

ACADEMIC CLUSTERING IN INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

by

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Abstract

Academic clustering is the occurrence of twenty-five percent or more of a single athletic team enrolled into a major (Fountain & Finley, 2009). Although clustering appears to have the possibility to occur among all college students, it seems to be more prevalent within intercollegiate athletics. There are several different factors that influence the prevalence of this experience. For the collegiate student-athlete, these factors include the National Collegiate Athletic Association, university athletic departments, individual differences among student-athletes, and characteristics associated with the university. While these are likely not the only contributors of academic clustering, they seem to be very prominent. Further, given that attention has been given to identifying the negative consequences of academic clustering in intercollegiate athletics, clustering also may result in positive implications. The purpose of this report is to provide information and increase the awareness towards academic clustering. Additionally, this report provides information as to the causes, but also offers recommendations that have the potential to lessen academic clustering within intercollegiate athletics.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	Page v
CHAPTER 1 – Introduction	
Definition of Relevant Terms	Page 1
CHAPTER 2 – National Collegiate Athletic Association	Page 4
Basic Academic Eligibility Requirements for Student-Athletes	
40-60-80 Rule	
Academic Progress Rate	
CHAPTER 3 – Athletic Departments	Page 9
Coaches	
Athletic Academic Counselors	
CHAPTER 4 – The Student-Athlete	Page 16
Under Prepared	
Time Management	
CHAPTER 5 – The College Institution	Page 22
Class Time	
Program Requirements	
Favoritism	

CHAPTER 6 – Is Academic Clustering Avoidable?	Page 25
Transfer Students	
Interests/Background	
Performance within First Year	
Team Unity	
CHAPTER 7 – Summary and Conclusion	Page 29
CHAPTER 8 – Recommendations	Page 31
References	Page 35
Appendix A – APR Worksheet	Page 38

List of Tables

Table 1 **Page 8**
Estimated Division I Team Scholarship Loss under APR (based upon NCAA 2003-2004 data)

Table 2 **Page 17**
Estimated Probability of Competing in Athletics at a Higher Level

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

Similar to traditional college students, student-athletes are required to try and map out their plans after graduation. A significant part of this process involves the identification and selection of a major. When it comes to the revenue-producing, also known as top-tier, sports (i.e. football and basketball), it is not uncommon to hear how student-athletes want to play their respected sport at the professional level. Because this train of thought may tend to inhibit student-athletes from thinking about career-related ambitions beyond or aside from athletics, it is also common to see them enrolled in a particular major on campuses in order to create an academic schedule that allows for the continued pursuit of their athletic endeavors. When this happens, the problem of academic clustering starts to take place.

When thinking about something being in a cluster, it is typical to think of several items being clumped together. The idea of academic clustering is similar to this in that there is a large number of student-athletes enrolled into one or two particular majors, usually those that are seen as the “easy” or “fluff” majors on campus. For the purpose of the present paper, academic clustering is defined as the occurrence of twenty-five percent or more of a single athletic team enrolled into a major (Fountain & Finley, 2009). This could be a problem because when the student-athletes graduate, there is a probable chance that they will not receive the opportunity to play at the professional level. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, only about 1% of men’s basketball, 2% football, and 9% baseball players will advance to the professional level (*Estimated probability*, 2010). This leaves the potential to have a large number of college graduates who might see their degree as useless because they chose to study an area in which they had little or no interest.

The fact that a student-athlete wants to compete at a professional level is not the only cause of academic clustering. In order for athletes to compete at the collegiate level, they must maintain their eligibility, which is the concept that several criteria have been met and the student-athlete is able to fully participate in an athletic event. Some of the criteria that must be met in order to be considered eligible includes passing a required number of hours each semester, meeting the required grade point average minimum, completing certain core courses within the institution, and hitting certain benchmarks. Along with the eligibility issue, there are several other underlying factors that come in to play when it comes to academic clustering. These factors include the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the athletic departments within the institution, the individual student-athletes, and the institution itself.

There are a few elements that fall into the purpose of this paper. The first is to examine the underlying factors that lead to academic clustering. The fact of the matter is that there is so much more to this process than a student-athlete remaining eligible to participate in his or her sport. There are a few factors pertaining to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, athletic departments (i.e. coaches and academic advisors), student-athletes, and the institutions as far as the faculty and individual educational departments are concerned. Examining how these factors contribute to the process of academic clustering should serve to reveal a more accurate and comprehensive perspective into how this process unfolds.

The second purpose involves addressing the concept of academic clustering in a manner that accurately portray the process more so than what seem to be the current negative perception of clustering. When academic clustering in relation to intercollegiate athletics is the subject of conversation, it seems to have the tendency to be seen in a negative light. While in a number of cases this is something that should be avoided, there are other instances in which clustering is not

necessarily a terrible thing. This information is important because a lot of institutions are coming under fire and receiving bad reputations in published materials such as newspapers, published journals, and magazines. It is also being seen most recently on television.

Definition of Relevant Terms

Academic Clustering: “Academic clustering occurs when 25% or more of an athletic team shares a single academic major” (Fountain & Finley, 2009, pg. 1).

Academic Progress Report (APR): A metric used by the National College Athletic Association (NCAA) to measure the success of college institutions’ athletic teams in moving their student-athletes towards graduation. The minimum score allowed is 0.925, while a perfect score is 1.0.

Eligibility: The concept that all criteria have been met and a student-athlete is able to fully participate in the athletic event. Some of the criteria includes the number of hours a student-athlete is required to enroll in each semester, the number of hours a student-athlete is required to pass in each semester, the required minimum grade point average, and enrolling in certain core courses required by the institution.

National College Athletic Association (NCAA): The governing body that provides the rules and guidelines in which member institutions are to abide by regarding athletic participation.

Student-Athlete: Any collegiate student who competes at the varsity level of a sport for the institution.

CHAPTER 2 – National College Athletic Association

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is the governing body that provides the rules and guidelines by which member institutions are to abide by in regards to athletic participation. There have been several advances made by the NCAA in order to promote and maintain academic success within each member institution. Some of these advances include basic requirements put in place such as a 2.0 minimum grade point average, the 40-60-80 Rule, and the Academic Progress Rate.

Basic Academic Eligibility Requirements for Student-Athletes

Some of the guidelines made by the NCAA are very straightforward. As mentioned previously, the eligible student-athlete is required to maintain a minimum 2.0 grade point average. While this is essentially requiring them to maintain their eligibility on a “C” average, this still obligates the student-athlete to put some time and effort into their studies. Another guideline put in place is that of each student-athlete being enrolled in a minimum of twelve credit hours each semester. This means that the student-athlete has to be considered a full-time student with the institution. The only way to bypass this is if the student-athlete is scheduled to graduate and needs fewer than twelve hours. For example, if there is a football player who is scheduled to graduate during the fall semester of 2010 and only needs to complete six hours in order to get his degree, he does not have to enroll in the full twelve hours and still be considered eligible for athletic participation. In addition to the twelve credit hour requirement, the NCAA has also made the guideline that the student-athlete must pass no less than six credit hours each semester. As defined earlier, all of these requirements are basic criteria for maintaining eligibility

(*Academic Eligibility*, 2008). For the football player only needing six hours to graduate it becomes more critical to pass all of his hours to ensure his graduation.

The policies that have been put in place by the NCAA have been developed with the best of intentions in order to help student-athletes succeed professionally in something outside of athletics. This is a common theme heard each academic year during televised sporting events, especially during the NCAA Tournament each March. (To view the most recent commercial, visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WO-jIrGPEMs&feature=player_embedded.) There is an important implication at hand, however. For many student-athletes, it is a dream to compete at the collegiate level, so they may do whatever it takes in order to remain eligible and get their chance to play. In consideration of the 40-60-80 Rule, they will enroll in whatever classes or majors they need to in order to easily meet their benchmarks. As it will be discussed subsequently, APR puts pressure on the student-athletes, coaches, and academic counselors to meet certain requirements of this policy in order to avoid the risk of losing scholarships. Even though the policies are in place to help, in order to accomplish all of these “goals,” academic clustering is sometimes inevitable.

40-60-80 Rule

In 2003, the NCAA introduced the 40-60-80 Rule. According to Ashby (2009), this policy came about due to the “growing trend of student-athletes swaying toward less restricting majors in an effort to keep up with the increasingly difficult NCAA eligibility requirements” (para. 5). In essence, the rule has the student-athletes placing more focus on completing their coursework within a specified amount of time and making progress towards graduation. This is to be done by requiring that 40% of a student-athlete’s major be completed by the end of their

second (sophomore) year, 60% by the end of their third (junior) year, and 80% by the end of their fourth (senior) year. This might cause one to question why the rule only requires 80% to be done by the end of the fourth year, when this is typically when student's graduate. By doing so, this allows the student-athlete to explore their options during their first year and make the decision as to what major they want to declare, which should be done no later than during the second year in order to meet the 40% completion requirement.

While the 40-60-80 Rule is helpful to keep student-athletes focused on track with their academics, it also deters some away from certain majors. This appears to be one factor that may influence the development of the academic clustering process in college athletics. As Ashby (2009) points out in his article, the guidelines of the rule are strict enough to make some majors difficult to complete while maintaining eligibility, causing the student-athletes to still lean towards less demanding majors. The Rule gives the student-athlete a more sound reason for choosing to do so. Very rarely will it be seen that an athletic career is given up in order to complete a more time consuming area of study (Ashby, 2009). A majority of time this has to do with the fact that athletic scholarships are only offered on a yearly basis now.

Academic Progress Rate

In April of 2004, the NCAA Division I Board of Directors adopted the Academic Reform Package. From this, the Academic Progress Rate (APR) was established (Fountain & Finley, 2009). Through this initiative, the NCAA can measure the rate at which the athletic teams at all member institutions are succeeding in moving their student-athletes towards graduation. According to Myles Brand, the late former president of the NCAA, the goals APR are to “improve the academic progress, retention, and graduation rates of student-athletes” (Fountain &

Finley, 2009, pg. 3). That is why those three areas are the backbone of which a team's APR score is based.

Figuring the APR score is fairly simple. It is found by semester per year, but a four-year score is what gets reported to the NCAA. The score is determined by awarding points to each individual student-athlete based upon whether they kept their eligibility and are retained as a full-time student for the following semester. "Each scholarship athlete on a team earns two points per term by returning to college and passing enough classes to remain eligible for sports...Athletes who return to college but do not pass enough courses to be eligible earn one point, and those who flunk out altogether earn none" (Suggs, 2005, para. 8). Located in Appendix A is a sample chart that could be used to help track APR.

Once the score for each student-athlete is figured, the sum of points accumulated from the current year and the previous three years is divided by the sum of possible points for those same years. The lowest permitted score without penalty is .925 (on a 1.0 scale). Teams that fall below the score risk losing scholarships. In addition, if a team fails to meet the minimum score for four consecutive years, there is the risk of losing their membership within the NCAA.

Data suggests that the APR initiative has had some impact. Table 1 shows how many scholarships would have potentially been lost by teams. This information is based upon data from the 2003-2004 academic year. Because of the large number of scholarships that would have been lost according to the data, the NCAA has put a cap on the number of scholarships that can be lost each year at ten percent of the maximum number of scholarships that team can award. For example, football teams can award eighty-five scholarships each year, so if they fall behind the minimum score allowed, they could lose as many as eight, possibly nine, scholarships for the following year.

Table 1 Estimated Division I Team Scholarship Loss under APR
(based upon NCAA 2003-2004 data)
 (Suggs, 2005)

	Football	Basektball	Baseball
% Potentially Lost Scholarships	30%	20%	25%

The goals that Myles Brand laid out for APR are commendable, but it is a fear that the different approaches that might be utilized in order to avoid being penalized could be questionable (Fountain & Finley, 2009). This is a situation that has the potential for academic clustering to become more widespread. There is a concern that these practices may reach new extremes. As it will be discussed in subsequent chapters, APR puts additional pressure on the coaches, academic counselors/advisors, and student-athletes because they are not only worried about maintaining eligibility but also keeping the student-athletes enrolled full-time in order to get them to graduate.

CHAPTER 3 – Athletic Departments

Athletic departments differ at every level. At the high school level, what might be considered the athletic department consists of an athletic director, coaches, and the athletes. At the collegiate level, these elements are still present, but there are also compliance offices, operations offices, academic services, and many more departments and personnel. Not every college athletics department is set up the same, but there are the basic necessities that have to be in place in order to keep the department up to standards. In an effort to provide services that target the scholarly responsibilities of the student-athlete, academic support services and personnel play a crucial role for collegiate athletic departments.

Academics are a critical issue within athletic departments. This is partially because of the rules and guidelines that are set up by the NCAA, but also with the standards and expectations that are set up by the individual institutions. Because of all of these rules and expectations, the concept of academic clustering is liable to become more prevalent. There are two groups of individuals associated with collegiate athletic departments, each of which may have an influence on the occurrence of academic clustering. The first group involves collegiate coaches. Their methods for recruiting could play a hand in the issue. The other group includes the athletic academic counselors within the academic services offices. These are the individuals who hold a lot of knowledge and access to resources regarding maintaining eligibility when it concerns the academic requirements of student-athletes.

Coaches

For many coaches, there is tremendous pressure stemming from developing a successful athletic program. Having a winning team not only satisfies this need, but also provides a method

of advertising for the institution. A good example of this is with the NCAA basketball tournament that takes place every March. It is common to see teams such as Kansas, North Carolina, and Duke playing in the top seeds and advancing towards the championship game. This is a national event that has a lot of hype around it, like the brackets and all of the additional, possibly new, media attention. In recent years, there has been a trend of teams from institutions that are not normally seen in the public eye very often, if ever, making it into the tournament. For example, in the 2006 tournament (for the 2005-2006 season) the basketball teams from Wichita State and George Mason earned spots – Wichita State made it to the Sweet Sixteen and George Mason made it to the Elite Eight. Just making it to the tournament made the entire country aware that the institutions existed, but their success really put them on the map. In turn, the 2006-2007 Wichita State basketball team played to sold out home games and were able to add more nationally ranked teams, such as Tennessee, to their regular season schedule. This may suggest that a successful athletic department has a great deal of influence on an institution. This is in terms of areas such as reputation, booster donations, and admissions (Letawsky, Schneider, Pederson & Palmer, 2003). In a study conducted by Adler and Adler (1991) (as cited in Letawsky et al., 2003) regarding the factors that play a part in helping students choose the institution they will attend, some of the most frequently mentioned were related to that of athletics.

David Goldfield, a history professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, agrees that winning is an important part of coaching, but adds that “...with the new requirements, the second and often equally pressing task is to maintain the eligibility of players” (Powers, 2007, para. 10). As discussed in the previous chapter, the NCAA has set up standards and guidelines that are expected to be met in order to consider a student-athlete eligible to

participate in competition. There are also standards set up by the institution, but they are usually very similar to those put in place by the NCAA, if not the same. The task of maintaining student-athletes' eligibility not only affects those currently enrolled, but also that of the recruiting process that coaches might use.

For coaches who are recruiting for major college athletic departments, it is important to put their focus on the accomplishments of the department they are representing. Before there was such a great emphasis put into academics, the athletic achievements were the primary focus. Now, the coaches are under pressure to draw in the attention of student-athletes who are not only successful in athletics but also academics. Casie Lisabeth (personal communication, April 20, 2010), Equestrian coach at Kansas State, believes academic success plays a moderate role in the recruiting process. She stated:

Obviously we are looking for great riders with experience in the competition arena first. However, we don't want to have to worry about them on the academic side of things, so we want them to be able to be successful in that area too. They do not have to be 4.0 students, but we do look for good grades and reports. If they struggle with studying, test taking, etc. then we want them to be aware that they need help in that area so they can be successful in college.

This can leave them with a variety of options for helping maintain and increase graduation rates when it comes to recruiting (Fountain & Finley, 2009). Some of these options include:

- Recruiting student-athletes that are prepared for college
- Increasing the expectations of the student-athletes

- Providing the appropriate academic services and support for the student-athletes who are considered to be marginal
- Recruiting student-athletes who are of less than average academic ability, seeking out easier majors, courses, and professors in order to maintain a reasonable graduation rate

The latter option is how clustering is brought about.

It is important to note that while all coaches, no matter what level or sport, are expected to work to recruit high caliber student-athletes, some coaches have to work a little harder to find student-athletes who are more successful academically. There are hundreds of different sporting events in college athletics but not every one of them has the potential or capability of leading the student-athletes to a professional level. Even though it is important to work towards allowing any student-athlete an opportunity for a successful future in athletics, it is equally, or more, important to work towards a successful future in the world of work. Coach Lisabeth makes sure to weigh heavily on a prospective athlete's academic success. She realizes that her athletes are not going to be drafted after college "so it is extremely important for us that they graduate with a degree they will be successful with in their life after college."

Athletic Academic Counselors

Like many college students, student-athletes have to consult with the academic advisor to which they are assigned by the institution upon admittance. Oftentimes the advisor is a representative of the department in which the student is majoring. For those students who are considered "undeclared" or "open option," there is usually a group of advisors that work to keep them enrolled in core classes while a decision is being made to choose a major. Even though

student-athletes have this similarity to non-athletes, they differ in that student-athletes typically have to report to an athletic academic counselor as well. This is mostly an occurrence in the Division I institutions. Typically the counselor is a member of the athletic department, usually located under the Student Services department.

The academic counselor in athletics is someone who is hired through the athletic department to work with athletes from one or more specific teams. Some of their duties include meeting with the student-athlete on a regular basis (usually weekly or daily), tracking student-athletes' grades, keeping contact with coaches, faculty, and staff, and working to track APR as well as each student-athlete's athletic eligibility. For the student-athlete, the advisor seems to be just an extra person they have to meet with each semester during enrollment. Even though the advisor is sought out in terms of finding what classes they need to enroll in, this is more of a suggestion because once the class list gets passed onto the counselor things are likely to change. A lot of this has to do with the fact that the student-athletes cannot be enrolled in a class that goes late in the afternoon because of their practice schedule. When they fall short of the minimum credit hours needed, it is up to the athletic academic counselor to work with the athlete to help locate courses to achieve the number of credit hours needed. The counselor is also in control of assisting the student-athletes in getting enrolled in their courses.

It does not matter if the academic counselor and academic advisor are two different people or the same individual. Either way, the academic counselor is responsible for ensuring that the student-athletes are enrolled in their classes. This is a factor that plays into the cause of academic clustering and can occur for a few reasons. The most relevant of these reasons, though, are because (1) they have the access to resources that contribute to clustering and (2)

they are potentially being pressured by the coaches to ensure that they student-athletes remain eligible.

Access

The role of the traditional academic advisor is very small in comparison to the athletic academic counselor's in that the advisor is the person in whom the student-athletes confide to ensure that they are taking the required classes in order to graduate from their major. The student-athlete is the only person within the athletic department with whom the advisors work closely. Their job is much more stress-free in comparison to the counselor's.

Athletic academic counselors are seen as part of the administration within the institution. They are held to a high standard and allowed access into certain files, databases, and programs across the institution. For example, at Kansas State University, the counselors have the clearance to view grade reports (current and past), schedules, and other information via the ISIS program. They also have direct contact with the enrollment personnel so that when it comes time for enrolling for the next semester, the student-athletes can be at the top of the list. Further, student-athletes are typically allowed to enroll earlier than non-athletes. This contact also is convenient when there are classes that need dropped and added quickly for eligibility purposes. It is access like this that makes the counselors capable of bringing about academic clustering.

Under Pressure

There are a series of individuals with whom academic counselors for an athletic department must communicate regularly when performing their routine duties. There has to be constant communication with the student-athletes, instructors, administration (both athletic and institutional), and coaches. There is a great deal of pressure put on the academic counselors,

which comes from different directions as well as in different forms. For instance, there are all of the rules and guidelines put in place by the NCAA that has to be followed. They are put forth for the student-athletes, but it is the counselors who essentially have to implement them. There also tends to be pressure coming from the coaches as well as the potential of the athletic administration, like the athletic director.

The different pressures that are put on counselors could be a chief reason for the occurrence of academic clustering. With the coaches, they are expected to develop a successful team both on and off the field or court. In order to be successful athletically, the student-athletes first have to succeed in the classroom. It becomes a vicious cycle; the pressure placed on the coaches by expectations (from boosters, fans, players, assistant coaches, etc.) falls onto the counselors. This is a good example of why the coaches and counselors should not only work well together, but also why they should work closely together. There cannot [successfully] be one without the other.

CHAPTER 4 – Student-Athletes

Being a student-athlete at the collegiate level can oftentimes be considered an honor, no matter the level at which the person is playing (NCAA or NAIA; Division I or Division III; at a two-year junior college or a four-year college). The experiences are all different, but it is still as honor as athletes are being given the opportunity to display and develop their athletic talents and abilities. In addition, while there are several colleges and universities that have athletic programs in a large variety of sports, there are only a small number of high school athletes who get the chance to continue and compete at the collegiate level. Table 2 (on the following page) shows the statistics and probability of student-athletes to further their athletic abilities. The table breaks down, by sport, several different factors that are important to look at, such as the overall number of student-athletes in the NCAA (as of 2007), the number of NCAA student-athletes that are drafted into the professional level, as well as some ratios and percentages for high school and college student-athletes to advance to the professional level.

Some of the most prominent reasons that student-athletes may cite for competing at the collegiate level are that of receiving a scholarship and because playing at the collegiate level is the next step to getting to play at the professional level (Suggs, 2003). Both of these have the potential to have a large effect on student-athletes. For some, athletics may be the only way that they could advance onward to college. This can be caused by financial hardships, social status, or family educational history, all elements that could prevent any student, athlete or not, from going to college, especially a prominent one.

Table 2 Estimated Probability of Competing in Athletics at a Higher Level

(http://www.ncaa.org/wps/portal/ncaahome?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/ncaa/NCAA/Academics+and+Athletes/Education+and+Research/Probability+of+Competing/Probability+of+Competing, 2007)

	Men's Basketball	Women's Basketball	Football	Baseball	Men's Ice Hockey	Men's Soccer
NCAA Student-Athletes	16,911	15,381	64,879	29,816	4,101	21,601
NCAA Senior Student-Athletes	3,758	3,418	14,418	6,626	911	4,800
NCAA Student-Athletes Drafted	44	32	250	600	33	76
Percent High School to NCAA	3.10%	3.5%	5.8%	6.3%	11.0%	5.6%
Ratio NCAA to Professional	1:75	< 1:100	1:50	9:100	1:27	< 1:50
Percent NCAA to Professional	1.2%	0.9%	1.7%	9.1%	3.6%	1.6%
Ratio High School to Professional	3:10,000	1:5,000	8:10,000	1:200	< 1:300	1:1,250
Percent High School to Professional	0.03%	0.03%	0.08%	0.44%	0.31%	0.07%

Any collegiate student who competes at the varsity level of a sport for an institution can have a difficult time performing well in the classroom. This is particularly true for student-athletes competing in the high profile, revenue-producing sports of men's basketball and football. For one freshman basketball player at Kansas State, after having experienced their first year as a student-athlete, one of the biggest challenges was that of expectations from coaches, instructors, family, and counselors (personal communication, April 23, 2010). Suggs (2003) suggests that some of the reasons for this could be "having attended poor high schools, daydreaming about the millions they think they'll make in the pros, and dealing with the oppressive demands of practice and competition" (para. 11). Of these reasons, the first and final are of greatest concern and could lead to academic clustering.

Under Prepared

Having a child involved in athletics takes a toll on finances, especially when the child is contemplating or actively participating in competitive sport. A lot of students who anticipate playing at the collegiate level make sure to play on teams that travel and compete at tournaments where they can be noticed and eventually scouted. It is more serious than leisure and intramural play.

With all of the dedication and resources being invested in the student-athlete's sport participation, some aspects of life may be negatively affected. Frequently, education is greatly impacted. For those families who have an active role in their child's sport experience and invest so much into their son or daughter's athletics, it sometimes becomes difficult to afford a proper education, especially when the family is not financially well off to begin with. It can be said that any education is a good thing, but when it is applied to helping a student get admitted into college, "any education" may not cut it. This is a cause of students becoming under-prepared for college and majoring in programs where clustering is prevalent.

There are other reasons that student-athletes receive a poor education rather than being able to afford it. Location also has to be taken into consideration. Students are typically enrolled into whatever school is located in the district that their residence is located, unless they choose to attend a private or preparatory school. For families residing in areas that are not typically considered affluent or having access to adequate educational resources or services, the schools in the areas might not have the best educational outreach because they may be under funded. Under funded schools oftentimes cannot afford to provide sufficient text books or supplies to create a proper teaching environment, both for the student and the instructor. When the students are do

not have access to adequate educational resources and services, there may be elements of their education that will be underdeveloped resulting in students being under prepared for college.

When any student starts college unprepared, there is going to be a lot of catching up (Wolverton, 2008). For a student-athlete, there is little time for this to occur given the benchmarks that they must meet. If there is any time wasted the chances of meeting them is lowered. In addition to potentially missing benchmarks, by being ill-prepared for college, there is the probability that their grade point averages will be low. This can deny them admittance into their major of choice. It is for these reasons that it might be suggested that they pursue a degree in something else, one that might help them more easily reach their benchmarks and even raise their grade point average, resulting in academic clustering if several athletes are funneled into that same discipline (Alesia, 2007).

Jamie Hamor, academic counselor at Kansas State, uses this practice. But she is not doing it just for eligibility purposes. “It’s like a tool,” she commented in an interview (personal communication, April 21, 2010). “We can enroll a student in the Social Sciences major which has a variety of options in itself and compare its requirements to, say, the Business major. We’ll look to see what classes are similar, enroll them in those courses, and work on improving their grades.” If this is done effectively and in a timely manner, the student-athlete has the potential of being able to change their major while still achieving the percentage they need by the end of the academic year. Unfortunately, there are times that the student-athlete may be so under prepared that going through this process does not help, so they manage to graduate with their “second” choice of major as opposed to their first.

Time Management

Participating in college athletics is extremely time consuming. One of the hardest adjustments that student-athletes have to make is that of managing their time. This is confirmed by Christopher Merriewether, a senior member of the men's basketball team at Kansas State. He stated in an interview that his biggest challenge as a student-athlete has included time management and that he felt like he is playing "catch up" (written communication, April 26, 2010). Their lives are completely consumed by their courses, study table, practice schedule, games, meetings, and work outs. Unlike high school where football starts in August and ends in November, it goes all year round in college. Very rarely is there an actual "off season," just a time of year when there are no actual competitions.

Student-athletes receive great amounts of pressure from both sides of the spectrum, academic and athletic. Because athletics are, for some, their primary reason for being in college, it comes as no surprise that academics could get neglected, leading to poor grades. Not only are academics neglected, so is career-planning work (Pendergrass, Hansen, Neuman, & Nutter, 2003). If academics are neglected, there is a great potential for academic requirements put in place by major programs to be missed. For example, if student-athletes at Kansas State University want to major in accounting, they have to meet the 3.0 grade point average minimum for admittance and maintain a 2.5 in the coursework specific to the major. By neglecting their academics, the student-athletes are risking admittance into the program. This can result in having to find a major for the student-athlete that does not have certain requirements, such as a grade point average. The major chosen is going to be one where academic clustering is seen most often. As for career planning, there may not be time allotted in their schedule for the

student-athletes to attend career fairs or workshops on campus helping them to develop their résumé or prepare for job interviews.

Time management is something that all students have to learn in college. Some students have jobs while taking a full load of classes. This is similar to the predicament that student-athletes find themselves in, but non-athletes usually put forth more effort into certain areas, such as career development because they are more concerned. It is easy for student-athletes to think that “she or he will make a smooth transition into professional athletics, making career planning a moot issue” (Pendergrass et al., 2003, para. 2).

CHAPTER 5 – Institutions

Athletics is an important aspect to any institution of higher education. Through the success of an institution's athletics department, there is potential to get additional advertisement through televised sporting events and to create a positive representation through good sportsmanship. There are several outcomes that an institution can attain through a successful athletic department. As previously discussed, student-athletes struggle with making adjustments to college because of a variety of factors. When it comes to the influences institutions of higher education have on clustering, a few factors appear relevant. These include: (1) times at which major courses are offered, (2) requirements placed on admittance into major programs, and (3) special treatment from instructors.

Class Time

Institutions offer classes throughout the day, from morning through night, allowing the opportunity for some classes, especially general education classes, to be offered several times in a day. When looking at classes that are offered specifically for certain majors, though, there is a tendency for these classes to be offered later in the day. This is not true for every institution or for every program within the institution, but it still remains a concern. For instance, there are a number of classes in the engineering department at Kansas State offered during afternoon hours, especially lab work. This makes it very difficult for a student-athlete to enroll into this program because their practice schedules typically take place in the afternoon (Lederman, 2008). Without having the schedule to pursue certain majors, student-athletes have to make a second-choice.

Program Requirements

A second reason for institutional academic clustering is that of different programs within the institutions putting additional requirements on their admission process. “Universities are allowing the programs to become more exclusive, requiring students to earn high grades and undergo a competitive admissions process just to be allowed to major in them” (Suggs, 2003, para. 27). When these standards are added to all of the other standards that student-athletes already face, the student-athlete may find this as a just cause to avoid enrolling in these particular programs and make a different choice.

Favoritism

A final reason that academic clustering could be occurring at the institutional level is by the faculty members employed at the institution. It is important to take a close look at the treatment that student-athletes are given in comparison to that received by non-athletes. It is not uncommon for any student to take multiple courses from a particular instructor because of their familiarity with the instructor, but when student-athletes are enrolling in classes for reasons other than this, something is not right (Powers, 2007). Student-athletes should not receive special treatment just because they are a student-athlete at the institution. They are also students, and should be treated as such. The only “treatment” that should be given is that of rescheduling exams and possibly homework dates when they are originally scheduled on a travel date, causing the student-athlete to be absent. Academic clustering becomes a greater problem when it is caused by special treatment coming from the instructor. One instructor at Kansas State has explained that she work hard to avoid situations like this. She stated that they ensure equal treatment by setting up their courses in a fashion that has a large amount of course work being in

essay format. This makes it “tough for students to cheat because it would be very easy for them to get caught” (personal communication, April 19, 2010).

CHAPTER 6 – Is Academic Clustering Avoidable?

Academic clustering is not a situation that may always be ideal, but it is something that is likely to occur. Fortunately, there are logical explanations for this, which could potentially help to put more of a positive outlook on it. There are four factors that suggest that academic clustering will likely remain an inevitable occurrence in higher education among some college campuses. They are: (1) the student-athlete is a transfer student from a two-year junior college, (2) the student-athlete has a strong interest of background in certain areas which help determine their major, (3) the choice of a major can be decided on by the student-athlete's academic performance in the first year in college, and (4) teammates like to stick together.

Transfer Students

Being a transfer student is a little difficult when it comes to athletics. Typically, these students are entering their junior (third) year when they make the move from a two-year junior college to a four-year institution. The biggest part of this is that the 40-60-80 Rule goes into effect for student-athletes immediately after they are admitted into the institution and have signed with the team. This means that at the time the student starts at the institution, they need to have declared a major and have completed 40% of that major.

Jill Shields, associate athletic director in academics at Kansas State, says that transfer students usually enter a four-year school with grade point averages that might make it difficult to put them in majors that have grade point average requirements (personal communication, April 19, 2010). For instance, to major in accounting at Kansas State, the student must have a 3.0 cumulative grade point average to be admitted and maintain a 2.5 grade point average in accounting courses. For this reason, a lot of student-athletes are seen in the social science

department at Kansas State because there are no minimum grade point average requirements and the major is so broad that it allows students several different options when choosing a concentration.

Interests/Background

Some students have known since they were young what they want to be when they “grow up.” Sometimes this plays a part in the student’s choice of major. Hamor calls it a preconceived career because they enter college knowing what they want to do and what direction they want to go in. Coach Lisabeth also discussed that a majority of her team members have a strong background in agriculture which leads them to major in agriculture. What is more is that a lot of these students have already been pre-admitted into graduate programs and veterinary programs after they have finished their degrees at Kansas State.

For student-athletes, athletics is an important aspect in their lives. They are interested in everything pertaining to athletics, even in their studies. Knowing this, it might be that “athletes are attracted to careers in sport related professions and thereby choose specialized career paths” (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987, pg. 53). These professions could include areas of study such as sports management or marketing, coaching, and physical education. Using this information is a good way to convince student-athletes to become interested in their schoolwork and leading them towards completing a degree.

It is important to take into consideration that some majors might be sought after more so than others at some institutions. Jill Shield makes it a point to note that academic clustering does not only occur within the student-athlete populations. She stated that “academic clustering is really the grouping of any group of students into a particular major.” To add, students, athletes

or not, are going to major in whatever area in which they are interested in (personal communication, April 19, 2010). To support this, Lawrence (2008) makes it a point that “if a sociology degree had no value, why would the institution offer it in the first place” (Lawrence, 2008, para. 4).

Performance within First Year

The first semester in college could be the most difficult one for any student. There are several reasons for this. Some of them include learning how to make different adjustments from high school to college and getting used to all of the new experiences in which the students are able to participate. There is also the pressure to take full responsibility for themselves when they have been used to their parents having that role. Luckily, if a student has a rough first semester, they can take advantage of the second in order to improve their grade point average.

In the first year of college, students usually start with general courses that satisfy the general core requirements for the institution. These courses typically consist of English, math, introductory sociology or psychology, and possibly an entry-level science course. If a student-athlete does not earn good enough grades, it could become problematic when choosing a major. As mentioned previously, some major programs have set standards that have to be met, including a required grade point average (recall the example of the 3.0 to enter the accounting major at Kansas State). Student-athletes have to declare a major during their second (sophomore) year in order to ensure that benchmarks under the 40-60-80 Rule are being met. This restricts them in what their choices of majors are, which therefore leads them to choose a major, such as Social Science, that might be filled with a number of other student-athletes. This might not be their

preferred choice, but it will help to keep student-athletes eligible and earns them a college degree.

Team Unity

Just as children like to stick together and do the same thing as their friends and older siblings. Student-athletes are like this, always sticking together. Members of any team become friends quickly, or more like a family. They spend a majority of their time together in several different capacities including living together as roommates, socializing in the same circle of peers, attending the same public events, practicing together, and attending study tables together. So, why would student-athletes not stick together when it comes to choosing their courses and majors? As one Kansas State instructor states, “peers are highly influential in decisions that young adults make” (personal communication, April 19, 2010).

CHAPTER 7 – Summary and Conclusion

The basic assumption of academic clustering is that it is done in order to allow student-athletes stroll through college while successfully competing in their sport. The thought is that student-athletes are being pushed into majors that will ensure they graduate with a degree without having lost any eligibility (Steege, Upton, Bohn, & Berkowitz, 2008). It is points like these that help define the term “academic clustering.”

It is easy to point fingers at a direction and label it as the cause of academic clustering, but there are in fact several factors that play into the phenomenon. The NCAA has made guidelines and rules that, while aiming to improve the education of college student-athletes, make it difficult to meet all requirements put forth by the NCAA and institutions. Athletic departments are pressured to do well in order to gain support. Coaches want to recruit student-athletes who are strong competitors, but now must also be successful in the classroom. Athletic academic counselors, aside from coaches, work closest with the student-athletes, especially concerning academics, and have the access to take matters into their own hands as part of the institution’s administrative members. Student-athletes have a difficult time making adjustments to college due to being unprepared or lacking in time management skills. And finally, institutions make it difficult for student-athletes to major in any program they choose because of times classes might be offered, strict requirements put in place by some academic programs, and favoritism shown both from and toward the student-athletes,

Academic clustering is not something that can be all together avoided. It is bound to occur at some point. Clustering currently has a negative perception placed upon it because it is seen as a sort of “easy out.” The important key to think about is that clustering is present for purposes of scheduling and convenience. This may not be the case if the factors mentioned

throughout were not present. Without these entities, though, intercollegiate athletics may not be in existence.

CHAPTER 8 - Recommendations

Academic clustering is something that is bound to happen at collegiate institutions. Even though this is true, efforts need to be made to avoid academic clustering within college athletics. If efforts are made, it is possible to lower the occurrence of academic clustering.

Shields suggests that institutions raise the admission standards for incoming students. This is something that would have an effect on all student populations, athletes or not. This strategy, though, could put forth the effort to not only erase clustering, but institution-wide clustering as well.

In addition to admission standards, Shields proposes that changing eligibility standards for student-athletes would help eliminate academic clustering. This is one strategy that could potentially lead to a greater problem in clustering. Even with the problems it could cause, there is a positive; there would be a higher demand for more academically successful student-athletes being recruited into the institutions.

Some of the most common recommendations that might be made in an effort to avoid academic clustering include letting the student-athletes choose their own majors or spreading them out among different majors, ones that will fit with their different learning styles. These are good recommendations and seem simple enough, but there are a few things that have to be considered. Not every student-athlete knows what area they want to study. Sometimes it is difficult enough to get them to see beyond the stars in their eyes caused by the idea of playing professionally. In addition, who is to say that they would not choose the majors that are commonly seen within the clustering programs? Also, there may not be a lot of different programs that are suitable for certain styles of learning that student-athletes can present, especially since they might not be fully prepared for college.

There are stipulations that the problem of academic clustering should be put in the hands of the institutions as well as the NCAA. These claims hold both responsible for academic clustering and have the viewpoint that they should work to put an end to it. The following are some suggestions that have been offered in order to better the situation (Case et al., 1987):

- Clustering effects need to be more closely monitored by the institutions and NCAA
- Advisement of student-athletes should be transferred out of the athletic department
- There should be an intervention done by the NCAA to set season limitations to allow more time for academic pursuits

Academic clustering is an issue that will be prevalent within intercollegiate athletics for a long time to come. This is cause for finding ways to make the best of the situation. Because the coaches and athletic academic counselors are the entities that work closest to the student-athletes, there are a few things that can take matters into their own hands. These include being up front with the student-athletes, enhancing study skills and techniques, and encouraging the student-athletes to become more autonomous.

One concern of academic clustering is that a large number of student-athletes will graduate college with degrees that they do not know what to do with or have no interest in. Typically, student-athletes are used to being told what to do, so when they are placed in a major program, they have the tendency to accept it and do what they need to do. No questions are asked. This is why it is crucial for athletic academic counselors to be up front with the student-athletes about the major, providing

information that will help them gain some perspective on what the major will prepare them for and allow them to do in the future. By being aware, the student-athletes can more effectively set career goals and search for employment. This will lessen the concern of confusion and disappointment.

Looking back at the idea of some student-athletes being under prepared for college, an important key to ensuring their success is by enhancing their study skills and techniques. This should be done during the first year student-athletes enroll in the institution. While it is crucial to enhance these skills in the student-athletes who do not possess any, it is a good idea to do this for all beginning student-athletes. This ensures that every student-athlete is taught the proper way of studying and writing, especially those student-athletes might present as being sufficient but could still manage to get some help.

This process can be done in the form of a class, one that the student-athletes can gain credit for and apply it to their progress towards graduation. In this class, various topics can be discussed, such as study skills and techniques, basic writing and grammar skills, and note taking skills. In addition, it would be ideal to include topics pertaining to different experiences that will be offered for the student-athletes and how to go about handling them. By offering something like this, the student-athletes will be able to become more rounded individuals and potentially make the needed adjustments to college life.

At the college level, it is expected that students, athletes or not, take responsibility for themselves. There are several developmental theories that pertain specifically to the development of college students. Autonomy is a topic that is seen

multiple times in these theories. For student-athletes, there is a large number of people that they have to report to that they sometimes forget to take the responsibility upon themselves. Their schedules are set for them by counselors and coaches, they are only told what times they need to be at certain places. It should be expected that student-athletes become more autonomous. They should do this by holding themselves accountable for being where they need to be and doing what need to do. Going along with this idea, it should also be expected that student-athletes take responsibility for certain situations such as missing class due to travel for an event. There are letters and emails sent out by counselors to instructors at the beginning of each semester concerning dates that will be missed due to travel, but it is impressive when student-athletes take it upon themselves to approach their instructors concerning missing class. This shows that they are concerned about the class as well as a great display of responsibility. It is acts like these that give academic clustering a more positive nature.

The best way to handle the academic clustering situation is to essentially avoid grouping student-athletes together. Standards need to be set in order to ensure that student-athletes are receiving a valuable education.

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Appendix A – APR

APR Worksheet

Sport		SSN		Semesters on Aid	Initial Collegiate Enroll	Elig for Spring 2009	Reason for Elig. Score	Retained FT for Spring 2009?	Reason for Ret. Score	Fall 2008 Points	Elig for Fall 2009	Reason for Elig. Score	Retained FT for Fall 2009?	Reason for Ret. Score	Spring 2009 Points	Total Points Earned	Total Possible Points	Notes	
																			Last Name
Doe	John	123-45-6789	2	F'09	1	C,E,G	1	R1	2	1	1	C,E,G	1	R1	2	4	4	John met all eligibility requirements, so received all possible points.	
Smith	Bob	234-56-7890	4	F'08	1	A,E,G	1	R1	2	1	1	A,E,G	0	R0a,F	1	3	4	Bob was unable to return for the F'10 semester, so received no point for retention.	
5th Year Aid Students																			
															7	8			
SPORT: APR Score for																			
Graduation Bonus Points																			
Name	SSN	Last Year on Aid	Date of Grad	Total Pts Earned															
					APR Score With Graduation Bonus Point														

Eligibility Codes:

- A – 14.4.3.1 (a) Fulfillment of Credit-Hour Requirement – 24 semester hours
- B – 14.4.3.1 (b) Fulfillment of Credit-Hour Requirement – 18 semester hours
- C – 14.4.3.1 (c) Fulfillment of Credit-Hour Requirement – 6 semester hours
- D – 14.4.3.1.6.1 Exception-Final Academic Year of Degree Program 6 Hour Req.
- E – 14.4.3.2 Fulfillment of Percentage of Degree Requirement
- F – 14.4.3.2.1 Five-Year Degree Program
- G – 14.4.3.3.1 Fulfillment of Minimum GPA Requirement
- H - Did Not Graduate *Within the 5-Year Window of FT Enrollment*
- P - Post BA/BS or FT Undergrad/ FT Grad Sch. / Completing another undergraduate degree with Gr. Sr. Ltr. on file

Retention Codes:

- R1 – Enrolled FT as of Census Date
- R2 – Verified Graduating Senior – Less than FT, with a Grad Senior Letter on file.
- R3 – Graduated this term (Graduated from Kansas State University)
- R4 - Legislative Exception/Allowable Exclusion
- R5 - Post BA/BS
- R6 - Not Enrolled FT as of Census Date (choose one)
 - R6a - Left Institution by Choice (known NOT to transfer)
 - R6a.P = Professional Athlete
 - R6a.F = Family Circumstances
 - R6a.H = Health of Student-Athlete
 - R6a.U = Unknown / Other
 - R6b - Transfer to Another Institution
 - R6c - Suspended/Dismissed from Institution
 - R6d - Unknown/Other
 - R6e - Transfer Adjustment point - Answers yes to ALL questions below:
 - Completed one full year in residence at K-State?
 - Immediately transfers to another 4-year institution?
 - Earns the eligibility point prior to the transfer?
 - Has a cumulative GPA of a 2.6 or higher?
 - Is there documentation?