The Academic Problems with Athletics in Higher Education

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the various complications associated with being a student-athlete in higher education. Indeed, my experience at a Division-3 school is vastly different from that of a student-athlete at a larger, more economically-driven Division-1 university. While I recognize that the influential forces are mitigated as the competition lessens, I would argue that in the vast majority of cases, regardless of the school, a student-athlete’s primary focus is blurred. Instead of concentrating on their role in the academic environment, athletes tend to place more emphasis on the importance of their sport. Statistics from different areas including economics and retention statistics are showing how universities as well as the general public are also sharing in this obsession with college sports. In many cases, this has prompted an institutional shift towards programs concentrated on excellence in the classroom as well as on the field, however as of yet this area is far from developed.

A variety of pressures can be attributed to these problems—pressures from the coach, teammates, media, self, the institution, etc. Through my thesis, I have identified these problems, distinguishing between Divisions, as well as proposed possible solutions that could put the focus back into academics.
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Intercollegiate athletics has a problem, and a serious one at that. While at one time sports were considered a predominantly extracurricular activity for college students, they have transformed into something terribly unlike their original purpose. Indeed, at the expense of colleges and college students everywhere, their beloved sports have turned into a billion dollar industry with individual actors all fighting for the most market share.

Amazingly, sports programs even take on the typical business hierarchy—the universities and colleges represent the competing businesses; the athletic directors play the role of the upper managers with the various coaches reporting to them; reporting to the coaches are the student-athlete "employees," whose performance dictates the success of the business. Of course, no company would be complete without shareholders, and undeniably there are plenty. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the media, the colleges, and the fans all have a great stake in the way their "business" performs. Even almost fifty years ago in 1960, Professor Frank Gardner at Drake University saw a problem with college sports in America, both as a member of the faculty as well as an ex-player.¹

If this were a discussion about the professional sports world, the issues would be vastly different, as the purpose of professional sports is, in essence, to make money. However, that is not, and should not be, the ultimate goal of higher education institutions. It can be conceded that without money, no university could operate. Comparably, the amount of money that a college has dictates in many ways the quality of the services that they provide—more money equals better facilities, higher paid (and assumedly more

distinguished faculty, more sophisticated programs, etc. Gardner goes on to discuss these benefits—"Profits at many institutions were great enough to finance the construction of laboratories, dormitories, chapels, and other buildings. Gains from a good football team were sufficient to support not only the whole intercollegiate athletic program but also intramural sports and other activities" (Gardner 365). However, since the goal of an educational academy is not to amass as much money as possible, their mission is to, quite simply, provide their students with a level of education and experience that allows them to succeed in their chosen path after college.

With more and more "student-athletes" being recruited not for their potential as scholars and instead their athletic capabilities, many schools have become places to play instead of places to learn. Without properly addressing this issue, intercollegiate athletics has turned into something that may provide a great deal of money for the institution, yet distorts the original, principle academic purpose of college.

This thesis investigates the various complications associated with being a student-athlete in higher education. Indeed, scholastic experiences differ when ranging between a Division-3 school and a larger, more economically-driven Division-1 university. While the influential forces are mitigated as the competition lessens, in the vast majority of cases, regardless of the school, a student-athlete's primary focus is blurred. Instead of concentrating on their role in the academic environment, athletes tend to place more emphasis on the importance of their sport. Statistics from different areas including economics and retention data are showing how universities as well as the general public are also sharing in this obsession with college sports. In many cases, this has
prompted an institutional shift towards programs concentrated on excellence in the classroom as well as on the field, however as of yet this area is far from developed enough to make a meaningful difference.

A variety of pressures can be attributed to these problems—pressures from the coach, teammates, media, self, the institution, etc. Consequently, a proper solution is one that not only identifies and offsets these distracting influences, but is also less reactive to these problems and is instead the driving force behind the shift. The difference between action and reaction is the difference between keeping an athlete eligible and recruiting a scholar athlete.

**The Purpose of Higher Education**

Before one can assess how something can undermine the objective of higher education, the objective has to be more clearly defined. Doing so is increasingly difficult with the large number of colleges and universities, along with what Professor Ronald Barnett calls the “changing face of academia”. In order to have any significant meaning, colleges and universities have to do more than just provide their graduates with degrees. A degree is meaningless without affording the skills, both personal and professional, that allow the student to be successful after graduation.

In his article “The Purpose of Higher Education and the Changing Face of Academia,” Barnett attempts to analyze all of the factors that shift how higher education has been perceived through the years around the world, and in doing so tries to define a

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standard that institutions should refer to:

Is the university to be a site of democratic rights, or societal enlightenment, of knowledge production for a technological society, of inculcating skills for the workplace, of personal transformation or of critical analysis? Is it to get by through its own wits, transforming itself to take on the image of any client or state agency that comes its way or is it to maintain some kind of allegiance to a sense of an enduring entity? Are its internal processes to be characterized by tight managerial disciplines that enable it to live 'in the real world' or is to forge, within itself, a new kind of organic community? (Barnett 70)

Depending on the institution, this definition can shift. Some aspects are given more emphasis for the university and its students as a whole, and this becomes a reason that many students choose the colleges that they do. And while there is no college whose mission states that they want to be the best in sports and make the most money, it seems to be at the forefront of both the actions of colleges as well as the decisions of applicants.

However, while at one time college was clearly seen as a milestone in one’s adult life, signaling a student’s shift into academic adulthood, current critics are far less optimistic. In answering the question “Why Go to College?” Jacques Barzun explains that “the college—and the university around it—have been transformed into a motley social organism dedicated to the full life. It does include the mental life, but certainly makes no fetish of it. Rather, intellect weaves in and out of the main business, which is socialization, entertainment, political activism, and the struggle to get high grades so as to qualify for future employment.”

Although this statement’s truth cannot be denied, one can find very few colleges who declare that as their mission statement. Instead, mission statements boast of academic opportunities and the gain of knowledge. For instance, Northern Illinois University’s mission statement is as follows:

The central mission of the university is the transmission, expansion, and application of knowledge through teaching, research and artistry, and public service. In fulfilling that mission, Northern Illinois University meets the needs of students for liberal, professional, technical, and lifelong education.  

A decidedly different institution both academically and athletically is Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. However, they lay claim to a very similar mission statement:

Northwestern is committed to excellent teaching, innovative research, and the personal and intellectual growth of its students in a diverse academic community.

The problem here is not with the mission statements themselves. Instead, it lies in the inaction of the institutions to stand behind them. And, while it may be possible for every college to completely fulfill their mission statement, the least they can do is send a message with their support and actions that shows they put academics before athletics.

The Benefits of Intercollegiate Athletics

If the only benefit to athletic programs was the money that they generate, it would be easy to say that colleges that want to emphasize academics could simply do away with

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their athletic departments. However, there are literally countless studies that have been published about the benefits of extracurricular activities, more specifically athletics, on students. In the quest to better a student's experience, an institution has to acknowledge these things and accept the fact that athletics can play a very important role.

In many cases, the very thing that erodes the purpose of higher education actually gives many underprivileged students a chance to experience something that has never been a possibility to them before. If those students actually appreciate the meaning of this opportunity, then they are able to take full advantage of it and come out of college with an education that ultimately means something to their life.

While there are clear drawbacks to the involvement of students in athletics, there are also many benefits that cannot be ignored. For this reason, it should not be argued that collegiate athletics should be eliminated; instead, they are in dire need of reform. A survey that initially investigated student-athletes feelings towards their balance between athletics and academics also reported many of the benefits that these very students feel that they receive. These include:

- Being satisfied with their educational experience
- Feeling positive about the overall education they are receiving
- Feeling well prepared for their life after graduation
- Indicating that they would attend the same university again if they were to start over
- Believing that it is important to them, their families, and their coaches that they graduate from college
- Feeling positive about their academic major
- Believing that participating in athletics contributes to their educational and personal development
- Believing that participating in athletics helps prepare them for life after graduation
- Believing that athletics helps develop their  
  o Leadership skills
Scherer 7

- Teamwork ability
- Work ethic
- Ability to make decisions
- Ability to take responsibility for self and others
- Time management skills.

For many students, this is clearly applicable, yet for the students to which it does not apply, something must be done. Truly, because these benefits are very real, intercollegiate athletics needs to be framed in such a way that more students involved can reap the benefits, personally, academically, athletically, and professionally.

The Different Kinds of Athletics in College

While the title of a college athlete can be applied to a broad spectrum of students, there are many sub-groups within that classification that make a vast difference in both the quality of athlete and the level of competition. Indeed, I would further argue that these subgroups also dictate the quality of the student. Roughly divided, these groups (essentially deciding factors) can be labeled as 1) the division in which the athlete plays, 2) the sport that is being participated in, and 3) the gender of the athlete. These criteria are mainly applied to varsity sports, as in many athletic programs there are junior varsity teams.

In terms of money, each division, sport, and gender has a “least desirable”—that is, in calculating the revenue made off of each sport, either male or female, depending on the division, you will find one that makes the most and one that makes the least. The bottom line speaks loud and clear, and the media, NCAA, and college athletic

departments are sure to listen.

*Difference in Divisions*

Every higher education institution that has an athletic program is classified as Division I, II, or III. It is here where the differences are so vast that many comparisons would be meaningless between a higher division and a lower one, however they are equalized by the fact that they all produce student-athletes affected by their college experience. The NCAA defines these different divisions in more specific terms regarding official standards for each (see chart), whereas the everyday person could most likely easily point out the difference in more layman's terms.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimum number of sponsored sports for men/women</th>
<th>Division I</th>
<th>Division II</th>
<th>Division III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7/7 or 6/8</td>
<td>2 team sports for each gender</td>
<td>2 team sports for each gender</td>
<td>2 team sports for each gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>Scholarships dictated by athletic ability with minimum and maximums set</td>
<td>Some scholarships dictated by athletic ability, with a set maximum</td>
<td>No money is given on the basis of athletic ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contest Rules</td>
<td>100% of the minimum # of contests must be played against Div. I opponents</td>
<td>50% of the minimum # of contests must be played against Div. II opponents</td>
<td>There are minimum contest requirements, but not a set percent to be played against certain opponents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these divisions are clearly governed by very specific rules, the average person would simply describe the difference in divisions in two ways: the exposure given to the athletic program and the ability of the athletes (which translates into steeper competition the lower the division). Division I programs are predominantly large, state-run universities, because the division rank is decided by the amount of money that a

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college chooses to invest in its athletic department.

While the NCAA makes no mention of a Division I student-athlete’s academic experience, they are sure to mention that “Division III athletic departments place special importance on the impact of athletics on the participants rather than on the spectators” and that “the student-athlete’s experience is of paramount concern” (ncaa.org). Even the NCAA recognizes that, although both athletes are students, the difference in divisions apparently forces the Division I student to sacrifice part of his or her own college experience as a result of being part of a program that is spectator, rather than participant, driven.

How does the division a sport is in affect the bottom line? In 2004-2005 Division I athletics made $65,861,549—more than $64 million more than the Division III total of $1,496,322 (ncaa.org). Of course, that money does not go directly back into the athletic departments or to the schools. A portion goes to the NCAA, some to the school, some to the network broadcasting the event, etc. Since a significant amount of the money goes to external entities that are not regulated in the same way as the school is, the sports (in this case Division I) that are the most popular among viewers are easily exploited for as much money as possible. The amount of revenue generated from the 2007 Men’s Basketball Tournament was in the hundreds of millions of dollars, including merchandise sold, television viewing (actual game, commercials, etc.), advertising, ticket sales, etc. While this money is dispersed among many different entities, the monetary pressure is still immense, especially for Division I athletic programs.
The Sport Played

Essentially, athletes play sports because they enjoy themselves when they are competing. For the most part, they are not going to compete in something that they have never liked simply because they are good at it. That said, the different kind of sports cover a wide range of areas—and Americans have their preferences. They love basketball and football. They are far less fond however, of rowing for example. The popularity of each sport depends largely on regions as well, however since collegiate sports in America is being discussed, the overall preference of the United States is being taken into consideration.

The best way to measure these kinds of popularities is by taking into account the viewing patterns of the different sports on television—indeed, some sports are not even televised. Another way would be to look at the attendance levels for the various sports and the amount of money, if any, spectators are willing to pay to attend the sporting event. Ultimately, that decides what a school is willing to spend on the sport. Using football as a worthwhile example, in 2003 the NCAA reported that the total money spent on operational expenses for the different divisions is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Money Spent (dollars in thousands)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I-A</td>
<td>27,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-AA</td>
<td>7,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-AAA</td>
<td>6,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II with football</td>
<td>2,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II without football</td>
<td>1,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III with football</td>
<td>1,570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III without football</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*nca.org
It is clear that there is an obvious relationship between the amount of money invested in a sports program and the amount of money it generates. This chart is particularly beneficial because it illuminates how not only a division affects this popularity, but also specific sports.

**Gender**

The NCAA defines Title IX as “a Federal statute that was created to prohibit sex discrimination in education programs that receive Federal financial assistance.” Almost all universities and colleges receive Federal funding, and so consequently, this statute applies to all higher education institutions. For collegiate athletic programs, this means that both men and women receive equal opportunities in three aspects: participation, scholarships, and other benefits (“the provisions of: (a) equipment and supplies; (b) scheduling of games and practice times; (c) travel and daily allowance/per diem; (d) access to tutoring; (e) coaching, (f) locker rooms, practice and competitive facilities; (g) medical and training facilities and services; (h) housing and dining facilities and services; (i) publicity and promotions; (j) support services and (k) recruitment of student-athletes” (ncaa.org).

Even after Title IX, there are glaring differences between male sports and female sports. At the very root, the biological makeup of each sex’s body type is inherently different—men are typically more able to generate muscle more quickly. Many times, this means faster and stronger male athletes if work between the two genders is held constant. Consequently, women are not expected to compete against men.
Regardless of any law created to ensure equality in collegiate athletic departments, no one can force independent networks to give equal coverage to everything on television. Michael Messner of the University of Southern California analyzed the television rating of the March Madness NCAA basketball tournament for men and women back in 1993. Not surprisingly, men had over 50 more games televised than women. While there are no current studies like this one, the pattern still remains, with viewing patterns equally as skewed.8

**Conclusion**

Every college athlete is defined by these three very important factors. However, it is clear that different combinations produce immensely different student-athlete experiences. For example, it is nearly impossible to compare a female, Division III golfer to a male, Division I basketball player. And yet it still remains that both are student-athletes, and while their exposure and success may be different, both should graduate college fulfilling the mission of the college that they chose to attend. Repeated failures to do so and the widespread acceptance of it are precisely the undermining aspects in the academic integrity of the higher education institutions.

The purpose of identifying the most popular sports is to understand the different pressures as a result of that popularity. The more popular a sport is, the more possible revenue it can generate. Therefore, more pressure is put on the institution, the coaches, the players, etc. to have a good team. Once you multiply that by the division, as well as

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the sport, the pressure becomes more and more intense. Logically, a Division I football or basketball player would therefore have more pressure on them than a Division III women’s soccer player. The result is more time focused on the sport (working out, practice, etc.) and far less available to develop academically.

In a survey previously referred to that was conducted by Josephine Potuto and James O’Hanlon called “National Study of Student Athletes Regarding Their Experiences as College Students,” Division I athletes were interviewed on their overall feelings of how their involvement in athletics affected their academic life. In the section on “Academic Behaviors,” the authors concluded that “even though student-athletes value their overall college experience and believe that athletics participation contributes in important ways to their personal and academic development, they may still feel short-changed on the academic end because of their time commitment to sport” (Potuto). In fact, more than half of the students surveyed reported coming to class without completing readings or assignments (13). 27% of the students surveyed answered “yes” to the question “Did your athletics participation prevent you from majoring in what you really wanted?” In terms of tradeoffs, individual student athletes were reported saying “It’s a great experience to have, but you need to know that your social life and your academic life with suffer,” and “Not getting to spend more time on academics even though I feel I’m well-rounded and wouldn’t have traded this experience for the world.” (28).

Suffering is an understatement: 82% of women and 79% of men said that the reason they did not spend as much time as they would have like to on their academic life is because they were “too busy with required athletic participation” (45). The more time taken up
by athletics means less for students to focus on academics, and so the ultimate purpose of college is undermined.

The Causes of Grade Fluctuation Among Athletes

Entering college, no athlete is the same, either athletically or academically. Each brings their own background and experience, which in combination with the choices they make after entering college determines their success. High school preparation clearly plays a very important role in whether or not a student will be academically fitting in certain institutions. Each institution has clearly different standards for accepting students then other schools. Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois is widely regarded as an upper-level school in terms of academics. They “advise” their applicants of standards that they generally apply:

The middle 50 percent of test scores for entering students ranges from 29 to 33 on the ACT; on the SAT Reasoning Test, the critical reading range was 650 to 730 and the math from 660 to 750. The most reliable predictor of success at Northwestern is a strong academic performance at the secondary school level. The mean high school class rank of enrolled freshmen has been at the 94th percentile (northwestern.edu).

By contrast, Northern Illinois University outlines their admission qualifications as:

Class rank, grade point average, and ACT/SAT scores: Applicants who rank in the upper half of their graduating class or who have a grade point average of at least 2.75 on a 4.00 scale must have a composite ACT score of at least 19 or an SAT score (CR+M) of at least 870.
Applicants who do not rank in the upper half of their class but who rank in the upper two-thirds of their graduating class, or who have a grade point average of at least 2.50 on a 4.00 scale, must have a composite ACT score of at least 23 or an SAT score of at least 1030 (niu.edu).

Not much needs to be said regarding the obvious difference between the qualifications set forth by each institution, and these measures are meant to establish a standard of academic success expected from each applicant. Consequently, in terms of high school preparation, a student who is less prepared academically by their high school is far less likely to be accepted into a school such as Northwestern. Should these standards be rigorously applied, a college can be relatively sure that their academic mission will be realized.

Who Is Recruited

The number one goal of a student attending college should be to graduate with a degree and experiences that they can use in the future. If a student is recruited that does not have that goal, many complications will arise, as we are seeing with the growing number of student-athletes more focuses. First of all, keeping them academically eligible to play is difficult because they do not realize the importance of the education itself. Second of all, getting them to take the classes that actually get them closer to a degree is even harder, as the degree essentially has no meaning in comparison to the sport that they want to play. A "student" athlete can take five years worth of meaningless, primary level
classes that, while keeping them academically eligible, will leave them far from a degree in the number of years that they are there.

**Exceptions Made for Athletes**

It is generally unannounced that exceptions are made for certain athletes who appear to have the possibility of making an impact for an athletic team. It happens, however, and so it only makes sense that a school accepting students based on athletic ability as opposed to academic ability is going to experience difficulty in upholding their academic mission. It would be much simpler if a student accepted into a university regardless of the applicability of the admission criteria to them would still be able to perform well in college. However, while the short-term benefit appears to be recruiting a promising athlete, that athlete is being set up for failure academically. Once that student fails to meet the required grade point average to either stay eligible to play or even remain at the school, changes are made further down the road instead of correcting the root of the problem. Exceptions are then made in the classroom in terms of both grades and the classes actually taken.

On other occasions, academic “support” centers have been found guilty of actually completing assignments for athletes. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Welch Suggs reported that “at Minnesota, an athletics department secretary completed more than 400 course assignments for players over a five-year period without ever being detected, according to a report released by university investigators.”

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candals similar to this one have shaken college campuses, as athletes continue to be given academic leeway and are many times enabled to cheat their way into eligibility and graduation. The same article goes on to report a similar problem at the University of Tennessee, although there are countless others just like these that somehow glide just beneath the radar and go unreported.

**Personal Responsibility**

It is easy to blame the money, the institutions, the coaches, the media, etc., for the failure of athletes in the academic environment. While all of these things play a huge role in the pressures that the athlete experiences, there also needs to be something said about personal responsibility and integrity. In a perfect world, students should understand that they are going to college in order to get an education, and therefore conduct themselves accordingly. Because there are examples of student-athletes taking on both responsibilities equally, it is difficult to completely excuse the academic irresponsibility of many athletes who fail to recognize their scholastic role. Quite simply, if they are not willing to work at least as hard in school as they do on the field or court, then they should not be in school at all. The purpose of college, as was stated before, is not to make a living playing a sport or to be recognized merely as an athlete. There is a place for that, and it is professional athletics, not a university. Since it has become easy for athletes to forget this, many do not take the responsibility for it, and consequently struggle in academic environments.
The Bottom Line

Everyone involved with college athletics has a bottom line: the coach, players, the athletic department, school, the media, etc. That bottom line is the one thing that ultimately decides how they conduct themselves and pushes them to make the decisions that they do. For many, it is merely the concept of winning, however if people look closely enough, they will see that there is almost always something behind that win that applies even more pressure.

Coaches

For the coach, winning is the bottom line, but it comes with plenty of perks. Winning means ultimately keeping a job or perhaps even being promoted into a better position. These opportunities translate to large sums of money for them. In January of 2007, an article in The State, a newspaper out of Columbia, South Carolina, discussed the current situation of intercollegiate athletics with the president of the University of North Carolina, William Friday, who also serves as the founding co-chairman of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.10 This conversation came as a result of the news that Nick Saban, the new University of Alabama head football coach, would be receiving $32 million dollars over the course of an eight year period of service. He went on to illuminate the very same problem at his own school: Butch Davis, the newly hired head football coach, was set to get $1.86 million dollars per year—a figure ten times greater than the highest paid professor. “That is wrong,” he said, “I don’t care what your

argument is, that is wrong. I don’t care what kind of atmosphere you have created (in athletics). To say...the finest professor you have is taking a back seat to a coach whose salary is ten times greater is wrong.” Frighteningly, this trend is more so the rule than the exception, especially in a world where Bob Stoops of Oklahoma football makes $3.45 million each year and Iowa football coach Kirk Ferentz annually makes $2.84 million (Morris).

In addition, their ego is fed with the fame and recognition of being regarded as a successful college coach. Since winning means that you or your team is better, not many people would forfeit that status in order to improve other aspects of a player’s college experience. Still, there are some who realize that winning is not everything, and so they do focus on other ways to better their athletes.

Bobby Knight, although many times the center of controversy for the way in which he has acted in the past, is a coach who, in terms of how his program is run, has a relatively clean slate. His conduct has many times been far from acceptable, however in terms of academics, he is consistently commended for the graduation rate of his athletes. In fact, during a recent game, he benched one of his top players because his grades had fallen below what Knight specified was acceptable.

With fairness, the coaches can only be blamed to a certain degree. Anyone offered millions of dollars for doing what they love is more than likely to take it. Similarly, winning is only human nature. The atmosphere of collegiate athletics has provided a place where coaches can make a living (truly, a few livings) off of their passion. There are far less opportunities for these kinds of people in professional sports.
Athletes

Money plays less a part of a student-athlete’s bottom line than the actual prospect of it. Student athletes are not paid for what they do—in fact it is a violation to do so. However, there is always the possibility that they could “go pro,” that is, be drafted into the professional sports world. Despite the fact that the NCAA reports the percentage of college athletes that actually do is quite small (male college basketball players have a 1.2% chance of becoming a professional, football is 1.8%, etc.), the possibility that making it big means large paychecks and even larger notoriety (ncaa.org). These percentages also change with division.

However, it would be a gross misappropriation to state that many student-athletes are not awarded many perks of being such. And, although the NCAA does specify certain recruiting standards that are not to be violated, there are still plenty of avenues around the regulations. Jeff Zillgitt of USA Today wrote an article regarding exactly this: “College Athletics Needs Budget Cap, Thinking Cap.” He cites several incidents (and indeed there are many, many more) in which monetary problems have arisen as a result of greed in college sports. Many of the examples initially stem from recruiting practices, although they then translate into the actual enrollment of the student in order to keep them there. Oregon flew a recruit to campus on a private jet; Florida treated recruits to expensive, lavish meals and hotel suites when they visited. It all stems from the business practice of competitive advantage—how each school can entice top-name athletes to come to their school by what they offer them. There have even been reports of

cars and other expensive gifts that popular athletes receive as a result of their celebrity status.

*Colleges*

Colleges driven primarily by money and athletic success are the ones who have rules and standards different for athletes than other students. They are the ones who will see an increasing problem with the growing gap between students and athletes, and eventually see the entire purpose of their institution shift from being what scholars and the educated public consider a legitimate higher education institution and instead turn into an arena—no pun intended—for sports.

Many would question how it could be possible for anything to compete with the benefits of having a successful team in one of the more popular sports. After all, the winners in this year’s NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Championship, the Florida Gators, are expected to see plenty of monetary bonuses coming from every direction. Merchandise—not only popular among students—is being sold now more than ever. The Florida newspaper the Gainesville Sun reports that they are also going to benefit from “revenue sharing from the Southeastern Conference and bonuses from the NCAA, all accounting for millions more dollars for the University Athletic association.”¹² The article goes on to report how each school’s conference received $164,000 for merely having a team in each tournament game. By winning, UF played in six games, totaling $984,000. When the Southeastern Conference (SEC) totals up the revenue that it earns

each year, it distributes it evenly to its 12 members, including itself. In fiscal year 2005, the SEC gave out $110.7 million, or $9.22 million to each school. Of that money, none came from winning the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament, as that year no member of the conference won.

Clearly big money is at stake for anyone involved in this kind of high level of intercollegiate athletics. As a result, the bottom line becomes driven by the amount of wealth that a college can accumulate as a result of their athletic success. Unfortunately, the data shows quite the opposite—most schools that operate large athletic programs actually lose money when the revenue is balanced by the amount spent. Quite simply, most college athletic programs operate in the red, and so while the amount money that they generate is extremely high, so is the cost. As an example: the Chronicle of Higher Education reported in 2002 that the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga had been operating in a way that not only exhausted their funds, but also forced them to repeatedly contribute millions of dollars ($2.6 million in ’02) from their general funds in order to counter this deficit.\(^\text{13}\)

\textit{Media}

The media primarily answers to their viewers and listeners. While the various media outlets are regulated by the government, they are generally only held to being responsible for broadcasting in the public interest. However, they do not care whether or not a college athlete is fulfilling their academic potential. What they are interested in is

when they screw up and when they are successful in their sport; both make excellent news and bring in plenty of viewers. The pressure (or call it greed) for them is making money, and they transfer that pressure to school and athletes to perform in ways that get them on television.

Advertising alone has risen from $310 million only seven years ago in 2000 to well past $500 million in 2007. In fact, advertising group TNS Media Intelligence has further reported that advertising for men’s college basketball is second only to the Superbowl in terms of advertising dollars spent. That means more money than college football games, the NBA Championship, and even the MLB World Series (TNS-mi.com). That exact same tournament takes place for both Division II and III, however with far less public interest all of the components that produce the money are dramatically reduced.

Change

Although the environment of college athletics is clearly a corrupt world driven by money and success, there is still hope for the possibility of it shifting back into both the academic interest of the higher education institution as well as the benefit of the experience of the college athlete. However, the only way to achieve this lofty goal is for all those involved to both recognize that the academic mission of the institution is more important than points on the scoreboard and also be willing to do something to change it.

Since the athletes, colleges, coaches, athletic departments, fans, and the media all play

such a vital role, each needs to be willing to make that role a positive one. Before that
can happen, two questions need to be asked. First of all, is it possible for there to be an
interest that is more compelling than money? Secondly, if there is, where does the
change need to originate and what specifically can be done? It is no longer enough to say
that a change needs to happen.

The "CEO’s" – The Institutions Themselves

The change needs to start from the colleges themselves—the ones whose actually
integrity is highly at stake. Without acknowledgment from the institutions who are most
at risk, the entire system would serve no point. The slippery slope theory places the
college of the future in the same league as professional sports—entirely money-driven,
with the concept of education serving only as a façade for the actual goal: a winning
athletic department. Sadly, this destination is not so far away, assuming that we have not
already arrived.

That being said, it is easy to believe that the few colleges that do take this stand
drop to the bottom of the barrel, however there clearly are colleges that do so. And, just
because they are not as successful athletically is not the point. The importance comes
with how they measure their success. A shift in their attitude away from athletic success
and with a much stronger emphasis on academic success would change their measure and
it would no longer matter how well their sports teams perform.

The attitude that money is everything does not take a lot of pressure in order to be
transferred to other people; in fact just the opposite. Money is very important and it
drives a lot of people, and so universities need to find a way to further their academic mission while still making money in order to better their school.

If colleges set the standard that what they think is important are academics, then they must change the way that they fund things to reflect this belief. This means no more multi-million dollar contracts for their coaches, and instead new academic buildings and facilities, higher paid faculty, etc. This will, as it does at certain colleges and universities throughout the country, attract both faculty and students that share in the college mission, resulting in greater achievement of that goal.

*The "Upper-Level Managers"—The Athletic Departments*

The next in the chain of command are the athletic departments. Since they are directly involved with the sports, it is harder to convince members of the department that winning is not everything. The most effective way to do this is to remove the pressure from the college that tells these people that they have to win. They still need to have a goal, however, and since it will not be as narrowly focused on the academic success of the students, it should be more broadly emphasizing the actual experience of playing college sports and how it can improve a student’s life.

This kind of positive pressure can come from a variety of places, however program building and developing can have the most immediate success. These kinds of programs, discusses later as solutions, can have both the effect of directing students, supporting them academically, and also helping them experience new things that they would not otherwise be able to experience.
The “Managers”—The Coaches

The hardest part about the change that needs to be originated with the coaches is that it is an entire shift of mindset. One of the principle reasons that people play sports is to be able to compete—and win. Since they are responsible for athletic teams, they are largely in charge of their success. The change, therefore, is how that success is measured.

Right now, it is widely accepted that successful teams are ones that have more wins than losses; those athletes that break records and win championships. Instead, the measure needs to be the entire overall experience of the athletes and teams, including their accomplishments off of the playing field. Questions that should be asked of a “successful” team include whether or not the players are happy and get along, whether or not they can achieve greatness in the classroom, if they are enjoying themselves, and if the sport is making the individual athletes better people. Right now, it seems as if the current mindset is that all of those things can be sacrificed for a winning record. Once that attitude changes to become a balance of all of them, a team can truly be successful.

The “Employees”—The Players

A certain sense of responsibility needs to come from the individual players. Certainly the external influences are so powerful that it is difficult in many situations to be able to resist, for example a possible offer to play professionally or to be on television. Money is a huge factor, as is the same pressure of winning that the coaches experience. Ideally, the change in the coaches’ mindset will translate to their players, and so they will
understand the importance of striking an appropriate balance between all aspects of their life and not only athletics. They need to understand their role as a college athlete as encompassing far more than practice and competition. Indeed, just as they apply important lessons of hard work and dedication to athletics in order to be successful, they also need to use that attitude in their academic environment.

*The “Shareholders” – The Media, Fans, etc.*

Unfortunately less can be done about the external influences on intercollegiate athletics mainly because they do not have the same vision and mission as the academic institutions. Simply put, an athlete getting straight A’s makes for dull television. However, there can still be a certain level of recognition that the media gives scholar athletes that does not necessarily have to hurt their ratings. For example, if at the major collegiate athletic media opportunities (i.e. NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Tournament) they respect these students’ successes off the field as well, a heightened level feeling of accomplishment may follow as a result of the widespread acknowledgment to the media, fans, schools, fellow athletes, etc. Or, perhaps opportunities for these real student-athletes to attend some of these major events could be a viable option. There is certainly enough revenue generated from these to afford for fellow deserving athletes to attend something that they may not usually get the opportunity to do. After all, in the long run, the student-athlete’s well-being is at stake, and so any positive pressure to guide them in the right academic direction would be beneficial.
One of the key problems with collegiate athletics today is a mixture of both a lack of standards as well as low standards. When players are recruited, as was discussed before, there are certain criteria that they are expected to meet in order to be accepted into the institution as a student. However, many times these criteria are overlooked simply because an athlete who may not be eligible academically is still desired as a player. Consequently, the original standard applied to the other students put in place in order to maintain a certain academic level are forfeited for more talented athletes. At the same time, once the athletes are accepted into the actual institution, the standards applied to them to keep them eligible are so low that they are virtually meaningless.

National Collegiate Athletic Association

The NCAA does set aside very rigid standards once an athlete is committed to an institution. While they are meant to compel student-athletes to retain their academic status, the standards that they set are actually quite low. They do, however, have a certain vocabulary that defines their academic reform program that can be found on the NCAA website:

**Academic Progress Rate (APR):** The APR is the fulcrum upon which the entire academi-reform structure rests. Developed as a more real-time assessment of teams’ academic performance than the six-year graduation-rate calculation provides, the APR awards two points each term to student-athletes who meet academic-eligibility standards and who remain with the institution. A team’s APR is the total points earned by the team at a given time divided by the total
points possible.

925: This is the cut score the Division I Board of Directors approved for contemporaneous penalties. APR scores have already become meaningful numbers to the membership and general public. Based on current data, an APR score of 925 (out of 1,000) translates to an approximate 60 percent Graduation Success Rate.

Squad-size adjustment: Small sample sizes of some teams can lead to reduced confidence in the APR as an estimate of academic performance for those teams. That is particularly true with only one or two years of data. Confidence intervals, commonly used in statistics, roughly represent a range of scores within which the true APR likely resides. That means the "upper confidence boundary" of a team's APR would have to be below 925 for that team to be subject to contemporaneous penalties. The squad-size adjustment is a short-term tool, however, and will be eliminated with the 2007-2008 reports.

Quarter school variance: Schools that are on a quarter system instead of a semester system were found to have an unintended advantage in APR calculations simply because of the number of reporting occasions and not because of academic performance. Because the reporting of APR is done at two occasions for semester schools but at three occasions for quarter schools, a slight numerical advantage can accrue from the extra reporting occasion. To account for the disparity, a statistical formula will be applied to a slightly alter quarter school APR’s.
0-for-2: This term is the equivalent of a four-letter-word when it comes to reform. An “0-for-2” student-athlete is one who is neither academically eligible nor remains with the institution. An 0-for-2 player might be one who transfers, leaves the institution for personal reasons or leaves to turn pro and would not have been academically eligible had he or she returned. Obviously, these are the types of situations the academic-reform structure is most meant to address since they are the most damaging to a team’s APR. While teams cannot always control the reasons student-athletes leave, the contemporaneous penalty holds the accountable for at least making sure student-athletes are academically eligible during their college tenures.

Contemporaneous penalties: These are the most immediate penalties in the academic-reform structure, and they occur when a team under and APR score of 925 loses a student-athlete who would not have been academically eligible had he or she returned (an “0-for-2” player). A contemporaneous penalty means that teams cannot re-award that grant-in-aid to another player. In effect, a team’s financial aid limit is reduced by the amount of countable aid awarded to the student-athlete who did not earn eligibility and was not retained. A contemporaneous penalty is not automatically applied when teams fall below the APR cut point; it is applied only when teams below that line do not retain an academically ineligible player. (There are a few exceptions).
10 percent cap: To ensure that the contemporaneous penalties are rehabilitative in nature and not overly punitive, the Board of Directors approved a limit on the number of contemporaneous penalties that apply to a team in a given year to about 10 percent of the team’s financial aid limit. That includes rounding up to the next whole number for headcount sports. For example, in the headcount sport of Division I men’s basketball, a team with an APR below 925 would be subject to a penalty of up to 10 percent of the maximum 13 scholarships, rounded up to the next whole number (in this case, a maximum penalty of two scholarships).

Historical penalties: While contemporaneous penalties are designed to be rehabilitative in nature, the historically based penalties carry a more significant punitive hit for teams that the APR identifies as “chronic” under-performers. The Committee on Academic Performance will finalize details of the penalty structure by summer 2006. The penalties will be incremental in nature, beginning with a warning once teams fall below a to-be-identified APR cut score, and progressing to a practice, and/or recruiting/financial aid restrictions, postseason bans and restricted membership status upon subsequent occasions.

Graduation Success Rate (GSR): The GSR is an alternative graduation-rate methodology the NCAA launched this academic year. The new rate, which supplements rather than replaces the federal methodology, credits institutions for transfers—both incoming and outgoing—as long as they are academically eligible. The new rate also accounts for midyear enrollees and is calculated for every sport (NCAA.org).
In theory, the NCAA is a wonderful idea. However, since it has been in practice for such a long time, they have somewhat strayed from their original mission statement. What they state as their “Core Purpose” is “to govern competition in a fair, safe, equitable and sportsmanlike manner, and to integrate intercollegiate athletics into higher education so that the educational experience of the student-athlete is paramount” (ncaa.org). It is clear that in conjunction with academics is the NCAA’s focus on the athletic aspect of it. Perhaps these two in combination with one another have become too lofty—it is obvious that the NCAA is more focused on the athletic aspect of college. Since it is clear that their efforts are not enough in terms of academics, they must heighten their academic criteria. There is no logical reason that they should not—right now the floor of their accepted grade point average (GPA) is 1.7/4.0 during the athlete’s freshman year (then gradually raises to a 2.0 by the senior year), a below C average.15 If the reasoning is that anything higher is unreasonable for an athlete to attain, then the athlete is not meant to be a student.

The Institution: As a Whole, the Athletic Department, and Coaches

Whether or not the NCAA decides that a certain GPA is acceptable does not have to dictate what the institution establishes as a desirable one. There is no rule anywhere that states that a university cannot set an acceptable GPA for all students that is higher than what the other institutions set. Therefore, if a college is legitimately serious about raising the academic performance of their athletes and thereby furthering the academic

mission, one simple solution would be to raise the bar for their students. Doing so would result in student-athletes focusing more on the academic aspect of college rather than simply settling for grades that keep them eligible.

It is also not uncommon for coaches to set their own standards for their athletes in order to raise the cumulative team GPA. At North Central College, each individual member of the woman's soccer team is expected to maintain a GPA of at least a 3.0 on a 4.0 scale. Players that fail to do so are then required to attend weekly study tables until that GPA requirement is met. Although the team makes up a small percentage of the total number of athletes at the college, that small amount does make a significant difference, especially if other teams adopt the same practice.

Support

Setting standards is only the first step, since there are certain measures that need to be taken to assist students. Academic support centers and programs are put in place to foster both student-athletes' as well as traditional students' potential in their academic life. These can take many shapes: directed primarily at freshmen, focused on prevention of problems, helping to remedy problems that student-athletes are having or already have experienced, etc. The result is a strong network of support that help guide a student-athletes balance between athletics and academics. Consequently, an institution can cultivate an environment where both are emphasized and where student-athletes can succeed.
At North Central, many programs along these lines have developed. For freshmen athletes, there is a program known as the Varsity Course, which has benefits for different aspects of the student-athletes’ lives. It is held in the framework of a college course, including course credit and a regular schedule. Every week, another speaker specializing in certain topics highly relevant to both a freshman student and a freshman athlete’s life conducts sessions. The purpose of this course is to help eliminate some of the pressures and hopefully prepare students better for dilemmas that they may face in their college career. Furthermore, since course credit is given, it helps first-year students adjust to a lighter course load for the term that their sport competes in. 2007 was the inaugural year of the course, and while retention statistics have not been calculated yet, the program was considered a success and will be continued in the future. While North Central College is a Division III school, Division I school University of Wisconsin at Madison has also adopted a similar program.

Another program that North Central has established this year is the Athletic Unity Council (AUC). The original purpose of the AUC was to establish a kind of conflict resolution problem that athletes could use. Recognizing that the needs and conflicts of athletes are many times very different than traditional conflicts, the council consists of various members that represent the variety of sports at the college. By training the members in conflict management and resolution principles, it was hoped that potential conflicts that could arise on the teams could be addressed by these representatives. In addition to this role, there were also other opportunities for council members to be involved with aspects of campus involvement, including the Varsity Course.
Campuses across the nation are becoming more and more involved in programs such as these. The purpose is not to enable student-athletes to scrape through college doing the bare minimum, but instead give them the resources that they need to succeed. In the long-run, they will ultimately have developed many of the skills that they will need not only to be successful academically, but also athletically. These skills would hopefully stay with them well after college and into their chosen career path—clearly bringing the institution closer to its intended mission.

It is obvious that athletes that do not meet the required academic standards are penalized, however there are too few occasions in which student-athletes are rewarded for outstanding achievement in the classroom. All collegiate athletes are eligible to be nominated as academic all-conference or all-American through the NCAA, which although it does recognize the academic accomplishments of successful students, does little to offset the negative stigma of the "dumb athlete." Indeed, All-Conference status, which recognizes only stellar athletic achievement, is more highly recognized and regarded than Academic All-Conference. At North Central College, the athletes throughout the years named All-Conference are immortalized on the walls of the field house. Not even scholar athletes, let alone traditional students, are given such recognition.

The media certainly does not help the unfortunate situation that athletes are facing. With all of the negative attention that athletes receive as a result of mistakes that they make, they are rarely portrayed as upstanding members of society. On many occasions, they fill out the role of the "dumb athlete," and since the media hardly
recognizes them otherwise, there is no incentive for them to act otherwise. If they act poorly, they are simply doing what is expected of them, and if they do something to be proud of, the media hardly recognizes them unless it includes winning a championship. It has engrained a kind of attitude in our society that athletics are not meant for the scholarly or responsible. Unfortunately, it is becoming an obvious trend.

Conclusion

It is obvious that something needs to be done in order to change collegiate athletics. Countless articles and books have been written calling for a kind of change that refocuses higher education on exactly that—education.

From a cultural standpoint, it is clear that our society has deemed it an acceptable practice to label people, groups, teams, etc. as either winners or losers. Not surprisingly, this toxic attitude has overflowed into our colleges, and no one wants to be considered the “loser.” Disappointingly, nothing appears to matter other than the end result. The team with average athletes that has a mediocre season is never featured on Sportscenter, even if all of the teammates have straight A’s and take part in community service projects that better society. Instead, plenty of press is given to the stand-out star athlete, regardless of his or her poor grades and less than exemplary off-the-court conduct. Here, the process does not matter, only the ends—ends that can be measured. It is impossible to quantify good grades and hard work in the same way that wins and losses are tallied or ticket sales are added. That, in combination with the strong desire to win, has placed our collegiate athletic programs and colleges deep in a hole that is difficult to dig out of.
In addition to this culture, another predominant trend is that of the growing business. Every higher education institution has turned into a revenue center, and that goal does not coincide with the mission statement of college. It is impossible to strive for to conflicting goals simultaneously. As David Kirp explains in his book *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education*, these pose an obvious problem because, for example, it is impossible to grade a student objectively if that student is essentially a "customer" of the institution. While it is only one example, there are plenty of others that exemplify this point.

For an appropriate change to take place, one that truly shifts higher education's mission—not only in writing but also in practice—entire mindsets need to transform. Success of the aspects of higher education, including athletics, can no longer be measured by quantifying what traditional society dictates as "successful." Indeed, it appears that the goals set forth by proponents at the beginning of higher education (and even those displayed proudly in mission statements today) are ones that truly cannot be measured. How can one calculate "experience?" Aside from standard tests, can the amount of "knowledge gained" ever really be totaled? Once our society has found a way to gauge goodwill, we will have begun to measure the things that really count. The college that makes the most money does not have the smartest students. The students at the university with the most successful football team have not necessarily had the most fulfilling college experience. It really boils down to goals and standards: identify the areas in which student-athletes need the most support in order to fulfill the academic mission of higher education and make them goals. Raise the standards of these students
and send the message that what is important is not wins and revenue, but instead knowledge and experience. While this process may be a long and arduous one, the result of a return to the original purpose of college will be a restored integrity to both higher education’s mission as well as the recognition that a student’s academic and personal life truly can be enhanced by the involvement in intercollegiate athletics.

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