

A MODEL FOR MEASURING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS OF STUDENT ATHLETES

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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities that actively recruit and accept young men and women as athletes have responsibilities to these young people. One responsibility is to provide these young people with comparable academic achievement data regarding both the student-athlete and the general student population. To assist in meeting the challenge of this responsibility a method, or model, for measuring academic achievement is proposed for national acceptance.

A Model for Measuring the Academic Achievements of Student Athletes

The intellectual image of college athletes that has been created over the years is that athletes are physical education majors who take "basket-weaving" and "clay-molding" courses and never graduate (Creamer, 1983;

Kirshebaum, 1984; Ross, 1983; Sanoff, 1983; Witherspoon, 1983). College athletes, according to Zingg (1982), have suffered long enough from the "dumb-jock" stereotype and deserve to be thought of as intelligent human beings.

Prudy, Eitzen, and Hufnagel (1982) reported the graduation rate of athletes at a major university from the fall of 1970 through the spring of 1980. At another major university, the academic achievements of student-athletes from the fall of 1974 through the fall of 1981 were reported by Whitner (1987). In general, research reports such as these which focus on college athletes' academic performances are rare or are not made public.

The question, "What are the academic achievements of student-athletes at your university?" elicits a host of prepared responses by various university authorities. In a report to the members of a university community, the president of one institution aid that "... varsity athletes continue to graduate at a higher percentage than the student population in general" (Advancing toward . . . , 1988, p. 7). In a publication for the alumni and other friends at another institution, a public information specialist said, "The graduation rate of student-athletes over the last 10 years is 25 percent higher than that of the general student body" (Parker, 1987, p. 22; 1988, p. 2.). However, neither of these authorities provides data or documentation to support his statements.

Information that has been made available to the public regarding the student-athletes' academic achievements is usually extracted from prepared statements which are generally vague and nebulous. By providing such information, respondents reduce the risk of being embarrassed or having to defend university policies, written and unwritten, which may reflect on their student-athletes' academic achievements (Bogan, 1986a, 1986b; Hayes, 1984; McCallum, 1984, Whitner & Myers, 1986). For example, a former Athletic Academic Counselor at the University of Nebraska contended that 92 percent of Nebraska's football players had graduated (Counseling the . . . , 1985). However, the university reported in a survey regarding football redshirts that of 21 seniors in 1983, not one had graduated in four years and only 13 would graduate in five years (Englehart, 1984). Also, the Nebraska football team had a total of 233 players, of which 65 players, or the entire freshman football class, were redshirts. The ambiguity between the former Athletic Academic Counselor's contention and the survey raises two questions that need to be answered: 1) What happens to cause the drastic decrease in the number of football players between their freshman and senior years, and 2) Are the dropouts included in the athletes' graduation rates?

Another example of a statement that lacks clarity regarding student-athletes' academic achievements was provided by Georgetown University's head basketball coach. The head coach said that only two of the 44 basketball players that played four years for him at Georgetown had failed to

graduate (Leary, 1985). Again, there are two questions that need to be addressed: 1) What happened to the players who played fewer than four years? and 2) Are they included in the graduate rate? Most colleges and universities have special academic support programs and services to assist their athletes. Nevertheless, the statements that are generally made regarding the academic achievements of their student-athletes are most often convoluted and confounded.

Congressional intervention

In an effort to create a balance between academics and athletics, three members of congress have proposed legislation to address the questions of the academic achievements of student-athletes and the percentage of student-athletes who have graduated. (Landis, 1988). The bill, entitled "Students' Right to Know," is sponsored by Senator Bill Bradley (Democrat, New Jersey), Representatives Tom McMillen (Democrat, Maryland), and Ed Towns (Democrat, New York). The proposed legislation would require universities to release student-athletes' academic achievement information. The bill is currently awaiting approval from the Senate's Labor and Human Resources Committee. If passed, the bill would mandate educational institutions that receive federal assistance to report separately the academic achievements of scholarship student-athletes and the general student population. According to the congressmen, this information would be beneficial for incoming freshman athletes. Freshman athletes would be able to review academic descriptions of both the student-athlete and the general student population and then make a decision regarding which universities are more committed to academics (Wakelee-Lynch, 1990).

To maximize the benefits of the congressmen's proposed legislation, a method or model that allows academic achievement variables to be uniformly compared is needed. A nationally approved model which can be fully developed and implemented must have parameters that are clear, simple, and easy to apply.

A PROPOSED MODEL

Imperative for an accurate and consistent description of the academic performances of student-athletes is the general assumption that a comprehensive model for measuring academic achievements is needed. In a quest to answer numerous research questions, Whitner's (1987) initial quasi-comprehensive model included three investigator-constructed data-gathering instruments. The instruments were developed in order to collect the academic information that was generated from broad parameters and complex definitions. After the instruments were implemented the researcher

was quick to realize that: a) the amount of data the model generated for each individual was enormous; b) large amounts of data were not necessary; c) parts of the data overlapped or were redundant; and d) some data were not readily available or missing (e.g., high school academic records and national test scores). With this information, the model was reexamined, adjusted, and modified as basic research procedures were reviewed.

To meet the purpose and challenge which research investigations pose, the basic research question, "What do you want to know about what population?" must be addressed. The purpose of the congressmen's legislation is to accurately and uniformly describe the academic achievements of student-athletes in a manner that allows consistent comparisons of academic performance to be made among different student populations. To assist in meeting this challenge, Whitner's model (see appendices) is proposed as a base or a foundation from which to begin. The rationale is that the model has been successfully implemented (tested) and the model possesses the universality to be adapted to various student populations. Therefore, the basic guidelines that directed the model's original use will be presented.

Parameters and Definitions

To be classified as a student-athlete, an individual's initial entry for post-secondary education or for participation in intercollegiate athletics must be at the same institution where his or her academic and/or athletic career(s) began. The rationale for initial entry is that a previous higher educational experience by a student-athlete could vary from a few credit hours earned during one term to many credit hours earned during a longer educational experience. Initial entry also focuses on the student-athlete whom coaches have actively recruited.

Individuals who meet the initial entry criteria to be classified as a student-athlete but who withdraw from the institution are included in that institution's statistics as a non-graduate. Some student-athletes who withdraw continue their education at other institutions and earn degrees. Tracking this sub-group, however, is not feasible because of the resources that would be required to follow such a sub-group over an extended period of time.

Student-athletes who have a previous college experience, either at a two-year or four-year institution, and enroll at a second, third, or fourth institution are not included in the latter institution's statistics as an initial entry student-athlete. These student-athletes are classified as transfer student-athletes and their academic records are kept separate from the initial entry group. The academic achievement statistics reported by an institution of an initial entry or a transfer student-athlete will reflect only the data generated by the individual while attending that specific institution.

Definitions that describe the populations are as follows:

Student: An individual who enrolls for post-secondary course-work at a four-year institution of higher education.

Athlete: An individual who:

- a. participates in at least one of the inter-collegiate sports sponsored by the institution and receives an athletic scholarship (either partial or full) as approved by the institution's athletic department; and
- b. enrolls for a minimum of 12 credit hours each term at a four-year institution of higher education.

Student-athlete: An individual who meets the definitions of both student and athlete as stated above.

Athletic scholarship: Financial assistance in the form of room, board, tuition, fees, and books which is approved and granted by the institution's athletic department. The assistance granted may be the total allowable amount (full) or any part thereof (partial).

Walk-on: Student not recruited by the institution to participate in inter-collegiate athletics but who does so voluntarily without financial assistance from the institution's athletic department. If this student's athletic abilities have been misjudged, he/she can earn an athletic scholarship by "proving" themselves athletically.

Redshirt: A one-year extension of eligibility that is granted to a student-athlete once during his/her intercollegiate athletic career.

Graduate: Initial entry for post-secondary education at a four-year institution of higher education and the completion and awarding of a degree from a four-year program as recognized by that institution.

Non-Graduate: Initial entry for post-secondary education at a four-year institution of higher education and no four-year degree earned.

Transfer student: After initial entry for post-secondary education at a two- or four-year institution of higher education, an individual transfers or enrolls at another institution of higher education (either two- or four-year). This process may be repeated any number of times.

Transfer-Graduate: A transfer student who enrolls at a four-year institution of higher education and earns a degree from a four-year program as recognized as that institution.

Research Questions

Once the population has been defined, the first part of the basic research question, "What do you want to know . . .," needs to be addressed. To accomplish this task, specific research questions relevant to the scholarly behavior of student-athletes need to be asked:

1. How many terms does the student-athlete attend during his/her academic career?
2. How many summer terms does the student-athlete attend during his/her academic career?
3. How many credit hours does the student-athlete earn during his/her academic career?
4. What is the student-athlete's cumulative grade point average?
5. What percent of student-athletes graduate?
6. How many calendar years does it take the student-athlete to graduate?
7. From what colleges within the university structure (Arts and Sciences, Education, Business, etc.) do student-athletes graduate?
8. Within each college, in what programs or major areas of study are the student-athletes enrolled?
9. What, if any, are the academic achievement differences between sexes of student-athletes or among races of student-athletes?
10. What, if any, are the academic achievement differences among student-athletes who participate in different intercollegiate sports?

Residuum

Potential college freshman athletes will not be the only individuals who will benefit from the academic descriptions of college athletes. The descriptions will also benefit educational institutions as follows:

1. Each university will have an accurate description of the academic performance of a specific university population (i.e., athletes);
2. University investigators will have a comparative image to use when examining the academic achievements of other student populations at their institutions;

3. Investigators at different universities will have a comparison group available for use when researching the academic behavior of their own student-athletes or other student populations;
4. The investigation by an institution into its student-athletes' academic achievements could identify specific educational needs that may be relevant for other student populations at its own institution; and
5. Pertinent information regarding the phenomenon of academics and athletes will be contributed to the professional literature.

Limitations

The proposed model is not comprehensive and is restricted in the number of academic achievement variables to be collected. The major limitations of the model are:

1. Student-athletes that withdraw or transfer from an institution are categorized in that institution's statistics as non-graduates. Some of these student-athletes have successful academic experiences and earn undergraduate degrees at other institutions. Tracking such a sub-group is not feasible for individual institutions because of the resources that are necessary to follow and collect data regarding such a sub-group. Also, members of this sub-group who enroll at another institution will be included in that institution's data as a transfer student.
2. Student-athletes who have had a previous university experience and transfer or enroll at another institution are categorized as transfer students, regardless of the length of their previous educational experience. However, categorizing avoids the confounding of data which increases the amount and the usefulness of the information generated.
3. The model is not comprehensive and does not include special interest variables (i.e., how many changes in the major area of study, number of classes dropped, etc.) which may be pertinent for some individuals or institutions.
4. The generalizations that may be made will apply only to that sample of an institution's student-athlete population because data will not be collected on the institution's total student-athlete population (i.e., student-athlete from past years — 1940, 1918, 1892). However, the generalizations reported by an institution may be considered to be an indicator of the academic performance of similar segments of the institution's student-athlete population.

CONCLUSION

In general, the academic achievements of scholarship student-athletes have not been uniformly reported or made public. For example, the Ohio State University needs to be congratulated for making public some very impressive figures regarding the academic achievements of its student-athlete population (Associated Press, 1988). However, the data has little meaning for most institutions because many institutions lack the comparative data or will not replicate the Ohio State study. In addition, research studies tend to reflect an institution's uniqueness with the consequences being that comparisons are not always valid.

To make uniform academic achievement comparisons of different student populations among colleges and universities, a nationally approved model is needed. A comprehensive model is ideal, but the resources necessary to nationally implement and maintain such a model prohibit its utilization. Therefore, a practical model is needed that addresses the needs of potential student-athletes and is nationally approved and recognized as the academic performance measuring instrument for all colleges and universities. The practical model proposed by Whitner meets the criteria for national acceptance. The model may be viewed as an intra- and inter-university tool for collecting and measuring educational variables regarding college students' academic performance. The information obtained from such a model will allow comparative research, free from qualifiers, to be conducted by investigators regarding the academic achievements of any university population, including student-athletes.

APPENDIX A

STUDENT-ATHLETE'S ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE SHEET

Code _____

Sport _____

Date Enrolled _____

College _____

Program _____

Status
(O-T)

Race _____

Graduated: Yes _____ No _____

Date _____

Degree _____

Last trm att _____ yr _____

1st trm att _____ yr _____

Total trms att _____ yrs _____

Total sum trms att _____

Yr-Term Hrs Ern GPA

1-1

1-2

1-2

1-4

2-1

2-2

2-3

2-4

3-1

3-2

3-3

3-4

4-1

4-2

4-3

4-4

5-1

5-2

5-3

5-4

6-1

6-2

6-3

6-4

Cumulative

CODE

Yr — Year

Trm — Term

Sum — Summer

Hrs Ern — Hours earned

GPA — Grade Point Average

Att — Attended

O — Original or initial entry

T — Transfer

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE TABLES FOR CATEGORIZING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

A selected sample of tables that may be used to categorize the academic achievement variables of student populations is included in this Appendix. The few numbers which appear in some tables are inserted for the purpose of clarification only.

Table X: Selected academic achievement variables of the student-athlete according to status.

STATUS	N	AVG QTR ATTN	AVG SUM QTR ATTN	AVG CR HRS ERND	AVG CUM GPA	% THAT ERND DEGRS
NON-GRAD	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
GRAD	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
THE STUDENT- ATHLETE	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX

TABLE X: Selected academic achievement variable of the student-athlete by year.

YEAR	N	AVG QTR ATTN	AVG SUM QTR ATTN	AVG CR HRS ERND	AVG CUM GPA	% THAT ERND DEGRS
1977	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
1978	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
1979	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
1980	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
1981	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX

Table X: College enrolled and the major area of study of the student-athlete

COLLEGE (Number enrolled) Major	Non-Graduate (n) — (%)		Graduates (N) — (%)	
ARTS & SCIENCES (80)	40	50	40	50
Art	3		15	
Biology	10		5	
BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (50)	20	40	30	60
Accounting	10		12	
Computer Services	2		10	
EDUCATION & ALLIED PROFESSIONS (60)	30	50	30	50
Business Education	10		15	
Community Medical Health ..	12		10	

Table X: The number of calendar years for student-athletes to earn a degree.

years to earn a degree	number of graduates	percent
4	xx	xx
5	xx	xx
6 or more	xx	xx
total	xx	100.0

Table X: Comparison of academic variable between the student-athlete and the regular university student.

STATUS	N	AVG QTR ATTN	AVG SUM QTR ATTN	AVG CR HRS ERND	AVG CUM GPA	% THAT ERND DEGRS
NON-GRADUATES						
STUDENT ATHLETES	100	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
REGULAR STUDENTS	200	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
GRADUATES						
STUDENT— ATHLETES	250	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
REGULAR STUDENTS	350	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
THE STUDENT						
THE STUDENT	900	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX

n = number

avg qtr attn = average quarters attended

avg sum qtr atten = average summer quarters attended

avg cr hrs ernd = average credit hours earned

avg cum GPA = average cumulative grade point average

% that ernd degrs = percent that earned degrees

non-grad = non graduate

grad = graduate

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