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**Article Title:** Athletic Subculture within Student-Athlete Academic Centers

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### **Abstract**

Over 400,000 student-athletes participate in NCAA intercollegiate athletics programs. Due to their dual roles as student and athlete, they have a different college experience than the general student population. Specialized academic centers and resources for student-athletes are part of the reason they are separated and often isolated from the rest of campus. Teams have their own unique academic subculture that influences each student-athlete in his or her academic pursuits. The purpose of this study is to explore the athletic academic subculture among student-athletes at the Division I level and the role the athletic academic center and special resources play in cultivating a separate culture from the campus culture. Symbolic interactionism was the framework used as the lens to view the results of this study in the context of neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** athletics, academic subculture, college, neoliberalism

## **Introduction**

There are approximately 400,000 student-athletes competing at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institutions in three divisions. Because of the unusual health, athletic, and time demands placed on these students, they have a very different college experience compared to the general student population. Simons, Van Rhee, and Covington (1999) suggested, “Student athletes may also feel isolated from the other students as they spend so much time and energy participating in athletics with their athletic peers” (p. 161). These circumstances create a unique subculture at American colleges and universities. This study considers the following research questions: What experiences do student-athletes share about the academic culture among their teams? What do student-athletes perceive about athletic academic centers? How do student-athletes feel about their fit in the campus culture? The purpose of this study is to explore the athletic academic subculture among student-athletes at the Division I level and the role the athletic academic center and special resources play in cultivating a separate culture from the campus culture.

### **Student-Athlete Academic Centers and Resources**

Student-athletes are immediately introduced to an academic support team once committed to an institution. Academic counselors, learning assistants, tutors, and class checkers play an integral service for student athletes (Ridpath, 2010). These academic professionals are necessary because of the increasing number of student-athletes that are academically unprepared. Coakley (2001) noted, “Nearly every athletic department with big-time sport programs developed or expanded its student-athlete academic support services” (p. 433). Many Division I universities offer conditional admission for students-athletes, regardless of their academic

preparedness (Ridpath, 2010). Universities recruit top athletic talent despite prospective student-athletes’ academic background.

Academic support centers were originally created in response to the outrage over the perceived lack of academic resources for student-athletes (Huml, Hancock, & Bergman, 2014). In the early 1980’s, the NCAA began to reform its academic policies because of scandals and low graduation rates. Creation of academic centers increased after the NCAA started subsidizing academic services through an academic enhancement fund (Ridpath, 2010). Stipends were provided to member institutions that created programming specifically for student-athletes (Ridpath, 2010). Additionally, the NCAA reform policies instituted reprimands and penalties for the athletic departments that failed to meet academic minimums. Wolverton (2008b) stated, “Competition for players has eased admissions standards in recent years, while the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s academic progress requirements have stiffened. That means it’s easier for an athlete to get into college but harder to stay eligible for sports” (para. 4). The threat of penalties encouraged athletic departments to increase their academic budgets, hire additional staff, and build centers (Ridpath, 2010).

In the past, academic professionals would work in old meeting rooms, cafeterias, and rented space on campus. However, in the last 15 years, many of the major college programs have built stand-alone academic centers exclusively for their student-athletes (Wolverton, 2008a). These centers are constructed and designed not only to keep student-athletes eligible, but also to compete with rivals that are building impressive facilities. According to Saunders (2010), “The neoliberal focus on wealth and economic success can help understand a radical shift in students’ goals, motivations, and their purpose of going to college” (p. 64). Students are attracted by shiny, fancy buildings and athletic reputation, not just academic prestige. As the NCAA

academic standards continue to increase, the academic facilities arms race will thrive (Huml et al., 2014).

Within the NCAA bylaws, there is not a rule that requires an academic center specifically for student-athletes. The National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) (2013) “defines any location where the student athletes are assigned to complete study hall/tutorial assignments” as a support center for student-athletes (p. 2). Not all support centers are stand-alone facilities and may be housed within libraries, stadiums, and existing campus structures (N4A, 2013). The N4A (2013) suggested that academic support centers have clearly defined restrictions regarding non-academic athletics personnel, individuals and activities in each space, education and training for all academic support professionals, and documented policies and procedures to report any violation of institutional or NCAA policy (N4A, 2013). While the N4A provided best practices, each center can implement policies based on the academic environment of its campus.

The emergence of these centers has led to increasing discussion over the consequences of specialized services. Typical student-athletes have schedules that require extensive time spent with their sport (Huml et al., 2014). Academic centers enable student-athletes to focus on their studies and receive extra support to be successful in college. While the use of academic centers seems positive, there have been critics against specialized centers for student-athletes. These centers cost millions of dollars including private donations to the athletic department. Faculty and staff assume that the cost of these academic centers negatively impacts institutional finances by taking university money for athletic budgets and limiting potential donations for the campus (Smith, 2009). Additionally, these centers are designated for a very small number of students on

campus. In comparison, campus student support centers are understaffed and underfunded while serving the entire student population.

The academic centers also contribute to the separation of athletes from the student body. According to Smith (2009), “The segregation created by the academic support centers also contributes to an overall undermining of the primary mission of the university. The academic support centers effectively replaces the teaching and advising that occurs in the academic center with the professors” (p. 193). These comments align with the notion of the student-athletes not receiving a comprehensive college experience. Huml et al. (2014) found that student-athletes indicated that time spent in the support centers negatively affected their ability to connect with faculty, participate in campus organizations and community service, and meet with students from their classes on projects. The existence of these facilities lead to a discussion on the influence of neoliberalism on higher education as a context for this study.

### **Neoliberalism**

The theory of neoliberalism has permeated higher education. According to Harvey (2005), “Neoliberalization has meant, in short, the financialization of everything” (p. 33). This corporate mindset has characterized everything as a business. Giroux (2002) described, “With neoliberalism’s market-drive discourse, corporate culture becomes both the model for the good life and the paradigmatic sphere for defining individual success and fulfillment” (p. 429). Kezar (2004) called this an “industrial model of higher education” (p. 453). College students enroll in classes by moving them to a shopping cart and paying for them transactionally; they are customers rather than students (Kezar, 2002; Saunders, 2010). Strategic enrollment management involves balancing the recruitment of quality students and the need for students who can afford a higher sticker price. Giroux (2002) cautioned, “Higher education needs to be safeguarded as a

public good against the ongoing attempts to organize and run it like a corporation” (p. 450). This has changed the experience of students on campus, especially student-athletes. Neoliberalism is a structure to organize the higher education system, and student-athletes are a product of this structure.

Noting how athletics operates separately from an institution’s academic mission, Bok (2003) emphasized, “Yet athletics, as practiced by most major universities, are the oldest forms of commercialization in American higher education” (p. 35). Bass and Newman (2013) confirmed, “Athletic departments are becoming increasingly commercialized and corporatized” (p. 29). There is a strong focus for institutions to make money. That means student-athletes are admitted below institutional academic standards (Bok, 2003). Even worse, “the pressure to win in big-time programs also helps to create a unique culture for recruited athletes that gives them a different, more impoverished educational experience than their classmates” (Bok, 2003, p. 43). Universities use athletics as a way to earn prestige and exposure (Bass & Newman, 2013). In that regard, Giroux (2002) found that neoliberalists are driven “to create wealth for a limited few” and value profit over learning (p. 440). This context provides an intense experience for student-athletes, both as consumers and as the talent that produces a profit. Referencing the Penn State scandal, Bass and Newman (2013) explained, “Too much money is on the line and too many stakeholders are interested in the success of the football program for morale and good judgment to be to the forefront of any major institutional decisions” (p. 31). This statement conveys that student-athletes’ best interests (especially academic) are not a priority given this neoliberal influence on big-time college sport. They are truly exhibiting the idea of the athlete-student role.

## Literature Review

A literature review led to discovery of several important dimensions to this topic. These include campus culture and its contrast to the athletic subculture, and general athletic academic subculture and its effects on performance.

### Campus Culture

Campus culture is often in conflict with the culture of the athletic department. Adler and Adler (1987) warned, “The equality of the exchange between college athletes and their educational institutions has...been sharply questioned, with many critics leveling charges that universities have exploited their athletes by making excessive demands of them and failing to fulfill their educational promises” (p. 443). Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) added, “Student-athletes may, in fact, be trying to negotiate a system that was not designed for them” (p. 189). Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) conducted a study to “assess whether prejudice existed among the peers of student-athletes at a large university” (p. 190). They utilized the Situational Attitude Scale (SAS) on a random sample of 293 freshmen at a Division I university. Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) found that negative attitudes toward student-athletes exist among non-athlete students, especially regarding academic performance.

Their study “confirms that the student-athlete group is a culture prone to prejudice in the campus community” (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991, p. 191). This prejudice extends beyond just freshmen on campuses, and includes a wide range of views. Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) emphasized, “For years, part of the university system has included myths and stereotypes that range from the student-athlete being the campus hero to the student being the campus idiot. The ‘dumb jock’ portrayal has been particularly pervasive about the Black student-athlete” (p. 189).



Also, student-athletes are seen as privileged on campus (Williams, Colles, & Allen, 2010). The viewpoints of athletes on campus are often negative.

Krebs (2004) discussed the clash of campus and athletic culture on her Division III campus from the faculty viewpoint. She noticed that students interested in different activities group together on campus, such as theatre students. However, Krebs (2004) considered students who live together, study theatre, and pursue activities related to theatre outside of their studies to still be grouping for academic pursuits, “a complement to their course work,” whereas student-athletes are grouped for non-academic reasons (p. B5). She indicated that student-athletes could learn from athletic participation but that was not necessarily prevalent (Krebs, 2004). Krebs (2004) suggested, “Faculty members should establish coachlike bonds with student-athletes...to acknowledge the students’ dual identities and make that work to their academic advantage” (p. B5). The campus culture at her institution is that “most of our student-athletes fly under the radar” and therefore can hide their athletic identity from faculty and other students (Krebs, 2004, p. B5). Krebs (2004) worried that the culture shows opposition between the academic and the athletic sides of students’ pursuits, though she determined that this is perpetuated by faculty and coaches rather than the student-athletes themselves.

Njororai (2012) cautioned that most college campuses in the U.S. are predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Whether attending PWIs or just in states with a “dominant White culture,” Black students struggle with the cultural transition (p. 54). The sports of basketball and football have heavy representation of Blacks (Njororai, 2012). He noted, “African American athletes feel isolated on college campuses as a result of others stereotyping them as academically inferior” (p. 54). Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) confirmed this was a prejudice students had towards athletes in general.

Hawley, Hosch, and Bovaird (2014) explored social identity theory and the “black sheep effect” among college athletes and non-athletes, utilizing eight scenarios with 245 participants to evoke responses. They commented, “Researchers found that simply describing a college age woman as an athlete or a non-athlete was sufficient enough to produce bias” on a campus (Hawley et al., 2014, p. 59). Agreeing with Krebs (2004), Hawley et al. (2014) argued, “Both faculty and students express negative perceptions of student-athletes regarding admissions, academics, press exposure, and athletic privileges such as tutoring” (pp. 59-60). Negative comments “related to the dumb jock stereotype, academic motivation and receiving underserved benefits and privileges” (Hawley et al., 2014, p. 60). Hawley et al. (2014) determined that student-athletes and the general student population are aware of social divisions on campus.

### **Athletic Academic Subculture**

Adler and Adler (1985, 1987) conducted a four-year participant-observation study of a men’s basketball team at a medium-sized private university. They found that “most of the athletes observed began their college careers with a positive attitude toward academics” (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 446). After a year, athletes in the study found a conflict between their roles as athlete and student. As these male student-athletes performed worse in classes, they distanced themselves from their academic role. They also were “racially, socially, and economically different from the rest of the student body” (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 449). Adler and Adler (1987) found five ways the athletes’ peer subculture conflicted with their academic role:

- (1) by discouraging them from exerting effort in academics; (2) by providing them with distractions that made it harder for them to study; (3) by providing them with distractions that made it harder for them to study; (4) by discouraging them from seeking out and associating with other students who could have provided greater academic role modeling; and (5) by providing excuses and justifications that legitimized their academic failures. (p. 449)

These issues came up when male revenue sport athletes were studied specifically. Njororari (2012) determined that the isolation and separation from the academic identity is especially difficult for Black athletes, who are overrepresented in revenue sports.

Meyer (1990) interviewed female student-athletes about their athletic and academic experiences. She found that to student-athletes, “doing well enough academically to remain eligible was extremely important” (p. 47). Rather than seeking advice for choosing classes, Meyer (1990) discovered “female athletes...consulted an advisor in the athletic department on an annual basis to make certain that eligibility requirements were being met” (p. 49). Simons et al. (1999) confirmed Meyer’s results, announcing, “The athletic culture that student-athletes inhabit informs them in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that athletics takes priority over academics. For many, staying minimally eligible to compete in their sports is the primary goal” (p. 159). Athletic academic advisors caution their students that eligibility does not equate to employability.

Simons et al. (1999) reiterated, “Some accommodations are made for the special demands on student athletes, such as early course enrollment, special advising and extra help in the form of tutoring and review sessions” (p. 159). Special academic centers are only open to student-athletes, just one of many ways on campuses that student-athletes are isolated from the general student body. Bowen and Levin (2003) suggested that this culture is adopted from the team mentality, writing that a “possible explanation for underperformance is that there is an athletic ‘culture’ that does not value academic achievement. Many team members live and study together, and it may be hard for an individual to challenge the norms of that group” (p. 163). Nishimoto (1997) observed, “The football student-athlete peer culture did function as the main social support network for the participants. Findings generally indicated that the primary point

of contact for the student-athletes in both their scholastic and athletic commitments lay within the membership ranks of their football culture” (p. 101). However, in her study on female student-athletes, Meyer (1990) found “most of the female athletes reported that their teammates were a good influence on them scholastically. The volleyball players in particular were very concerned about academic performance, creating a contagious atmosphere wherein all the players tried to do their best in addition to helping their companions to achieve” (p. 51). This study showed that socialization for certain student-athletes could incorporate academics into the subculture as a positive aspect of the college experience.

Meyer’s (1990) interviews with female student-athletes revealed that a strong bond is formed because of the “lack of understanding by students of the experience of being a woman athlete may therefore draw women athletes together into their own support group” (p. 52). Nishimoto’s (1997) study of football players had similar results. She learned, “This study has suggested that the social integration of football student-athletes in their peer culture is the central source of interaction for them. This points to insulation or detachment from the mainstream collegiate world” (p. 102). Time commitments to athletics and pressure from various stakeholders cause student-athletes to struggle with the balance between athletics and academics. According to Adler and Adler (1985), “Most athletes acknowledged that their athletic-related activities affected their academic performance” (p. 244). This culture permeates the entire athletic department, not just one gender or specific sports.

Many times, student-athletes will internalize these perceptions and underperform. Adler and Adler (1985) described,

Athletes believed that many professors labeled them as jocks because they looked different from most of the other students, they were surrounded in their classes by other athletes, and they were identified by coaches early in the semester to the professors as athletes. They perceived, then, that professors treated them differently from the general student body...Athletes also encountered a number of less sympathetic professors who they thought stereotyped them as dumb jocks or cocky athletes...using persecution as a rationale for disengaging from academics. (p. 246)

In Nishimoto’s (1997) study, football players felt “a distinct ‘we-ness’ and ‘they-ness’ mentality” in the classroom (p. 100). These types of perceptions by others weaken student-athletes’ identity as a college student. Disengagement from academic pursuits leads to stronger focus on athletics and more isolation from other students and campus resources. Meyer (1990) noted that this behavior is more likely to be exhibited male student-athletes. She addressed, “Both the women and the men lived primarily in an athletic peer subculture, but the norms in the subculture varied by gender. The anti-intellectual orientations and the social prestige of the male athletes set them apart from other students. The women experienced proacademic pressures and little if any social recognition and status” (Meyer, 1990, p. 52). Students on each team are different at every institution, but evidence demonstrates that women athletes identify more with being students than do male athletes, especially in a collective group.

The team environment provides for an understanding of the student-athlete experience. Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) described, “Often, student-athletes are the most effective communicators to their peers about the life of a student-athlete. They are able to bring alive the impact of their intense schedule, the stress created by juggling two major, often conflicting roles—that of student and that of athlete—and being the victim of stereotyping by the campus community” (p. 192). Krebs (2004) added, “Students who participate in intercollegiate athletics, even in small Division III institutions...consider themselves forever hyphenated student-athletes” (p. B5). Williams et al. (2010) agreed, discussing, “Athletes are naturally seeking out

their peers, particularly teammates, to provide academic support and assistance” (p. 230). Throughout research on student-athletes, there is little doubt that student-athletes have a collectivist orientation within teams that significantly impacts perceptions of them on campus and academic performance.

Throughout these themes, we can see that athletes experience tension on campus. There is pressure behind their purpose--which role is first, student or athlete? Student-athletes face negative perceptions, separation and isolation from campus, and a “we versus them” mentality from faculty and the general student population. Athletes are exploited through this corporate model, where academics are secondary to the accolades these students bring to their institutions. We expect male students to have the same struggles with and feelings about academics as those in the renowned Adler and Adler (1985; 1987) study. The athletic subculture and its relation to the college academic environment are examined through the lens of symbolic interactionism.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism is a contemporary sociological theory in the interpretive paradigm. Interpretive sociologists aim to study social behavior to understand it and find out why people behave the way they do. Blumer (1962) described, “Human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions” (p. 190). Ritzer (2010) provided some fundamental assumptions of this theory.

He explained, “People act toward things, but do so on the basis of the meanings those things have for them” (Ritzer, 2010, p. 138). Those things become symbols, “thought of as common or shared meanings and values” (Rose, 1962, p. 6). Hewitt and Shulman (2011) defined significant symbols as “a vocal or other type of gesture that arouses the same response in

the person using it as in people to whom it is directed” (p. 33). These significant symbols are one of four key components of the theory.

People learn the meaning behind significant symbols through socialization. Ritzer (2010) emphasized, "People become human through social interaction... We are born with the capacities to become human, but that potential can only be realized through human interaction" (p. 138). He explained the interpretive process, continuing, "people do not simply internalize the meanings that they learn through social interaction, but they are also able to modify them through an interpretive process... People are conscious, capable of reflecting on themselves and what they do, and therefore capable of shaping their actions and interactions" (Ritzer, 2010, p. 138). Rose (1962) connected the concept of socialization with examining group cultures: "The socialization is not only into the general culture but also into various subcultures" (p. 16). This interpretive process also extends to the concept of social self.

Another major concept of the theory is the idea that the self is a process and is social in nature. Hewitt and Shulman (2011) explained, "The experience of self rests on the capacity to see ourselves from the vantage point of others" (p. 48). This idea is critical in examining athletic subculture as it relates to the development of self. Hewitt and Shulman (2011) described, "Selves are shaped by ideal conceptions of what the person ought to be, and these vary by gender, ethnic origin, religion, region, social class, and other kinds of social differentiations. Many definitions of the ideal person are linked to group membership" (p. 106). The fourth and final factor of symbolic interactionism is the joint act.

After considering the interpretive processes with learning significant symbols, socialization, and the social self, the connection to joint acts is created. Rose (1962) expressed, "Through the learning of a culture (and subcultures, which are the specialized cultures found in

particular segments of society), men are able to predict each other’s behavior most of the time and gauge their own behavior to the predicted behavior of others” (pp. 9-10). These four elements of symbolic interactionism serve as a lens to examine athletic academic subculture in the collegiate environment.

### **Method**

Three focus groups were conducted at a Division I athletic institution in the Midwestern United States. Student-athletes’ participation was voluntary, learning about the opportunity through athletic academic advisors. The participants completed at least two full-time semesters at the institution to be considered immersed in the team culture. The three groups consisted of six to 10 students in revenue sports (i.e., men’s basketball, football), male non-revenue sports (e.g., baseball), and women’s sports (e.g., track and field). Six to 10 people in three to five groups is an appropriate number of subjects and groups for a study (Morgan, 1997).

According to Morgan (1997), “Focus groups serve as the primary means of collecting qualitative data” in self-contained uses (p. 5). Since this study is about group culture, focus groups share an interest in group interaction (Morgan, 1997). They are considered “facilitated social activity” that helps construct meaning from a social situation (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 6). Morgan (1997) found focus groups’ “reliance on interaction in the group to produce data” to be a strength (p. 15). Focus groups also give a voice “to groups that would not otherwise be heard” and “reveal aspects of experiences and perspective that would be not as accessible without group interaction” (Morgan, 1997, p. 20). Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013) agreed, adding, “Although not entirely ‘natural,’ focus groups can afford a closer approximation to natural interaction than do many other data collection strategies and activities” (p. 46).



The focus groups were organized into the three groups mentioned previously because their experiences are unique within those divisions. Thus, their viewpoints serve to “[index] connections among apparently disparate activity systems...that are invisible to all but ‘cultural insiders’” (Kimberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 83). The experiences of student-athletes can only be shared by those who live in that role, as an insider. Also, Kimberelis and Diminstradis (2013) noted that participants should be those in existing groups which fosters synergy. The focus groups were loosely structured so participants can freely discuss the topics and related areas without being tied to answering questions in a rigid order.

Sample focus group questions include: How do you feel student-athletes fit into campus culture? How do you interact with your teammates within an academic setting? How do your teammates react if you share news of academic success? What matters most to you as a student here? What matters most to your teammates as students here? Do you think student-athletes should have their own academic center? Does having this academic center isolate you from non-athlete students on campus? Would you want your academic center to be open to the general student body? What additional services would you want your academic center to offer?

## **Results and Discussion**

The focus groups yielded interesting results that were not expected based on previous literature. The research questions asked: What experiences do student-athletes share about the academic culture among their teams? What do student-athletes perceive about athletic academic centers? How do student-athletes feel about their fit in the campus culture? We viewed the results through symbolic interactionism to understand the context.

## Significant Symbols

In intercollegiate athletics, many symbols are related to academic requirements and success for student-athletes. One major symbol is eligibility. This word has strong connotations and meanings. For high school athletes, the idea of “no pass, no play” was a clear policy for students to follow. Eligibility for college competition is much more complex. Another symbol in athletic academic subculture is the athletic academic center, which creates isolation from other students. From the literature and the focus group participants’ responses, four symbols emerged from the study: eligibility, graduation, time, and academic center/resources.

**Eligibility and graduation.** Student-athletes are constantly thinking about eligibility. Of course, there is more to the college educational experience than meeting minimum NCAA eligibility requirements for athletic participation. Eligibility standards do not enforce or suggest academic achievement or timely graduation. However, that concern is constant as eligibility depends on a student’s academic performance every semester. A male non-revenue athlete commented, “For our sport, I don’t know about the girl’s side, but the men’s side, we all take accountability for each other...since we know the rules we keep each other accountable.” Though past literature did not focus on male non-revenue student-athletes, this comment is interesting because in past research on male revenue athletes, there was not a team culture that encouraged any sort of academic success. A male revenue sport athlete shared about his academic team culture: “As long as you not messin’ up your eligibility and you graduatin’...as long as you on the right path I don’t think [the coaching staff] really worried about it.”

This student’s mention of graduation conveyed that his coaches may have positively discussed graduation with the team even if academics is not constantly discussed.

Horner, Ternes, and McLeod (2016) suggested, “Such a near-sighted concern for eligibility, academic progress, and quantitative metrics work together to obfuscate the true value of the collegiate student-athlete experience, especially when projected over an extended period of time” (p. 194). These student-athletes understood the underlying importance of staying eligible and what that meant to the staff members. To some male athletes, graduation was a personal goal even if athletic participation was a priority. One male revenue athlete announced, “Just want to get a degree, that piece of paper that said I did it.” For many student-athletes, the opportunity to attend college is something their family members did not have. Their athletic talent has enabled them to enroll in college, and graduating is important to them and their families.

**Time and academic center/resources.** Throughout the focus groups, student-athletes mentioned struggles with time. Their schedules were filled with athletic commitments, class time, and structured study time. There was little time for extracurricular activities. Because of time limitations, student-athletes felt it was imperative to have access to separate academic resources and facilities available to accommodate their busy schedules. Horner et al. (2016) noted, “When student-athletes rely on coaches and administrators as sole providers of information concerning the ideal management of their time, they allow for possible overrepresentation of athletic department interests in their personal investment strategies.” (p. 200). Students complained that they have to share tutors in the campus tutoring center, but in the academic center for athletes, “when you get a tutor, nine times out of 10 it’s just you and the tutor” (Female student-athlete). Another female student-athlete emphasized, “We put the work in so it should be one of the benefits we get as well.” These resources were deemed vital by the majority of the focus group participants. One male non-revenue athlete commented, “If we

didn't have the [athletic academic center], it would be so hard to find access to tutors or to just get the help specifically one-on-one for us.” Student-athletes also expressed concern if they were to share academic facilities and resources during limiting study time with the general student population; they feared students interested in talking to them because they were athletes would distract them.

## **Socialization**

Student-athletes learn the academic subculture by interacting with other student-athletes. Athletic teams are always changing, on an annual basis and sometimes by semester. The culture is reinforced as new freshmen and transfer students join the team. Hawley et al. (2014) described, “College athletics subjects athletes to an intensive socialization experience, which socializes them to meet the physical and mental demands of their sport, but tends to separate them from the general student body. This separation creates a form of social categorization on college campuses—a division between non-athlete students and student-athletes” (p. 58). According to Bowen and Levin (2003), “It is hardly surprising that large numbers of athletes spend lots of time with each other, living, eating, studying, and partying together. After all, they spend a great deal of time practicing, traveling, and competing, and strong bonds are naturally likely to form between teammates, who then, more or less inevitably, also choose to spend a great deal of informal time together” (p. 110). Whether on campus or off campus, many student-athletes live together. Adler and Adler (1985) offered, “Within the dorm...the peer subculture thus provided them with a set of norms and values that guided their interactions and behavior within these three realms. One of the most predominant influences of the peer subculture was its anti-intellectual and anti-academic character” (pp. 245-246). By spending so much time

together, student-athletes may subdue personal identities and choices for those of the whole team.

Beyer and Hannah (2000) discussed, “Collectivist norms dictate that athletes be so strongly affiliated with their teams that they will subordinate individual goals to those of the team” (p. 113). When related to academics, many students on athletic teams downplay the importance of education in the college experience, especially in male and revenue sports. However, all student-athletes, regardless of gender, are affected by the enormous pressure and requirements placed upon them. Socialization has a major role in student-athletes’ understanding of their academic subculture, whether academics is championed or not valued.

Like previous research (Adler & Adler, 1985; Adler & Adler, 1987; Meyer, 1990; Nishimoto, 1997) has shown, the socialization process separates and often isolates student-athletes from campus. This separation even occurs in the classroom with non-athlete students: “We’ve got a class now and the whole back row is football and on the far left side the whole row is basketball” (Male revenue athlete). Another male revenue student-athlete explained why this occurs:

If you see an athlete in class or on campus, you are going to talk to them or sit next to them. Opposed to like maybe someone else in the class, even if you’ve got other friends in the class...you’re gonna sit next to someone who woke up at six with you, not someone who woke up at nine and had coffee and is all jittery because you probably don’t want to talk to them.

Because student-athletes start their day early, the focus of the day is on athletic pursuits for the majority of it. Kezar (2004) explained, “Athletics is an example of an area that has become so dominated by economic gain that it may never be able to incorporate educational values again...it illustrates what happens when educational values and practices are compromised by market/corporate approach” (p. 443). A male revenue athlete explained,

This is kind of our job...we spend so much more time in the weight room and on the field and stuff like that than we do in class...we don't get that much time schoolwise...by the time we get to study hall, we are mentally checked out...we've been grinding since six in the morning.

Sometimes, student-athletes are driven to compete academically, but the students in the focus group indicated that this is limited to other student-athletes in the same classes: “If we have a test due, a quiz due...I ask him what his grade is. If my grade is higher than his I'd be more excited than he would be and I'd be talkin' trash” (Male revenue athlete). A male non-revenue athlete echoed this sentiment: “If I see one of my teammates and I ask them like hey what did you make and they made a better grade than me then next time I am going to try to make a better grade than them.” Both of these quotes definitely contrast with the conclusions made by Adler and Adler (1985, 1987) and Nishimoto (1997), which emphasized that there is not really academic encouragement among teammates, and that sometimes male athletes would lie about getting a good grade or face embarrassment for higher grades and focusing too much on academic activities.

The results of the female student-athlete focus group confirmed Meyer's (1990) study about the positive academic culture on women's collegiate athletics teams. One female athlete explained, “I think as a culture our team is really happy for each other. We support each other...it's more important for us to have better academics and we consistently do.” More succinctly, a female athlete said, “Pass together, fail together.” Another female athlete described the culture: “We kinda try to stay together. It's basically you know who you know so if they're your teammates you kinda wanna stick together in classes so that we all pass.” This is not very different from the male revenue athletes who sit together in the classroom. As a female student-athlete noted, “It's nice to be around people who understand your lifestyle.” From these comments, it seems that student-athletes choose to isolate themselves due to socialization in their

team and athletic department culture. They may feel that non-athlete students do not understand them and what they experience every day.

## **Social Self**

The social self encompasses how student-athletes feel others view or perceive them. Student-athletes take into account how they are perceived by others at their institutions. The student-athletes in the focus groups discussed a variety of different people’s perceptions: other athletes, faculty, staff, non-athlete students, and even employers. Some student-athletes felt they were viewed positively by others: “In general, I would say student-athletes are looked at as people who are leaders and they set an example, especially male student-athletes from sports like basketball or football” (Female student-athlete). Another female student-athlete commented, “Employers are more apt to hire student-athletes” based on transferable skills. This differs from Horner et al.’s (2016) findings that “the commitment to sport instead of other activities such as internships may even put college athletes in a more difficult position than their non-athlete peers” in finding employment (p. 203). The student’s comment provides an interesting opinion that her status as a student-athlete gives her an advantage in the job market. A male revenue sport athlete felt views of student-athletes are very polarized: “You get major love from everybody or they just think you’re a jock.”

Referencing Georg Simmel, a major influence on symbolic interactionism, Adler and Adler (1985) reasoned,

Athletes resemble Simmel’s strangers – i.e., individuals who are full-fledged members of the group yet at the same time are outside of the group. By being part of, but not like, the larger student body, athletes experience the tension between nearness and distance. This heightens their sensitivity to their strangeness and focuses their attention on those elements they do not share with other students. As a result, the internal cohesion of their peer subculture becomes strengthened and their self-identities become more firmly anchored within it. (p. 248)

Based on this observation, student-athletes shape their concept of self on the perceptions of being outsiders from the student body and insiders of the student-athlete population.

Both male and female respondents mentioned trouble with faculty perceptions of athletes. One female student-athlete stated, “Some teachers don’t really...like they’ll tell you from the beginning if you’re a student-athlete you might as well not even take this class because if you’re gone for so many days I don’t care.” Besides faculty, student-athletes felt scrutinized by the general student population. This increased the feeling of student-athletes’ being commodities that represent the university, rather than being seen as actual members of the student body themselves. A female student-athlete offered, “I think the regular student body is very critical...that we get all this extra stuff, especially gear.” A male revenue student-athlete added, “We stick out because we play a sport, but to me I should fit in just like everyone else because I am a student here trying to learn just like every other student here who attends.” Both male and female student-athletes believed female student-athletes care more about academics and grades than male student-athletes do.

Academic success in athletic departments is not promoted like athletic achievements are. Adler and Adler (1985) explained, “Athletes received greater *reinforcement* for athletic performance than for academic performance” (p. 245). Yet outside of athletic departments, the environment is not the same. The university’s primary purpose is to educate students. Many student-athletes feel uncomfortable in the classroom because of the stereotypes associated with athletic academic culture. This is reinforced by Horner et al. (2016): “Being a student-athlete requires a significant amount of money, time, and effort along with forgoing many other experiences and opportunities for self-development” (p. 205). Disengagement from academics leads to stronger focus on athletics and more isolation from other students and campus resources.



## Joint Act

The joint act represents when others make decisions that student-athletes consider before they act for themselves. Student-athletes are affected by the actions of others beginning with their recruitment to institutions. Coaches recruit student-athletes aggressively, and usually have parents as an audience. Their promises that students can pick their own major, academics is the most important aspect of the college experience, and the student-athlete academic services will cater to their academic needs and deficiencies lead to high expectations from students and parents. According to Meyer (1990), “During the recruiting process, coaches and others may have placed a great deal of emphasis on getting an education and on the availability of an academic support staff such as tutors and study halls which served the athletes. This emphasis may have reinforced or contributed to idealistic expectations” (p. 48). While this sounds very positive, the concerns increase when students get to campus.

Academic staff and resources help students with the academic role. However, many students never learn how to make decisions about choosing courses or selecting a major, which is generally a responsibility for all individual enrolled students who also are legal adults. Adler and Adler (1985) stressed, “Athletes, therefore, were largely uninvolved in academic decision-making and did not interact directly with professors, academic counselors, or academic administrators. As a result, they failed to develop the knowledge, initiative or, in many cases, the interest to handle these academic matters themselves” (p. 244). The actions of coaches and academic staff are then interpreted by student-athletes to be unrelated to their own decision-making.

This can be a major issue for student-athletes. College is a time to develop an identity, be challenged academically, and make adult decisions. Non-athletes and professors may view

student-athletes as coddled since they cannot make their own academic choices. Giroux (2002) suggested, “Colleges and universities do not simply produce knowledge and values for students, they also play an influential role in shaping their identities. If colleges and universities are going to define themselves as centers of teaching and learning vital to the democratic life of the nation, they are going to have to acknowledge the danger of becoming corporate or simply adjuncts to big business” (p. 446). Obviously, this is a joint act with major consequences.

Another interesting phenomenon that has been researched is the idea of academic clustering. Student-athletes often major in similar programs. Bowen and Levin (2003) indicated that because athletes tend to major in similar programs, “that points to the existence of a separate athletic ‘culture’” (p. 327). Just as students learn the athletic subculture in the socialization process, they also take into account what their teammates and athlete peers choose as majors, and then make a decision before the start of the junior year. This joint act impacts the academic subculture because “the athletes who choose to major in these fields may be more readily influenced by their teammates in academic matters” (Bowen & Levin, 2003, p. 163). Major selection is often related to working around team competition and practice schedules. Though student-athletes are often accused of taking an easy route through college, there is no measure of comparison between various fields of study, and all majors are open to all students, regardless of athletic ability.

Several female student-athletes were critical of male student-athletes’ academic efforts. They felt many male student-athletes, especially the revenue sport participants, took advantage of the academic resources so much that they slacked on actually doing much of the work. One female student-athlete noted, “Men get more help than females do. People automatically think girls are smarter and they don’t need the help guys do...they need somebody to make sure they

get their work done.” Another female student-athlete continued, “They’re like, well, I have these people who are going to help me so I don’t have to try. I can slack off but they’re going to make sure I get the work done so I can kind of just do what I want.” Interestingly, the female student-athletes felt that not only were they viewed as smarter, but also less important than the males:

Say some all-star basketball or football player or something like that becomes academically ineligible. That’s going to be a lot bigger of a problem in like they’re going to get in a lot more trouble in the academic center if that would happen than if one of us were to become academically ineligible. (Female student-athlete)

Though these comments may reiterate the descriptions of academic subculture that permeated the literature of Adler and Adler (1985, 1987) and Meyer (1990). However, the male student-athletes shared information that contradicts some of these earlier subculture studies. When teammates struggle academically, one male non-revenue athlete noted that he and his teammates will “inform some other people that we know can help you.” This was especially interesting because the student participated in an individual sport where the team does not always practice or spend time together. Also, a male revenue athlete insisted, “We all want to see each other be successful...you don’t want to see any of your teammates go through all this and not come up with something at the end.”

In the men’s quotes, it is evident that some male athletes are willing to help their teammates before those teammates have a chance to act, though it is for positive reasons. However, the females feel neglected academically because they may need help too and there may be less access to academic resources or staff. They also are concerned that they are valued less because they do not compete in a revenue sport that gets lots of attention like men’s basketball or football.

## Implications

Several implications for policy and practice can be drawn from the results of the study. The results reinforced that an academic center specifically for student-athletes isolates them from the rest of campus (Huml et al., 2014; Smith, 2009). In the great facilities arms race influenced by neoliberalism, these centers will likely continue to be limited to a small population of students on campus and be used for recruiting (Wolverton, 2008a). However, the student-athletes value having space separate from the general student population. Students expressed a desire for the center to become more than just space for academic purposes. Additional services suggested by the students included career development, information about on-campus activities, student organizations, and internships. By adding services that incorporate the general student body, student-athletes can develop an identity outside of athletics and possibly change their academic culture. Student-athletes' individual identities directly tie into their team's culture. Academic professionals are in a unique position to assist student-athletes with strengthening their connection to all campus services, including encouraging student-athletes to develop relationships with faculty, staff, student leaders, and the community. This is valuable for retaining and graduating student-athletes.

The results also suggested potential positive effects of unintended clustering. The students took a genuine interest in their teammates' grades when they were taking the same course or in the same major. This is especially important for incoming students who have to adjust to a new environment and academic culture. By placing student-athletes in courses together perhaps four to five new freshmen or transfers, advisors can produce a positive cohort effect. This increases academic motivation and enables academic professionals to promote integrity in the classroom. This practice can also assist with teaching students time management

techniques and study habits. Detractors of this practice would note the risk of students’ becoming dependent on each other and possibly committing academic violations. However, advisors should encourage student-athletes to work in groups or find study buddies with non-athlete students. This would help engage student-athletes with the general student population and also potentially break negative stereotypes about athletes and academics.

Student-athlete academic centers are fairly new considering the long history of intercollegiate athletics. Specific rules do not exist that inform departments on requirements like how many staff members they should have and how much space is needed. For academic services, the NCAA should require advisors to attend regional rules conferences and N4A professional development opportunities (regional and national conventions). This will cut down on academic integrity violations and establish best practices for each department.

### **Conclusion**

Academic subculture has been largely unexplored within the athletic realm. With the increasing emphasis on recruiting the best athletes at the expense of academic ability, more athletic departments have been paying attention to their teams’ academic culture. There are major variances between the three participant groups, leading to the differences in academic approach and teammate support. Enhancing this culture will greatly improve student-athlete attrition related to academic issues. The purpose of this study was to explore the academic subculture among student-athletes at the Division I level and the role that athletic academic centers and special resources play in a cultivating a separate culture from the campus culture. This study contributed to the limited knowledge on academic subculture and reinforced assumptions about the value of academics within the locker rooms.

Eligibility and graduation are the main areas of emphasis for the students. Teammates encouraged each other to stay eligible but did not take specific interest in grades unless they shared a major. Most female athletes expressed that academic success was a priority for them. The importance of receiving a degree was a common theme for each of the groups. Student-athletes that classified themselves as low-income or first-generation college students placed additional emphasis on finishing their degree programs.

Student-athlete academic centers have an integral role in building a positive team academic subculture. The results suggest that the student-athletes prefer to study in their academic center. The students expressed that their academic center assisted with reducing outside distractions and provided them with one-on-one tutor interaction. The centers also provide student-athletes with an additional area to socialize with other student-athletes, but the results also suggest that many student-athletes prefer to study with their teammates.

We also found that socialization and individual student identity shapes the academic identity of the teams. The results reinforced prior research (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1985; 1987) that indicated student-athlete isolation in academic settings and found that individuals from different teams are isolated from each other in the classroom regardless of their commonality of being a student-athlete. Students from each group shared the opinion that traditional students were not relatable in classroom settings because they did not share the same schedules or understand their exhaustion. Focus group participants also mentioned that non-athletes have a negative perception of their academic ability, and both the tangible and intangible benefits of being a student-athlete. When student-athletes are placed in the same classes or majors, there is an intentional and competitive nature between the students to earn higher grades. The student-athletes study together and ask about tips, strategies, and grades.

The students’ perceptions of what others thought of their academic abilities differed among the groups. The female student-athletes were aware that some teachers perceived them as troublesome because of their athletic schedules, but also acknowledged that employers value student-athlete experiences. The male student-athletes felt overwhelming acknowledgment and support from their non-athlete peers, but also expressed the idea that faculty and staff members have negative perceptions of their academic ability. The student-athletes also had strong opinions on the academic values of students on other teams. The female student-athletes perceived the males as not taking their education seriously, while the males admitted that the female students prioritized academics.

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, the student-athletes in this study shared experiences and thoughts regarding significant symbols (e.g., eligibility and graduation), socialization (e.g., team academic subculture), the social self (e.g., how faculty perceive them), and joint act (e.g., helping each other). Though some of the same challenges for student-athletes mentioned in previous literature remain like balancing dual roles, this study shows a shift in academic culture. Student-athletes are taking more ownership of their academic pursuits, especially the males, who are more encouraging than the students in the Adler and Adler (1985, 1987) study.

There was no mention of the joint act of coaches or others doing anything for the student-athletes specifically related to their education. Rather, regardless of gender and sport type, student-athletes wanted their teammates to be successful and have access to every resource. Even if pursuing Olympic dreams had a higher priority than class, the students in this study still placed a strong importance on graduating from college and breaking the perceptions held by

others. In this case, socialization into team culture had a positive effect on academics because the student-athletes understand each other’s schedule and demands.

As neoliberal policies and procedures continue to influence many decisions on college campuses across America, the students in the athletic department are almost directly affected by a revenue-based structure. Along with eligibility and graduation, the students also have the pressures of representing the many financial interests of the university. Bass and Newman (2013) explained, “Some universities have even chosen to openly invest heavily in the athletic department in hopes of raising the school’s national profile” (p. 33). This ties directly into the need to recruit the best athlete regardless of academic ability and level of preparedness. Bok (2003) warned, “Admissions offices are importuned to accept student athletes with academic credentials far below the norm. Everyone involved must do their part to enroll the outstanding athletes so essential to success on the field and at the box office” (p. 43). The students are extremely dependent on their athletic academic centers to assist them with the need to stay eligible and compete.

These centers are also viewed as resources to attract top athletes, while also isolating the students portraying them as the university's investment. With the focus shifting to increased revenue and large endowments, “universities view their athletic teams not only as a means of making money, but also as the mechanism for improving the status of the entire institution, the pressure to win grows very intense indeed. The single most likely outcome is that academic standards will be a major casualty of the process” (Bok, 2003, p. 51). Student-athletes encourage each other within their teams towards academic success, and more positively among male athletes than in previous studies (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987; Nishimoto, 1997). However, “the situation where athletes enrich everyone but themselves in College Sports, Inc. is a



problem” (J. Nocera, personal communication, April 20, 2016). These findings will assist in leading general discussions about academics within the intercollegiate athletics culture. The marriage between athletics and its place on campuses has been longstanding and critical to the success and morale of the general student body.

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