-athletes are able to take advantage of all a college education has to offer without minimizing or neglecting any of their obligations, suggest that alternative approaches may be warranted in studying and facilitating the education of college athletes.

In identifying alternative approaches, it is important to operationalize the specific aspects of role theory which make it an unsuitable choice for explaining and managing issues related to student-athlete education. First, role theory espouses a homogeneous human existence, maintaining similar expectations for each individual who occupies a particular role or position (Connell, 1983; Giddens, 1979; Wentworth, 1980). Role theorists assume that all roles are orderly and stable, and that individuals and their past experiences have little influence on the practice of their roles. In ignoring the dynamic and historical nature of behavior, role theorists suggest that there are finite, standard ways in which to experience the student-athlete role and deal with the conflict of competing role expectations. Second, role theory represents a myopic depiction of individual behavior. In suggesting that individual actions are motivated by psychological constructs such as the need to conform to societal expectations, the theory ignores the importance of social conditions that influence cognition and behaviors (Connell, 1983; Stacey & Thorne, 1985; Wentworth, 1980). Neglecting to consider structural and situational influences on the performance of various role expectations results in the reinforcement of a simplistic, singular approach to the attainment of a comprehensive, balanced college education.

Finally, role theory fails to address issues of resistance or opposition to specific role expectations (Connell, 1983; Giddens, 1979; Wentworth, 1980). Rather, it assumes that in order to keep society functioning in a smooth manner, individuals should be willing to conform their behavior to predetermined role expectations. By failing to acknowledge matters of individual resistance and opposition, role theory ignores important hegemonic forces inherent in the college environment.

The historical, stable, myopic nature of role theory illustrates its limited ability to explain and manage issues related to student-athlete education. The dynamic nature of the college experience along with the interaction of individual and environmental factors in shaping this experience, suggest the utilization of a critical perspective to explain how many student-athletes are able to obtain a balanced and comprehensive

college education. Popular in several disciplines within the social sciences, critical theory combines the notions of constraint, dominant ideology, and hegemony discussed by conflict theorists with the concepts of personal growth and social order espoused by functionalists, to explain how "beliefs and practices are created, reproduced, and changed..." (Coakley, 1990, p. 31).

Critical theorists assume that sport does not exist merely to meet the needs of the social system nor to reinforce the dominance of the powerful (Coakley, 1990). Although power may be in the hands of certain groups, critical theorists argue that sport is created by people interacting with one another, who use their own individual power, resources, resistance, and opposition to make sport into something that is meaningful to them (Messner & Sabo, 1990). In the case of an education for student-athletes, critical theorists understand that athletes do not necessarily progress through college with a false consciousness. Consistent with a conflict theory (which informs the critical perspective) athletes at certain institutions may recognize that their athletic department is protecting its own interest by enrolling them in manageable albeit useless courses, providing tutors to "help" with tough assignments, and monitoring their grades. Student-athletes realize what is going on around them, and depending upon their ultimate goals, can decide if and how to take action. From a critical perspective, individuals and their interactions with others are dynamic and influenced by the situational and structural circumstances surrounding a particular issue.

Critical theorists also acknowledge that through constant negotiation and transformation, shared values and conflicts-of-interest can co-exist in the same society (Coakley, 1990; Sage, 1990). As such, individuals may be oppressed by historical and/or economic conditions, but they do not lose their ability to think critically and to act within the limits of structural constraints. In the current context, student-athletes from working class families may have fewer options for obtaining a college education than those from privileged backgrounds, and therefore consciously decide to endure the hectic schedules, frequent verbal outbursts from a coach, and other inconveniences associated with their student-athlete status "in exchange" for an athletic scholarship. Conversely, those from privileged backgrounds who do not rely on an athletic scholarship to obtain a college education may take a more active approach in resisting and opposing such practices, as the consequences to them (i.e., loss of scholarship) are less detrimental. These examples, in conjunction with the one provided above, illustrate the dynamic, historical, and individually oriented nature of critical theory, and therefore the value of its use to study the education of intercollegiate student-athletes.

Although little research has been focused in this direction, it is the author's contention that in order to gain insight into the development of a well-rounded quality education for student-athletes, researchers should examine the experiences and perceptions of, as well as the strategies utilized by, those student-athletes for whom college was a balanced, comprehensive experience. The purpose of this research is to address the gap in the literature on athlete-centered change by utilizing qualitative methods and a critical perspective to (1) examine how the student-athletes in the sample shaped their experiences, (2) explore specific factors that enhanced the overall quality and symmetry of their education, and (3) provide implications for academic advisors, sport psychology consultants, and others who deal with the educational concerns of student-athletes.

METHODS

Since little empirical evidence exists documenting the nature of the balanced student-athlete experience (i.e., comparable participation in academic, athletic, and social activities) a qualitative approach is most appropriate in examining contributions to student-athlete success. This approach enables researchers to examine previously unexplored areas without the bias of preconceived notions and predetermined hypotheses. Through their actions and words, the student-athletes themselves identify important issues and concerns with educational attainment, thereby ensuring that their experiences and perceptions, not the researchers' predetermined hypotheses, guide the study and help us to understand the factors important in shaping a comprehensive educational experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

Participants

In an effort to study individuals who were successful in acquiring a balanced college education from a Division I institution (hereafter referred to as the University), the participants were selected purposefully, as is consistent with naturalistic methodologies (Patton, 1990). The criteria for an individual's inclusion in the study were: (1) University graduate, (2) University letter-winner between 1980 and 1990¹ in football or men's basketball, and (3) current residence within 120 mile radius of the University. Potential subjects were identified from a list of current and former student-athletes that was provided by the University Varsity Club. These individuals were contacted by phone, and in the case of unlisted numbers, by mail. Overall, 44% of the former student-athletes who fit the criteria volunteered to participate in the current study, which was approved by and conducted in accordance with, guidelines established by the University's Institutional Review Board. It should be noted that research (Borg & Gall, 1983) has shown that individuals who volunteer to participate in studies tend to have strong opinions about the subject matter. Thus, the men who agreed to be interviewed for the current study may have had either very positive or very negative experiences and/or perceptions that they wanted to report.

Male athletes involved in revenue-producing sports at Division I institutions were selected as the target group because research suggests that they may have a more difficult time than other athletes in obtaining a balanced college education (Adler & Adler, 1991; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Lederman, 1988). The decision to conduct face-to-face interviews necessitated physical proximity, thus the 120-mile radius. This geographic area, which has the largest concentration of University alumni, encompassed three states. Former rather than current student-athletes were selected because of the sensitive nature of the topics to be addressed, the politically charged atmosphere surrounding the University athletic department at the time of data collection, and the desire to minimize potential stress to the participants. Although

¹Although the 10-year period under study represents a time of philosophical and legislative change in college sport, it should be noted that none of the men in the sample entered the University prior to the institution of academic reform measures (i.e., Proposition 48, Proposition 42). Similarly, the University community did not become actively involved in reform efforts until the late 1980s and early 1990s.

some of the former student-athletes were affected by the climate surrounding University athletics (e.g., refusal to discuss their experiences, assertions that the research was for a story in a newspaper or magazine, etc.), they clearly had less to lose than current athletes by participating in a study examining the experiences of college athletes. While some researchers (Gould, Udry, Tuffey, & Loehr, 1996; Rhodes, Hill, Thompson, & Elliot, 1994) have questioned the utilization of retrospective data collection techniques, others (Bloom, 1985; Scanlan, Ravizza, & Stein, 1989) report that the viability of retrospective interviews focusing on salient experiences and issues in an individual's life has been demonstrated, and is an acceptable method of eliciting this type of information.

The participants in the study consisted of 26 former male letter-winning football (n=20) and basketball (n=6) players. Nineteen percent of the participants were African-American and 81% were Anglo-American. Approximately 30% of the men in the sample had played their respective sports at the professional level.

The participants graduated with academic majors from numerous University departments and were working in various careers at the time of the interview (see Table 1). The popularity of the Communications major was due in large part to the fact that students enrolled in the Communications degree program were required to complete only 28 credits in major courses, allowing them to fill the remainder of their schedule with electives. Contrary to the suggestions made by other researchers (Adler & Adler, 1991; Brede & Camp, 1987), the men in this study did not major in communications so they could fill their schedules with "easy" electives. Rather, several of the men had hoped to pursue careers in business upon graduation, but could not meet the requirements for admission into the College of Business. The liberal credit guidelines in the Communications Department, however, enabled them to enroll in the more interesting, demanding, and applicable business courses.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview format was employed to understand how the participants were able to secure a balanced, comprehensive college education and explore factors that facilitated their success. By giving each participant a "voice," the researcher was able to understand their experiences and perceptions, their thought and decision-making processes, the culture or climate in which they were operating, and acquire a comprehensive picture of what they were experiencing during their college tenure.

The development of the interview format was consistent with previous qualitative research both inside and outside of the sport domain (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Scanlan et al., 1989). Research (Adler & Adler, 1991; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Meyer, 1990) depicting the college experience as a dynamic, evolving process, dictated the organization of each interview around a discussion of experiences and perceptions in the following time frames: (1) pre-University, (2) freshman year, (3) remaining years, and (4) retirement/transition. In an effort to elicit participants' experiences and perceptions related to the demands placed on student-athletes, factors important in the education of student-athletes, strategies utilized to facilitate their education, as well as issues related to their transition and retirement from organized sport, evidence from empirical studies and anecdotal inquiries in these areas were used to frame questions in the interview script.

A combination of open-ended and then more specific probing questions were asked in an effort to better understand how these individuals successfully obtained a balanced education. Sample questions from the aforementioned areas are provided in Table 2. The interviews took place over a 5-month period, and were conducted in a variety of convenient and quiet locations. While several individuals familiar with the current study and related research reviewed and contributed to the interview script, the author was the only interviewer and attempted to conduct each interview session in a similar, yet flexible manner. Interview length ranged from 90 minutes to four hours, with the average interview lasting 2 hours and 30 minutes.

Establishing Trustworthiness

The theoretical paradigms underlying and informing the utilization of qualitative and quantitative methods are quite distinct, and therefore issues typically discussed in the context of quantitative research (e.g., randomization, sample size, validity, reliability, etc.) are not considered as such in the current paper. Rather, results of the current study should be read and considered in light of the following discussion.

The researcher's interpretation of the data, or credibility, was established through member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing. Member checking was performed throughout the study by summarizing and paraphrasing participant responses, and by asking participants to review summaries and interpretations of the data. Triangulation was achieved by reading book and newspaper accounts of the University athletic department and the climate or culture that surrounded that era. Discussions with "objective" members of the University community also helped to verify the information obtained in the interviews. The participants themselves also served to verify the experiences and perceptions of the sample, as similarities were reported by participants who neither knew, or played on the same team with one another. A colleague of the author served as a knowledgeable peer debriefer, and as an auditor of the inquiry process.

Thick descriptions were provided in an effort to increase the transferability of the themes and assertions generated by the data. Former student-athletes not involved in the study but possessing characteristics similar to those of the participants, as well as researchers in sport and exercise science, verified through review of data collection and analysis processes, the quality and quantity of the descriptions. The audits of inquiry process and product mentioned above were also used to establish the dependability of the study.

Data Analysis

Each interview was audio-taped, transcribed, developed into a case study, and content analyzed in a manner consistent with that suggested by researchers inside and outside of the movement sciences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Scanlan et al., 1989). Specifically, raw data quotes, phrases, and paragraphs were examined, and those with similar meaning combined into groups. The groups or lower order themes were, through both deductive and inductive procedures, organized into meaningful higher order themes and categories (See Figure 1). Consistent with qualitative methods and grounded theory, the data and various theoretical constructs were examined concurrently to identify the theoretical perspective (i.e., critical theory) which best fit or explained the data.

Results

Analysis of the interview data indicate that the results of this study cannot be explained in a manner typically used (i.e., role theory) in texts and other research studies to explain how student-athletes manage their complex lives. The fact that the participants thought critically about their situations (i.e., awareness), acted on this awareness (i.e., agency), had their efforts circumscribed by the University athletic department (i.e., structural constraints) and were impacted by the dynamic nature of their experiences and perceptions (i.e., situation specificity)

suggest that the results of this study, and subsequent discussions of interventions with student-athletes, should be viewed through the lens of critical theory.

AWARENESS

Theoretically, it is suggested that power is dynamic and that people do not have or possess power. Rather, people are placed in relations of power where they experience more power or less power than some; this power is constantly changing in accordance with contextual relationships. Furthermore, critical theorists assert that lack of power does not necessarily hinder the ability of individuals to think critically about their life circumstances (Coakley, 1994; Messner & Sabo, 1990). Intercollegiate athletics, or athletes, are no exception; while power imbalances definitely exist, this does not mean that those who often experience less power (i.e., the student-athletes) have lost their ability to recognize this situation and view it critically (Messner & Sabo, 1990).

The content of the interviews indicated that the student-athletes in the present study were indeed aware of what was going on around them. The oppression or inability of the athletes to make ideas dominant as well as their perceived exploitation or utilization for profit by the University, neither impaired their ability to look at their experiences reflectively nor their ability to obtain a balanced college education. Specifically, the men were aware of the focus of the University athletic department on eligibility as well as the contradictions that existed between what they were told by coaches and other athletic department personnel and what actually occurred. As a result of this awareness, the participants were taking a first step in successfully securing a comprehensive education.

Focus on Eligibility

Interview data indicated that participants were aware that the focus of the University athletic department was on athletic eligibility rather than education. This focus, and subsequent awareness, began for most of the men when they arrived at the University as freshmen. The men received "assistance" in choosing manageable courses and finalizing their class schedules; in some cases, the men had schedules waiting for them when they arrived on campus. As one athlete recalled: "There was no process, my schedule was made out for me by the athletic department... They said, 'first term is going to be a tough one for you with football, with adjustment, so take a light load'." While it may be wise for all students to take a reduced credit load during the period of adjustment inherent in the first few semesters of college, participants in the current study believed the athletic department was proposing these schedules so that athletes did not have to spend every waking moment studying

and could therefore devote more time and energy to athletics.

The men's awareness of the focus on eligibility was also evident as they described the relationship between the University athletic department and certain University professors. The uninteresting and meaningless classes in which the student-athletes were often encouraged to enroll were typically taught by professors with informal ties to the athletic department. While the participants were careful to avoid saying that they were "given" grades in these courses, they were convinced that University athletic department personnel knew certain instructors would be more sympathetic than others to the time and travel demands faced by student-athletes, and therefore more lenient in assigning grades. Similarly, it was not unusual for the men to have their professors provide extra assistance at athletic study halls and on athletic road trips. One participant shared his recollections about such activities:

I had professors who were at my study table. I can remember an occasion where a natural science professor—I had his class the next day, we had a test—and he's asking some question and there were a couple of other [athletes]... And finally he just goes "God [expletive]," and he opens up his briefcase and he takes out the actual exam and he starts reading the questions on it.

Similar examples were provided when describing the tutoring services available to University athletes. Tutors were available at study hall on a "first come-first served" basis, and were present primarily to help the athletes with their general education courses. Tutors for specialized and upper-level courses were available at the request of the student-athlete and the approval of the athletic academic advisor. The following experience with tutors is consistent with that of all the participants, and illustrates the perceived strengths and weaknesses of such a service.

You had the tutor who legitimately tutored you, especially for the guys that were business [majors] and they were taking [upper level math courses]. I understand that was a pretty tough class. But then there's guys getting tutored for [English Composition]. Well basically the tutor would come in and write the paper and say "write this out." You know, give 'em all the ideas and "here you go," and then he'd write it.

While the men were occasionally grateful for the "assistance" provided by tutors and certain faculty members, they knew these services were being offered so that they could pass classes and remain eligible for athletic competition. The participants also knew that such perquisites would ultimately undermine their abilities to obtain a well-rounded college education.

Contradictions

In addition to their awareness of the University athletic department focus on eligibility, the participants were also aware of the contradictions that existed around them, particularly those involving (1) others' assessments of their chances in professional sport, (2) the loyalty of athletic department personnel to the University and the athletic program, and (3) the loyalty of athletic department personnel to student-athletes. Awareness of these contradictions served to reinforce participants' impressions that the University, and athletic department in particular, were only concerned about them as athletes, and would do little to ensure that they received a well-rounded college education.

Professional sport. During the data collection process, each participant admitted that he had dreamed of one day playing his sport at the professional level. This dream was reinforced by coaches during the recruiting process, and then again later during their college playing days. One athlete explained how his dream of playing professionally had been reinforced: "Just the process of being recruited, and all the major colleges wanting you. And they're saying you're the greatest thing since pockets. They make you feel like you can play anywhere." While some of the men initially believed this assessment, there came a time when they realized that the coaches were just "feeding them a line." The athletes in this study perceived the reinforcement of their dream to be in the best interest of the coaches, who wanted to win games and build players' sport-related egos; a player who thought he might have a chance at a professional contract might devote more time and energy to furthering his athletic abilities than anything else. While he may not succeed in athletic, academic, or social domains, he would have served his coaches and the athletic department well.

The majority of the student-athletes in the study realized early in their college careers, however, that they did not have the talent to play professionally. Watching more talented teammates get cut from professional teams, or assessing their size and ability against that of others were just two of the ways the men came to realize they may not make it to the professional ranks. Still, the men felt that coaches continued to reinforce their athletic abilities and encourage them to work harder so that they might have a chance at a professional career. The men admitted that it was good for their egos to hear such things, but because they were aware of the hypocrisy, were not deterred from concentrating on education and non-athletic careers.

Loyalty. In addition to an awareness of the contradictions that surrounded their professional sport opportunities, the student-athletes in the study were also aware that the University athletic department benefited economically from football and basketball, and that they as athletes were often commodified in the process. In other words, the men perceived that they were valued not so much as individuals, but more as products or objects used to win games and make money.

The numerous coaching changes endured by the football players in the study reinforced this perception. The fact that coaches were not honest about accepting other job offers served as indicators to the men that coaches did not care about them. Many of the football players in the study had played under three head coaches and numerous assistant coaches during their college tenure, contending with changes in coaching style and philosophy as well as changes in off-

season and off-field regulations. As the mens' experiences suggested, lack of continuity in the coaching staff served to strengthen their perception of contradictions.

The participants' treatment during the process of retiring from college sport was another indicator that they were seen merely as a means of winning games and making money. Although the men had invested much of themselves in their respective sports, little if anything was done by University or athletic department personnel to ease their transition from athlete to non-athlete, or facilitate their overall personal development. As one participant recalled:

When you're done with that last bowl game that last year, that's it. I mean that's it. You very seldom have anything to do with—I don't know it's like a long lost relative. You walk in one day after that last bowl game,

you walk in, you're like that's it; you're not part of the family anymore. You're just kinda kicked out of the nest.

As the words of this athlete and others suggest, it was "out with the old and in with the new"; the men were no longer directly valuable to the athletic program, and were treated as such.

Overall, the student-athletes in this study were very aware of what was transpiring around them; the athletic department overtly stressed academics and obtaining a solid education, but their covert actions suggested otherwise. In theory, study hall, grade monitoring, and class schedule assistance were developed to help athletes who were devoting 40 or more hours a week to athletics, as well as those individuals who may have come from overcrowded and underfunded high schools; it seemed as if the athletic department was doing these men a favor. In reality, the athletes perceived that the University athletic department had developed a method for controlling them, making certain that they did not neglect their athletic-related responsibilities. By trying to enroll them in manageable albeit useless courses, provide tutors to assist with tough assignments and/or papers, monitor grades, and reinforce athletic achievements, the athletic department seemed to be encouraging the men to put athletics ahead of a balanced education. A consistent theme throughout the study was that coaches and the athletic department were perceived as being more interested in the men as athletes than as students or human beings. The athletes were being exploited, and they knew it.

The scenario described above is a perfect example of the hegemonic process, whereby the group in charge uses their power and resources to make their ideas and perceptions dominant. Consistent with critical theory, this hegemony was incomplete, as the athletes in the current study did not progress through college with a false consciousness; rather, they retained their ability to think reflectively, and examined their situations objectively. By doing so, the student-athletes became aware of what was going on around them and could then decide how to progress or act in such a way as to secure a comprehensive, well-rounded education.

AGENCY

As discussed earlier, critical theory stresses "agency" or individuals' abilities to think critically, and to reshape and redefine oppressive situations. The student-athletes in this study were no exception, which explains why their perceptions and experiences help to refute the assumptions inherent in role theory. As illustrated above, the men were aware of what was going on around them. And as will be shown in this section on agency, the majority of the participants chose in one way or another to act on this knowledge, which served to facilitate their attainment of a symmetrical and complete college education.

Defying Dependency Training

The primary way in which the men acted on the environment created by the University athletic department was to defy athletic department personnel and the dependency training they promoted. Dependency training, or doing things for others instead of teaching them the skills which enable them to be independent, is unhealthy because it develops in less powerful individuals little sense of control. Completing class schedules for players, hiring tutors to assist them with homework, and guiding

them toward manageable majors are just a few examples of dependency training used by the University athletic department. As stated above, these tactics did not always work, as the participants often resisted and/or defied these attempts. For example, several of the athletes exercised agency by attending the *normal* freshman orientation rather than that offered by the athletic department. One student-athlete who attended normal freshman orientation and continued to design his own class schedule remembered:

They have a special orientation for athletes... I just went to the normal student orientation, sometime in July or August or something like that, and I just did it myself. I took a natural science, I took a math, and I took [English]. Eleven credits, and then I took one other class to give me twelve credits. So that's all I did. I wasn't gonna take the chance of letting someone in the athletic department screw me up. There was no way.

Similarly, other participants completed their own class schedules and consulted regular academic advisors rather than those employed by the athletic department. One such participant, a basketball player, recalled his attempt to register for classes his first semester at the University:

He [academic advisor for athletes] called me in and told me to go where all the black athletes go. He said "Jim, I'm gonna get you a good grade point." And I said "[expletive] the grade point, I want an education." I said "you got me in a class that I don't want to take." I said "I don't need to take basketball, I'm pretty good at it." I said "I don't need to take two criminal justice courses because you know the prof." And unfortunately instead of them saying "[expletive], this is a pretty good guy"... They didn't care where I went to high school. They didn't care about that stuff.

As a result of concerns such as those voiced above, many of the student-athletes in the study refused to trust individuals employed by the athletic department with their college education. This was their way of acting on their awareness, and ultimately taking responsibility for their own education.

Mainstreaming

Student-athletes in the study also acted on what was transpiring around them by trying to *mainstream* themselves into the typical college environment. Instead of associating primarily with teammates and other athletes, as so many intercollegiate athletes tend to do (Adler & Adler, 1991; Meyer, 1990), the majority of the men in this study were part of a non-athletic subworld². Despite the dependency training, special privileges, and family atmosphere created by the coaches, the men chose to be more like their non-athlete peers. Many of the participants despised the special treatment and notoriety they received as student-athletes, and felt like they were missing out

²See Crosset & Beal (1997) for a complete discussion of terminology in sport-related ethnographic and/or qualitative research.

on the true college experience. Joining fraternities and rooming with non-athletes were just two of the ways the men tried to integrate themselves into the college environment.

The men's inclusion into a non-athletic subworld also prompted them to take educational and occupational planning cues from their non-athlete peers, instead of the athletic department.

For example, when an athlete's non-athlete roommate declared a major (per the advice of his academic advisor), the athlete decided that it must be time for him to declare a major. Job fairs, resume and interview workshops, as well as other career guidance services were also discovered via friends and roommates who were not athletes. While the coaches seemed to spend quite a bit of time trying to shield athletes from the typical college environment, the participants realized that they may not have been getting the real story from their coaches, and thus decided to assert their independence. By doing so, the participants were taking an active role in obtaining a comprehensive college education.

Overall, the men in the study were quite adept at acting on their awareness of the University athletic environment. Specifically, the participants chose to defy the dependency training espoused by athletic department personnel and mainstream themselves into the college milieu. The resistance of some student-athletes, however, was intermittent; possession of power, access to resources, and differences in circumstances played an important role in which athletes acted and when the action occurred. Even when the student-athletes obeyed all of the established rules, they did not necessarily believe them. The participants may have been prevented from acting on their awareness by factors out of their control, but that did not strip them of the ability to think critically and take small steps toward obtaining a complete college education.

Structural Constraints & Situational Circumstances

As indicated by the preceding discussion, increasing athletes' awareness about the environment in which they exist and the circumstances they encounter may facilitate their abilities to act on this awareness, and in the current context, to succeed in obtaining a balanced education. According to critical theorists this process may not be as simple as it sounds, as awareness and agency are greatly influenced by ideological and structural constraints built into that particular society, and dynamic situational factors which may vary across time, place, and within a group of people. (Coakley, 1994; Messner & Sabo, 1990). This appeared to be the case with the student-athletes in the current study, whose actions were often circumscribed by structural and situational forces present in their environment.

Sport and Team Factors

The structure of the teams and/or sports of which the men were a part may have played an important role in their college experiences in general, and their ability to obtain a well-rounded education in particular. The fact that the participants were all members of revenue-producing teams meant that they may have devoted more time and energy to their respective sports than did participants in non-revenue producing sports. The time spent in practice and related sessions, coupled with the amount of traveling done by these teams may have prevented the men from devoting more time

to other components of a college education.

Situational factors related to the sport in which the men participated may also have influenced their college experiences. For example, the sheer number of individuals on the football team may have affected how the men felt about their education. The fact that the football coaches had more players to monitor may explain why the football players in the study often complained about the superficial relationships they had with their coach(Es). The type and amount of traveling done by the two teams may also have been responsible for some of the different experiences reported. Similarly, the win/loss records of the two teams may explain some of the changes that occurred in the programs during the men' careers. A string of winning teams may have changed the coaches' focus to athletics, while a few losing years may have led the athletes to focus more on academic success. In the end, the different characteristics of the two teams represented in the study may have influenced the experiences and perceptions of the participants and the paths they took to secure a complete education.

Personnel Factors

In addition to the structural constraints and situational complexities associated with specific sports and teams, University personnel and their respective philosophies may also have influenced the participants' abilities to proactively acquire college education. In most universities the formal nature of the sport experience is defined primarily through the head coach, and ultimately the athletic director and president of the institution; the mission of the institution and philosophy of each president eventually trickles down into athletics (Bicknell, 1989; Single, 1989). For example, a presidential focus on the arts or research may mean a disinterest of sorts in athletics, and less power for head coaches. A presidential focus on athletic supremacy, however, may mean that a head coach has power and authority on campus, and people (i.e., administrators, trustees, and faculty) may tolerate a more professional sport atmosphere among these teams.

Personnel changes were expressly reflected in the experiences of football players at the University, who encountered several presidents and three head coaches during the time period under study. The first and third coaches, for example, ran their teams with a professionalism often seen in the NFL. Winning games was the focus of these teams, with academic achievement and a well-rounded education taking a decided backseat to eligibility. Comments made by the athletes regarding their coaches' lack of attention to academic and career plans served as evidence of this focus. For the second coach, however, winning was not as important as the development of responsible, decent citizens. The success of his players off the field appeared to be just as important as their on-field accomplishments. As one football player recalled:

Our position coach really took an emphasis in it [a total education] and was concerned about what we were doing. He'd actually come in and instead of talking about football, he'd talk about what you were gonna do when you graduated and stuff like that. He was good. I think it was kind of uncommon. He was really concerned about the total person rather than just the football player. He was more concerned about manners and trying to educate people from a social standpoint as well as football.

Unlike their football playing cohorts, the basketball players in the study played for the same head coach throughout their college careers. Such continuity may have

led to less pressure and more confident athletes; the men were aware of what was expected of them, and did not have to go out of their way to learn a new system and impress a new coach. Several of the football players, however, had three different head coaches and various key assistant coaches during their college careers. These men were admittedly frustrated by this situation, as they never had a guaranteed position or role from one year to another. Similarly, the football players recounted how schedules and time demands fluctuated with the change in coaches. From these comments it becomes clear to see how it may have been difficult for these individuals to "let down their guards" so that they could devote time to the other components of a college education.

The aforementioned differences and/or changes in University leadership, coaching staff, and coaching philosophy further illustrate how structural constraints and situational differences, along with their contextual and temporal elements, may have affected the participants' abilities to take an active role in obtaining a well-rounded college education.

Social Network

Like personnel and sport/team factors, social networks also appeared to influence the college experience of the participants in the study. Since the men had little choice in selecting teammates, they often looked outside of sport—or associated only with certain teammates—in an effort to surround themselves with people who shared similar goals and nonsport interests. As one athlete explained, "I didn't want to come home and talk about football. I want to come home and say 'What'd you guys do? What's up?' Get a taste of the real world outside University sports. I liked it. I chose to do it that way."

Additional analyses highlighted situational differences, indicating that those men who associated primarily with non-athletes tended to place an even greater emphasis on a well-rounded education than those men who associated primarily with other athletes. As the interviews illustrated, those men who placed more emphasis on a complete education were the same men who wanted to be like normal college students. These individuals were not comfortable with all the hype surrounding their athletic prowess, and in an effort to progress through college like other University students, utilized their non-athlete friends as barometers to help guide academic and other decisions. Conversely, the men who associated primarily with other athletes tended to be somewhat more invested in their athlete status and the athletic subworld, occasionally using their status as University football or basketball players to get preferential treatment.

These differences in friendship patterns reinforce the view of critical theorists that structural and situational factors must be considered when explaining or predicting behavior. While selecting friends with similar values, interests, and dedication to the total college experience empowered the men in this study and mobilized them to pursue a balanced education more actively than the other men, the overall outcome (i.e., successful in obtaining a balanced education) for all men was the same. The men may have intended to actively pursue a balanced college education only to have their actions undermined or influenced by structural constraints and/or situational factors that were outside their control.

The results of this study suggest that a critical perspective, which takes into account more than the needs of the social system, provides extensive insight into how student-athletes involved in Division I revenue-producing programs are able to obtain a balanced, comprehensive education. Although University athletic department personnel tried to make their ideas dominant by keeping the athletes eligible for competition and reinforcing their dreams of professional sport careers, the participants were not blind to these "tactics." Rather, they were aware of the focus on eligibility as well as the contradictions that existed in coaches' assessments of professional sport opportunities and their loyalty to the athletic program. This awareness was translated into action, which resulted in the men defying the athletic department's dependency training and mainstreaming themselves into the general college environment. Those individuals who were less active or explicit in their resistance were not necessarily less dedicated to securing a well-rounded education; rather, structural constraints and/or situational complexities may have prevented them from speaking or acting at that time. Such factors may have prevented overt resistance, but did not prevent the participants from examining situations objectively and thinking about them critically.

Note that the preceding results and explanations are decidedly different from those that would be offered from a role conflict perspective. Specifically, role theorists may claim that the men in the study were able to secure a balanced education because they did not experience role conflict; that is, the demands of them in the athlete role were not incompatible with the demands of them in the student role, the friend role, or any other roles they "occupied." As data from this study suggest, taking advantage of all that the college experience has to offer was not easy for the participants, but they learned to manage the demands in much the same way that students with heavy job-loads and family responsibilities do. Proponents of a role conflict perspective may also claim that in order to secure a comprehensive education the participants in the current study "must" have foreclosed on or selectively optimized one or more of their roles (thereby engaging in socially desirable dialogues during the interviews). Both study criteria and data serve to refute this suggestion, as each of the participants achieved the grades necessary to graduate from the University and earned a varsity letter in his respective sport. These points, along with the fact that 30% of the men played their respective sports at the professional level, contradict the assumption that one role must be compromised to ensure success in the other.

While the preceding examples illustrate how role conflict theorists may have interpreted and explained the results of the current study, it is very possible that an examination into the development of a well-rounded quality education for student-athletes would not be undertaken by such individuals in the first place. Role conflict theory deals primarily with issues of conflict and incompatibility, therefore role theorists would likely ignore situations like those in the current study where athletes are successful and few conflicts exist. As suggested in the introduction of this paper, models of success must be examined in order to gain insight into the development of a balanced, symmetrical education for college athletes. Then, and only then, will advisors, counselors, and other support personnel be adequately prepared to provide student-athletes with specific strategies and techniques for securing a comprehensive education.

IMPLICATIONS

As the results of this study demonstrate, the athletes' success in obtaining a well-balanced college education cannot be attributed solely to the institutional and national athletic systems in which they operated. While these systems and the resulting structural changes (i.e., reform) that are occurring in higher education to improve the educational experiences of intercollegiate athletes are necessary and have proven to be somewhat successful, results of this study suggest that athletes can succeed with little if any outside assistance, and may succeed at even higher levels if introduced to athlete-centered strategies facilitated at the micro-level by sport psychologists and other personnel who provide personal support to student-athletes. Based on the results and interpretations of the data in the current study, the following suggestions are offered to individuals who interact with student-athletes in the context of maximizing the educational experience.

First and foremost, practitioners trained in psychology and related disciplines need to recognize the inherent weaknesses in using role conflict theory to explain how student-athletes handle the contradictory expectations and demands they face in their daily lives, and subsequently its limited ability to explain and manage issues related to the educational experiences of this population. The dynamic, historical nature of human experiences cannot be ignored, and direct us to examine how individual and environmental factors, along with structural and situational circumstances, unite to shape an athlete's educational experience. Recognition of this merger in shaping behavior reinforces for practitioners, the importance of considering individual difference in service delivery.

The dynamic, historical nature of human behavior illustrated in the current study also demonstrates how individuals, athletes and non-athletes alike, are active participants in the shaping of their own experiences. Awareness is a precursor to many types of action or behavior change, and an initial step in resistance or opposition; therefore, practitioners should encourage athletes to examine all sides of an issue and the entire realm of possibilities before deciding if, and how, to behave. Similarly, practitioners should encourage athletes to gather information from as many sources as possible before taking action; by triangulating their "data," athletes can maximize their awareness and base their actions on a valid breadth of information.

As suggested above, awareness does not always lead to overt action or behavior change. Some individuals may gather information and decide to take no action, whereas others may choose to offer little overt opposition, preferring instead to exert agency more subtly by working within the system. It is important for practitioners to understand that these less active positions are not necessarily the result of apathy or strategies resulting from role conflict (i.e., role foreclosure, selective optimization) but rather the result of the historical influence of structural constraints and/or situational circumstances. For example, an athlete who appears to "buy-into" a coach's suggestion that he has the talent to play at the next level and should devote more time to his sport may simply be waiting for certain situational or structural constraints to be lifted (e.g., scholarships for the upcoming year awarded) before openly defying or resisting the wishes of the coach and focusing once again on a comprehensive education. Practitioners must realize that while many student-athletes may strive to obtain a comprehensive college education, underlying historical factors, as well as

structural and situational elements, influence the different processes through which a balanced education is ultimately achieved. As the findings of this and other studies suggest (Adler & Adler, 1991; Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Parham, 1993), professionals working with student-athletes must be aware of the diversity and individual difference that characterize this population.

A final suggestion for individuals who interact with student-athletes in the context of maximizing their educational experiences is to reinforce, through actions and words, the importance of assuming personal responsibility for their education. Although practitioners may embrace alternative theoretical approaches for managing issues related to a balanced education and possess experience implementing strategies and techniques that facilitate the achievement of education, such knowledge and skill are of little value unless they help to develop in athletes an expectation of independence and an acceptance of personal responsibility. By accepting responsibility for their lives athletes assert their independence, an important step in increasing their awareness of the aids and impediments to, and appropriate course of action for, securing a complete college education.

TABLE 1

Sport Played	Academic Major	Current Career
Basketball	Building & Construction Management	Employee, family-owned construction company
Basketball	Business (advertising)	Bank manager
Basketball	Criminal Justice	Counselor for juvenile delinquents
Basketball	Communications	Salesperson
Basketball	Criminal Justice	Sports broadcaster
Basketball	Business (general)	Investment broker
Football	Business (general)	Salesperson
Football	Business	(HRI: hotel, HRI manager restaurant & institution management)
Football	Communications	Employee, family-run title search Co.
Football	Packaging	Manager, packaging industry
Football	Communications	Salesperson
Football	Communications	Salesperson
Football	Communications	Salesperson
Football	Business (advertising)	Owner, real estate company
Football	Communications	Salesperson
Football	Recreation & Youth	High school coach
Football	Communications	Leadership
Football	Communications	Musician
Football	Business (op mgmt.)	Salesperson
Football	Physiology	Pharmaceutical researcher
Football	Communications	Salesperson
Football	Park & Rec. Resources	DNR agent
Football	Business (HRI)	PhD student/teaching assistant
Football	Criminal Justice	Federal law enforcement officer
Football	Civil Engineering	Engineer
Football	Studio Art	Artist & Bartender
Football	Business (operations management)	Salesperson

TABLE 2

Sample Interview Questions

Time Frame	Sample Question(s)
Pre-college expectations & experiences	What did you think it would be like to be a University student-athlete?
Freshman year	Describe the process you went through to complete your academic schedule and course of study. Tell me about your relationship with coaches and other athletic department personnel.
Remaining years	Describe for me what it was like to be a student-athlete during this time. Assess your attentiveness to educational and career plans.
Retirement and/or transition from organized sport	Tell me about your transition from college to "the real world."

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