

Evaluating Academic Success in Student Athletes: A Literature Review

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In the world of collegiate athletics, student athletes across the country use the opportunities provided to them to become the future professional athletes, teachers, coaches, and business leaders of our world. But at what cost to the education of these student athletes has this business atmosphere become? As Division I and II institutions continue to provide scholarships and other benefits to these students, the question is whether they are receiving a quality education. Studies have shown that participation in extra-curricular activities such as athletics (Hood et al., 1992) improves overall student academic performance. However, it must be noted that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has instituted numerous policies and propositions (NCAA Division I Manual, 2003) in regards to “redshirting” athletes for academic or medical reasons. However, no concrete research has been done to determine if keeping an athlete out of competition during their freshman year, while allowing them to continue to practice with the team (considered an “academic redshirt”) would have positive or negative effects on their academic performance during that first year. This literature review includes research-based studies that evaluate the effect that athletic participation has on the academic performance of intercollegiate student athletes. The goal of this literature review is to provide a substantial basis of factual information that would be used to support a study evaluating the effects that “redshirting” would have on academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

Sports fans across the country are not unfamiliar with the business atmosphere introduced into the world of intercollegiate athletics. Whether it is evident in the college football bowl series where major corporations sponsor each game, or in the large amount of money that the NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Tournament draws, the business that Division I college athletics has become raises many questions in regards to the academic stability of the student athletes that participate at that level, as well as the athletic program in general. Research shows that participation in extra-curricular activities such as athletics improves student academic performance across the board. So then why do we question the academic performance of student athletes? The point is that student athletes are highly scrutinized individuals on college campuses today, and many times, their behavior in and out of the classroom reflects on the university as a whole. Therefore, it

should be a priority to evaluate and analyze the academic performance of these high-profile individuals and determine whether or not changes need to be made to the academic standards set forth by each institution and the NCAA. The goal of this paper is to discuss previous literature that questions whether academic performance of the college athlete can be improved, and by what means it can be enhanced. The intent of this paper is to also introduce to the reader the terms of a “redshirt” and an “injury” to enhance the reader’s understanding of the basis of this literature review and the proposed research study that would follow, addressing whether “redshirt” freshman can improve academic performance compared to “true” freshman.

What Is a “Redshirt?”

A “redshirt” is defined by the National Collegiate Athletic Association Eligibility Committee as a student athlete who does not participate in competition in any sport for one complete academic year (August through May). An example of this would be an athlete who qualifies for and attends a four-year college or university and only practices with the team they join, but does not participate in activities against outside competition. Because they do not compete in any games outside of intersquad activities, then they still have four complete seasons to participate against outside competition. (NCAA Division I Manual, 2003) The NCAA considers these types of “redshirts” to be the most common, and typically coaches in the NCAA will use this option if they have too many players at one position or if they decide to keep a specific player based on their talent and ability level. This creates an opportunity for athletes not to be bothered with the hassles of games or traveling, but it allows them to continue to be a part of the team, and maintain the four seasons of eligibility offered to them.

Medically Speaking

Sports reporters and writers often refer to athletes as being “medically redshirted”. However, the correct term is that the athlete is granted a “medical hardship waiver.” The NCAA Eligibility Committee defines a “medical hardship waiver” in the following context. Each athlete who is considered eligible by the NCAA to participate in a sport has a total of four years of competition once they enter school. If a student athlete is injured during a season and cannot return to competition, he or she may qualify for another opportunity to use that season of eligibility. To receive this waiver, coaches must submit paperwork at the end of the season to the school and the NCAA; then they must be approved by the Eligibility Committee in order to retain the extra season of eligibility for the athlete. To be approved by the NCAA committee in any sport, the student athlete cannot participate in more than 20 percent of the team’s scheduled contests for that

season (rounded to the next whole number). The injury or illness that causes this “hardship” will also be limited also to occur during the first half of the playing season for that sport, which concludes with the NCAA Championship of that sport. Another interesting part to this eligibility rule is that if an athlete participates in even one contest during a season, for even the smallest amount of time, then he/she is considered to have participated in a complete varsity season. (NCAA Division I Manual, 2003) In other words, a student athlete who wants to “medically redshirt” for a season must be injured or incapacitated, and be unable to participate in the first half of the season. They may also not have already participated in more than 20 percent of the team’s scheduled contests. However, if an athlete participates in just one play during a game in one season, then that is considered as participation in a full varsity season. The NCAA does however make occasional exceptions based on case-by-case circumstances, but their stance is very firm on eligibility requirements and rules regarding redshirts, either for academic or medical reasons.

In addition, the term “injury” must also be defined prior to the start of this literature review. For the terms of this paper and research study, an injury will be defined as any ailment (injury or illness) that requires some form of care by the sports medicine staff and their associates at the institution and also restricts the student athlete from participating in at least one (1) practice or competition. This injury or illness must be the result of varsity athletic participation, and cannot be the result of activities outside of competitions or practice sessions. This definition is an acceptable one for this study because it incorporates all of the major characteristics of any incident that may prevent an athlete from participating in varsity intercollegiate athletics.

Villanova University: A Case Review

In the case of Villanova University, there are a variety of different procedures that coaches must follow in order to have their student athletes redshirted or placed on a “medical hardship waiver.” Villanova University is part of the Big East Conference, which currently includes 14 member institutions. All varsity sports with the exception of football participate in Big East Conference sports; it competes in the Atlantic 10 Football Conference. For this reason, there are a number of different procedures that must be adhered to in order for student athletes to be redshirted. The individual schools, acting on the behalf of the NCAA, typically grant the common “redshirt”. On the other hand, “medical hardship waivers” are granted by individual conferences, based on what sports participate in that league.

For example, if a Villanova coach wants to redshirt a student athlete during a particular season, he must contact the Office of Compliance and request the “Request for Student-Athlete Redshirt” form. The coach fills out the

appropriate information on the form and returns it to the Office of Compliance. If this redshirt request is the most common form of redshirting, then the Office of Compliance distributes a copy to the appropriate sport administrator, the academic support office, and will also file a copy in the student athlete's file. Because this would be an example of a typical (regular) redshirt, this is the only process that must be followed to redshirt a student athlete. However, in order for medical hardship waivers to be filed, the specific conference must be notified and approve the application for the medical hardship waiver.

If the coach requests a medical redshirt on the "Request for Student-Athlete Redshirt" form, then each conference office requires a separate form. Villanova's Athletic Department includes a short note on their application for a redshirt (Appendix A), where they state that, "Villanova University cannot grant a medical redshirt. All medical redshirts must be approved by the appropriate conference." However, the following information must also be included with the application to each conference for the medical hardship waiver. The date of injury, nature of injury, and last date of competition for the team's season must be included on the initial form. Along with this information, the form for the specific conference is required, along with appropriate documentation from the athletic trainers, the physician, other medical professionals involved, and the athletic director. For Villanova, separate forms for Big East athletics and the Atlantic 10 Football Conference are required. These forms, along with Villanova's request form and the appropriate documentation are sent to the conference office, where the medical hardship waiver is either granted or denied by the conference's eligibility committee. However, as with any process of application, it is imperative that the coaches, athletic trainers, physicians, compliance officials, and athletic directors follow all of the required steps in order for student athletes to be granted a redshirt, in order to gain another season of eligibility.

Academics: The Key to Success

For years, educators at all levels have examined the effects that co-curricular activities have on academic performance. More often than not, many of these studies focus on the effect that athletic participation has on academic performance. But in order to truly assess the effect that athletics has on academic performance, a more in-depth review of these studies needs to be done. Hood et al. (1992) found that in the Division I and II schools included in their study, student athletes and the general population of college students did not match in academic test scores and GPA. They concluded that this might be the result of increased stress and strain placed on the athletic population, as well as the differences in incoming academic scores of both populations. They found that athletes who were provided scholarships at these schools had significantly lower academic test scores

when compared to the general population of students at those schools. This is a common factor in most Division I and II programs, where athletes who may not get into a specific school solely on their academic abilities, may be provided the chance to attend that school based on their athletic abilities. In a 2001 study, Carodine et al. examined a number of factors that affect a student's ability to be successful academically while participating in intercollegiate athletics. The study revealed that time commitment, physical stress from athletic participation, a high profile on and off campus, and high expectations from faculty and staff cause tremendous stress and affect a student's ability to perform at their academic best. Other studies have also indicated that the combination of school and sports causes drops in test scores and more importantly, grade point average. These studies indicate that even the academically gifted students, who are also very talented athletically, sometimes have trouble making the transition from high school to college. For example, Gerdy states that "even for the academically gifted, the combination of athletics and school work can be extremely stressful and can eventually cause test scores and grade point average to drop significantly." It is important to remember that the transition from high school to college is a major step in a student's life, and many aspects of that life change over a very short period of time. This dramatic change from high school to college becomes particularly evident in the student's academic courses, and as the courses become tougher in college, students must meet the challenges that are presented to them. If they fail to meet those challenges, then scores and grades begin to drop, and they cannot effectively balance the strains of academics and athletics.

Moreover, in Simons and Rheenen's 2000 study, athletic and academic commitment of 200 Division I-A athletes at the University of Michigan was examined and determined to be a significant negative predictor of grade point average among underclassmen. In their study, Simons and Rheenen found that 85% of underclassmen (freshman through juniors) felt that commitment played a significant role in how well they did, either in sports or in the classroom. Part of their research found that "a stronger commitment to athletics results in a lower GPA than students who committed more to school work during their initial years in college." Simons and Rheenen also found that "as students and faculty and staff felt that athletes were placed in a higher profile by the school and their sports, that the athletes showed a significant decrease in their GPAs over a number of semesters."

The results of this research study reveal its importance to determining whether there is a relationship between athletics and academics, and what that relationship is. It is important to see that in this study, the results show a significant difference in grade point average when students focus more on athletics than academics. The same would be true if students focused more on academics

than athletics. Simons and Rheenen reached the conclusion that “student athletes at the Division I level must meet the challenge and strain caused by increased academic and athletic commitments” and that “nongognitive factors, such as commitment to school or sport plays a significant role in determining how successful students will be academically.”

This research is important in supporting the idea of keeping students out of competition during their freshman season in order for them to allow them to focus on academics. This is important because it shows that allowing students to commit more to athletics causes significantly lower grade point averages than those students who commit more to their schoolwork. Furthermore, it also concludes that the stress caused by the challenges of Division I athletics can also have a significant effect on a student’s athletic performance. Therefore, it is important to continue to research the concept of athletic and academic commitment of underclassmen, and more importantly freshman, because it will provide educators, coaches, and athletic administrators with more concrete and updated information on the effectiveness of athletic participation on academic success.

The NCAA’s Position

At the forefront of the argument of the relationship between academics and athletics is the National Collegiate Athletic Association. This organization, which governs its member institutions and provides them with support and guidance, also provides numerous research reports that evaluate topics related to intercollegiate athletics and makes conclusions based on those reports. The NCAA has found, through their own research, that graduation rates of student athletes are improving throughout most colleges and universities across the country. However, while the NCAA continues to raise academic requirements of incoming student athletes, the research on whether or not these increased requirements are effective is yet to be completed. Nonetheless, educators and athletic administrators still question whether these academic standards create more academically sound student athletes after they leave college. A major question that is raised is at what cost to a student’s education are athletes who may not normally be admitted to some colleges and universities being allowed to attend these schools based on their athletic abilities. One of the tougher issues that colleges and universities deal with today is the fact that excellent athletes in high school who have a reputation for not being strong academically are admitted to schools in order to boost the performance of certain athletic teams, and the major academic transitions that students have to make in college courses receive no consideration.

In his September 2002 article, Suggs states “Members of Congress, college professors, and athletes themselves have accused the NCAA and its coaches of exploiting players by bringing them to college with little academic preparation and

little chance of success in their courses.” In Suggs’ statement, he expresses the fact that student athletes, when making the adjustment from high school to college, have very little background in college academics and are essentially unprepared for the major changes that they have to make when adjusting to the life of an intercollegiate student athlete.

The NCAA’s addition of Proposition 48 (1988) and Proposition 16 (1996) raised the minimum academic standards of incoming student athletes who wished to participate at the Division I level. Proposition 48 required that schools could not admit students who had lower academic scores than the general population of students at that school, in an attempt to boost athletic performance at the school. Students were required to meet specific requirements set by the NCAA in regards to high school GPA and SAT or ACT scores. Proposition 16 however, simply raised the standards set by Proposition 48, increasing the GPA and scores required of freshmen who attempted to enter schools on athletic scholarship money. With the addition of these bylaws, the NCAA limited the type of students that were allowed to attend Division I-A and I-AA schools and participate in intercollegiate athletics. Ultimately though, student athletes who wish to participate in levels of college athletics that allow scholarships must enroll in the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s Clearinghouse which monitors and disseminates a student’s academic information obtained in high school to colleges and universities that the student wishes to attend, or is recruited to attend. The clearinghouse’s importance in the role of college athletics is that it provides schools with all of the information necessary for the student’s admission to the university that they choose to attend. It also provides a “safety net” for schools in that it eliminates students who do not have a strong academic background from attempting to enroll in schools with high standards for academics and athletics. In cases where scholarships are at stake, schools use the information from the clearinghouse to determine whether it will be worth the school’s money to allow the student the attend that particular institution.

Ultimately, the NCAA plays an important role in setting the academic standards that students and institutions must abide by in order to remain in compliance with NCAA bylaws. In order to gain a better understanding of the important relationship between academics and athletics, the NCAA continues to improve and adjust their bylaws in order to support the reason why students attend college; to learn the skills necessary and earn a degree in their chosen career field. The provision of intercollegiate athletics by the NCAA offers students a chance to enhance their academic endeavors through participation in co-curricular activities. Athletics provides for a sense of teamwork, good work ethic, and a sense of community, which all are necessary qualities that an individual will need to possess in the real world. Therefore, it continues to be an important goal of the

NCAA to evaluate and research the role of academics and athletics in colleges and universities across the country.

The Level of Competition

In a 1986 issue of the National Academic Advising Association's (NACADA) monthly journal, Thomas Grites, Director of Academic Advising, and Larry James, Director of Athletics and Recreation of Stockton State College (now called Richard Stockton College of New Jersey) presented an article that discussed the various levels of competition within the NCAA, more particularly, the lowest level of sanctioned NCAA competition, Division III. Grites and James discussed the issues regarding academic advising and performance in regards to comparing Division I and Division III athletes. Grites and James explain that "non-scholarship athletes of Division III face daily practice schedules, are required to learn athletic-related information, and often are away from campus just as much as Division I and II athletes." (Grites and James, 1986). Their point in this article is to show that there is little difference when it comes to comparing the activities that student athletes participate in at various levels of NCAA competition. Grites and James also believe that "in contrast to the scholarship-athlete, [Division III athletes] are purely self-motivated to participate. They are not obligated to do so, and they can quit at any time with no penalty." Furthermore, they state, "The Division III student athlete is an unusual student and athlete because [they] choose to sacrifice a portion of academic time to compete in athletics for the good of the sport" (Grites and James, 1986). The point behind this article is to express that while there may be similarities in student athletes at all levels, the major differences separating Division I and III athletes is that students at the Division III level play for the "love of the game", and not for scholarship money or revenue. At both levels, however, academics are still an important aspect and therefore must be monitored. Another point that they make in their statement is that while the stress levels of student athletes are very similar to that of the scholarship athlete, the added factor of a business-like atmosphere in Division I and II athletics places more stress on the scholarship athlete to perform better and draw more money and support to the athletic department than those athletes who participate for the love of the game.

As far as the National Collegiate Athletic Association is concerned however, even though there are similarities to the varying levels of competition, there are major differences between the scholarship athletes of Division I and II and the student athletes of Division III. For example, as the dissemination of scholarships for athletic participation increases at the Division I and II levels, the only scholarships provided in Division III are for academic reasons, and occasionally this causes a problem for athletes who accept major academic

scholarships in Division III, but who also participate and perform extremely well in a major sport at that school.

There are even more differences among the varying levels of competition within the NCAA. For example, recruiting at the Division I and III levels are extremely different and sometimes can make a difference in what school the athlete chooses to attend. With the added attraction of increased media exposure at the higher levels, some athletes may choose to attend a school (but not necessarily be on scholarship) where they could be recognized by professional scouts and national media. Other differences between the various levels in the NCAA include things such as recruiting visits. While most, if not all Division I schools offer recruiting visits to potential student athletes, some Division III schools may not have the budget or the personnel to attract potential student athletes through recruit visits, or they may do so in some other fashion. Another main attraction, as mentioned before, is the draw of competition and exposure. Some athletes are drawn to the idea that an increased media exposure at the Division I level will increase their potential to play beyond college. This is not always true, and for the most part, athletes at the Division III level are not interested in increased exposure in the media; they are more interested in continuing to play because they enjoy it and it provides for increased extra-curricular activity in college.

The introduction of Title IX in 1972, which called for equality among men's and women's sports, caused many schools to drop or add sports programs to be within NCAA compliance guidelines. Basically, this meant that schools needed to provide equal opportunities for men and women to participate in intercollegiate athletics, regardless of the level of competition. This piece of legislation caused much debate among athletes, coaches, and administrators, some who believed that Title IX caused even more problems as far as scholarship money allotment and equality in playing facilities. Title IX's goal was to provide for equality in sports, and for that reason, the distribution of scholarship money had to be adjusted to enforce that equality. In any case, it is common practice in many schools to provide an equal number of scholarships in male and female sports. For example, in a school such as Villanova, the football team has a total of 65 scholarships to offer its players. The women and men's basketball teams each offer a total of 15 scholarships for all of their players. Because the total between men's basketball and football (Tier I sports) equals 80, it is required that the athletic department offer a total of 80 scholarships to the Tier II sports, which include sports such as women's field hockey, women's soccer, women's lacrosse, women's cross country, and softball. There is also a limited amount of scholarship money offered to men's sports such as soccer, baseball, and lacrosse, but primarily scholarships

offers go to the female sports so that the school can remain in compliance with Title IX and the NCAA.

It is obvious that the differences among Division I and III schools could cause a potential student athlete to run into some tough decisions when choosing a college or university. However, when a student chooses to attend a school that provides athletes with scholarship money and an increased exposure in the media, the student must be aware of the differences and the expectations at the higher level, both from an academic and athletic standpoint.

Predicting and Improving Academic Performance

In the field of education, teachers, professors, and other academic leaders are always in pursuit of better ways to promote and improve education for their students. This becomes more evident in precollegiate schools, where educators attempt to find ways to make their students excel as individuals. In the college setting however, there is an added twist to the idea of improving a students' academic abilities. For those students that choose to participate in intercollegiate athletics, it becomes much harder for them to focus on these two major aspects of their lives and balance them equally.

Simons and Rheenen (2000) discuss that “when individuals are expected to fill multiple roles, they can experience role strain in which commitment to one role detracts from the commitment to another.” In that case, we see that the stress of athletic participation may cause students to lose focus and control over their academic lives, and eventually become stressed to a point where they are choosing one role over another. The question then becomes, how can leaders, academic advisors, coaches, and administrators predict and provide ideas for improvement in academic performance. Walter et al. (1987) states that previous literature suggests that “limiting admission to high profile athletic institutions to students with higher SAT and grade point averages would be beneficial in that it would create more academically sound athletes.” However, Walter argues that limiting admission to only those students would reject approximately “60% blacks and 18% of nonblacks.” With this type of limitation, the result would be that more institutions would become so academically talented, that the athletic programs would become less successful, and ultimately, people would lose interest in collegiate sports. The study by Walter focused on measuring incoming high school grade point averages of students to determine whether or not these students would be successful in the collegiate setting. The focus of their study was to determine if grade point average and SAT score, along with high school class rank, could be considered as predictors of academic performance in college. The results of the study revealed that in fact, high school grade point average could be considered as a noncognitive variable in predicting the success of male student athletes in college. Their

conclusion suggested that as an alternative, future educators and academic advisors should consider “the process of education in colleges”, and how that can change in order to provide for better student athlete success in the classroom. More importantly, Walter et al. suggested “the provision of academic support programs for entering students allows administrators to influence student success [in the classroom].” The provision of academic support programs in collegiate athletic programs at that time (1987) were few and far between, but the importance of this study moved educators to rethink their approach to education and athletics, and the introduction of strong academic support programs at colleges and universities across the country began. This was also an important study because it exposed the thought of using grade point average as a predictor of student success in college.

In 2000, Garrett published an article that compared traditional measures, noncognitive variables, and sports participation in predicting academic success for male student athletes. As part of his research, he discussed Ryan’s article (1989), which found that athletic participation provided a positive impact on the development of leadership and interpersonal skills for student athletes. However, he also discussed an article by Hood, Craig, and Ferguson (1992), who found that students who begin their college careers with typically low academic scores are more likely to have difficulty succeeding in college without some sort of academic assistance. Additionally, Pascarella et al. (1995) found that when comparing athletes to non-athletes in particular schools, that the athletes had significantly lower scores in reading comprehension and mathematical skills at the end of their freshman year. The ultimate question that Garrett raises in his research is what are the true predictors of academic success in student athletes. Particularly, his goal was “to determine whether or not the type of sport an athlete participates in is a predictor of academic success.” He found that while sport type did not have an effect on academic success rates, other variables might play a more important role in providing for the best possible academic situation for any student athlete. Garrett suggests that focusing on ways to boost a student’s confidence in their academic ability will improve academic performance. He also suggests meetings and workshops that develop study skills and strategies necessary for college level classes in order for the student athlete to make an easier transition from high school to college life. The main point that Garrett makes note of is the importance of “working with student athletes” to improve their college experience in and out of the classroom. As educators, it is important for us to realize that students should be our first priority, and that our goal should be to see every student succeed. In order for that happen, Garrett believes that individualized attention to a student’s needs in regards to academic support is vital to the success of any student, whether they are an athlete or not.

Simons and Rheenen (2000) make an interesting point in their discussion of the variables that affect a student athlete's performance in the classroom. "Because the 'dumb jock' stereotype remains prevalent, student athletes are often not seen as serious students. Consequently, faculty may have lowered expectations of them...[which] makes it easier for many students to prioritize athletics above academics." This is true in many colleges and universities across the country, and more importantly, at larger institutions where athletics is an extremely major part of campus life. Regardless of gender, student athletes are seen as the jocks of the school, and because of the stereotype, they lower themselves to a level that is expected of them by other students, faculty, and their peers. As a solution to this problem, Simons and Rheenen's study examined some other noncognitive variables including motivation, exploitation, commitment, social status, self-handicapping excuses, and the relationships between academics and athletics. They found that there was strong correlation between grade point average and commitment and exploitation. They found that student athletes with stronger commitments to athletics, along with those athletes who felt they were more exploited by the university had significantly lower grade point averages than those students who focused more on academics than on athletics. As before, Simons and Rheenen believe that student athletes, when making the transition to any collegiate athletic programs, "must meet the challenge of potential role strain by expanding the time and mental energy devoted to academics." Simons and Rheenen suggest that using "academics and athletics to complement and reinforce each other" is an important concept for student athletes and educators to understand and use in order to improve the student's academic abilities, while continuing to participate in these high profile and demanding athletic programs.

The Better Freshman Year

Speaking from experience, the first semester, and more often, the entire first year of college is an extremely stressful period for any student, and with a life full of changes, this combination can adversely affect both academic and athletic performance. As mentioned before, Pascarella et al. (1995) found that freshman athletes and non-athletes had significantly different scores in reading comprehension and math skills, with student athletes scoring lower in both areas. Even though they do not give specific reasons, the reader assumes that one reason for this difference is an increased commitment to athletics rather than academics. Additionally, Gerdy (1998) states that "exposing a 17 or 18 year old to the high-pressure, high-visibility world of major college athletics while expecting that youngster to adjust to college both socially and academically" is not only denying these students the ability to enjoy their very first college experience, but it also denies them the chance to focus on the reason why they are in college, to learn

skills that will be vital to them in their future careers. Gerdy also argues that “Providing freshman the chance to get their feet on the ground academically and socially and to fully sample the broad range of activities and opportunities that a college campus offers will go a long way toward ensuring that institutions are meeting their end of this fundamental obligation.” Gerdy’s position in terms of a student’s activity level during their freshman year is that they should have the chance to focus on the reason why people go to college in the first place; to experience a variety of activities that help to develop character and build interpersonal relationships and skills (as Ryan stated in an earlier article), rather than have to experience the pressure of being exploited by the school in highly visible, high pressure intercollegiate athletics.

In The Handbook of Counseling Psychology, Russell and Petrie discuss a number of factors that affect a student’s transition academically to college. They discuss factors such as campus environment, academic motivation, and commitment to academics as major factors that play a role in a student’s adjustment to college academics. For example, Russell and Petrie state “several researchers have noted that social and environmental factors appear to play an important role in a student’s academic adjustment and success.” Russell and Petrie’s explanation (through previous research) of the role of social and environmental factors in a student’s academic success suggests that if a young student athlete participates in co-curricular activities such as athletics, that they would be more successful than students who chose not to participate in any co-curricular activities. Russell and Petrie also suggest that providing strong peer communities for young college students can be extremely valuable in helping those individuals become more easily adjusted to the stressful life of a college student, both academically and athletically.

Bringing It All Together

Ultimately, it is important to remember that the reason young people choose to go to college is to obtain an education and to develop skills for a future career. Providing activities like intercollegiate athletics, intramurals, and other co-curricular activities allows students to enhance and expand their educational and social experiences in college. However, one must understand that in a college setting, academics must be the first priority in any student’s life, regardless of whether or not they participate in co-curricular activities like intercollegiate athletics. Therefore, it is critical to examine whether giving student athletes the opportunity to focus on education rather than athletics is effective in improving their academic performance. By not giving students that chance to focus on their academics during their first year, athletic departments and other school officials defeat the purpose of using intercollegiate athletics to enhance the campus life of

their student athletes. By examining this issue then, schools across the country and throughout the membership of the NCAA will be able to improve academic standards and create a more collaborative effort between academics and athletics in Division I institutions.

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