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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

The Books or the Ballgames: Understanding Student-Athletes' Experiences in School

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Dinur Blum

June 2018

Dissertation Committee:

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Dr. Adalberto Aguirre, Jr.

Dr. Bruce G. Link

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2018

The Dissertation of Dinur Blum is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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## **Dedication**

No dissertation is ever written truly alone. To that end, I have many people to thank, and I list a few here.

I would like to thank Yigal and Shlomit Blum for their love and support, and constantly pushing me to delve deeper into research and into sharpening my analyses. I would also like to thank Avraham and Lea Blum for their continued love and support, and also dedicate this in part in loving memory to Natan and Sara Flum.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Books or the Ballgames: Understanding Student-Athletes' Experiences in School

by

Dinur Blum

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Sociology  
University of California, Riverside, June 2018  
Dr. Alfredo M. Mirande, Chairperson

This dissertation examines the obstacles college student-athletes face with respect to academic achievement. Through 37 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 former student-athletes and 17 current student-athletes, it asks student-athletes how they define success academically, athletically, and professionally, and examines ways to help student-athletes succeed as well as challenge the narrative that student-athletes disengage with their coursework as a result of apathy. Instead, it suggests that the challenges of

juggling a full academic course-load, combined with time spent for practices, travel, and competitions, and in some cases, additional employment, may be too stressful for student-athletes to be able to consistently succeed in all areas. Further, they are encouraged to succeed academically by their families and significant others, but not always by their coaches, some of whom emphasize eligibility over excellence. I suggest an alternate way of viewing the apathetic student-athlete as an overwhelmed student-athlete who does not want to show weakness, and has a role that is accessible to them and to instructors, and this veneer of apathy allows the student-athlete to save face by not admitting needing help.

## Table of Contents

### Outline of Chapters

<b>Chapter One: Background, Goals, and Research Questions of this Project</b>	<b>1</b>
Relevant literature	6
Methods	16
Research questions	21
<b>Chapter Two: Student-Athletes Who Graduated</b>	<b>24</b>
Messages about academic success	27
Messages about athletic success	30
Messages from significant others	32
Structural support offered & perceptions of teammates' success and attitudes in class	38
When class and sports schedules conflict: the role scholarships play	42
Priorities: school or sports	44
Differences between easier and harder classes	48
Defining academic success	51
Defining athletic success	54
Discussion	56
<b>Chapter Three: Current student-athletes</b>	<b>61</b>
Messages received from family and coaches;	62
Differences between junior colleges and four-year schools	63
Pressures student-athletes face	66
Selecting course schedules: the role of academic counselors	69

Importance of grades for student-athletes themselves	77
Importance of grades for teammates and coaches	81
Teammates who struggle academically	85
Defining academic success	91
Defining athletic success	92
Defining professional success	95
Being a student-athlete: hardships and difficulties	96
Hard but rewarding (positive overall)	99
<b>Chapter Four: Books or ballgames? Understanding student-athletes' academic struggles in a new way, and what can be done to alleviate them</b>	<b>103</b>
Obstacles faced and pragmatic responses: scheduling classes	104
Maximizing effort in the classroom: Fighting the apathetic student-athlete image, and a new way of examining student-athlete attitude	107
The role coaches play	109
How to help student-athletes succeed academically: Policy implication	113
<b>Chapter Five: Findings, limitations, and future research</b>	<b>121</b>
Works cited	139
Interview guide	142

**List of Tables and Figures:**

Figure 2.1 59

Figure 3.1 102

# **Chapter One: Background, Goals, and Research Questions of this Project**

“Why should we have to go to class if we came here to play FOOTBALL, we ain’t come to play SCHOOL, classes are POINTLESS.”

In 2012, then-freshman and third-string quarterback Cardale Jones of Ohio State University posted this message from his Twitter account. As a freshman (first-year undergraduate), Jones was new to being a college student, and as a third-string quarterback, he was not receiving playing time, as he would need two injuries (to the two quarterbacks ahead of him on the depth chart) to have playing time and to be noticed by professional football (NFL) scouts. Years later, he claimed that this tweet was born out of frustration for how he had done on an exam, and he graduated from Ohio State in 2017, after having played as the starting quarterback. Jones’ tweet highlights a discrepancy for many student-athletes, and serves as the catalyst for this project, which focuses on how student athletes have to be proficient at both academics and athletics. It is worth noting that Jones finished his Bachelors Degree and ultimately graduated from Ohio State University after his playing career had ended, posing with a graduation cap poking fun at his original tweet, saying “Someone once said we aren’t here for classes”, and in addition to being a professional quarterback, Jones has also posted about seeking an advanced degree in education.

In 2014 the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reported that 3100 of its undergraduate students, including student athletes, had been funneled into so-called “paper” courses, in which little if any work was required to pass the course (Ganim and Sayer 2014). These courses allowed student-athletes to remain academically eligible for intercollegiate competitions, as they artificially inflated students’ grade point averages. As a result of an investigation by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the University of North Carolina received accreditation probation for one year in 2015 (Dalesio 2015). While the university was exonerated in 2017 following an investigation into these classes, the fact that these classes were offered was a source of concern and potential embarrassment for the school.

Athletics at major universities is a business. Money from college athletics served as a justification for paper classes at North Carolina. As of 2013, NCAA had made almost one billion dollars in revenue from the annual men’s basketball national tournament (“March Madness”). This money was distributed to participating schools, but academics took a clear back seat, with \$25.1 million allocated to “academic enhancement.” Much pressure is placed on the student-athletes to succeed as athletes, while academics, and their role as students, are given secondary status. These pressures raise questions about what it is like to be a college athlete today. Questions addressed in this dissertation, include what messages student-athletes are given about the value of academic work relative to athletic success, and what pressures student-athletes face to succeed in the classroom, on the court, or on the field.

While the NCAA invests heavily in athletes, fewer than two percent of the undergraduate student-athletes go on to play professional football or basketball in the United States (e.g. NFL and NBA), and while others do have athletic careers overseas or in other sports, the overwhelming majority of student-athletes embark on careers other than professional athletes. My project looks at what forces push student-athletes to succeed both on the field and in the classroom, how the athletes define success athletically, academically, and career-wise.

This project seeks to better understand what it means to be an undergraduate student-athlete. In the process, I hope to shed light not only on the student-athlete experience but to offer insights into how student-athletes can also succeed in the classroom. The project speaks to multiple areas of sociology, including the sociology of higher education, the sociology of sport, and the study of race, class, and gender, since athletics is often seen as a vehicle for social mobility, particularly for male athletes of Color. I also examine how student-athletes structure their class schedules and decide what to study – whether they are following a major due to intellectual curiosity and interest, whether there are pragmatic concerns such as team schedules, or both. Understanding these pressures can help shape the classroom experience for student-athletes and for undergraduates who work either significantly long part-time hours or who work full-time outside the university, and it helps explain student-athlete performance in the classroom and in the field.

## **Standpoint**

I approach this project from two different perspectives: that of participant, as an avid fan and part-time amateur sports' photographer of professional and college athletics, and from my perspective as an academic and instructor. I grew up watching college football and college basketball, and as a part-time (amateur) sports photographer, and have developed relationships with student-athletes both during their time as students and in some cases after their graduation through my photography, as I would offer them photos of their athletic accomplishments. Being a photographer has given me a deeper appreciation of athletes' athletic accomplishments, as I see them not merely as students representing a university (as can be the perception watching sports on television exclusively) but also as people who I may have shared a course (or major) with, who are dealing with pressures outside the classroom to perform in a way that I am unfamiliar with.

While I am not approaching this project from the perspective of a former athlete, having never been an intercollegiate athlete and not being able to speak from personal experience about the cross-pressures, demands, and challenges faced by college athletes, I am a quasi-insider in the sense that as a photographer I have had numerous formal and informal conversations with student-athletes. Moreover, as a teaching assistant and college instructor, I have also had student-athletes enroll in courses I teach. I have observed student-athletes in my classes who appear to be disinterested in the material, or more commonly, appear exhausted. These experiences have led me to conclude that the pressures these student-athletes face are also academic and not limited to success on the

field. The simple explanation – that the student-athletes are disinterested in the class or are lazy – is not necessarily reflective of their reality.

Student-athletes are up early most mornings, especially in-season, lifting weights and attending meetings before classes start. By the time a late morning or early afternoon courses begins, they have had a full workday. After their classes are over, many of these athletes have more practices before they can head back to their dorms. In addition, many of the student-athletes must travel to road games, which means that they miss classes not only on game days but also on days they travel to and from their home campus. Student-athletes effectively work two jobs simultaneously: one job as an athlete, another as an undergraduate student. Both jobs have various performance pressures that are placed on the student-athletes, and they are expected to excel at both. However, people have a finite amount of energy and time that they can expend on each of these jobs, and consequently, there are student-athletes who succeed more on the field than in the classroom and those who excel more at academics than athletics.

If, as Guenther (2009) asserts, “the act of naming is an act of power” (2009: 412), then the fairest option to respondents is to give them control over how they choose to be identified in this work. I identify interviewees based on pseudonyms, use these as well as being vague about school attended. This allows for interviewees to discuss potentially-sensitive information. Schools are described based on geographic location and whether, athletic division and/or conference, and in some cases, whether they are public or private universities. This allows for generalizations to be made across schools – whether private or public schools act similarly to one another, whether there are regional differences

among universities, and whether the size of the school's athletic department and its NCAA division (1-A lower) makes significant differences to student-athletes. All this is done in an attempt to protect the confidentiality of interviewees and their responses, as well as give them some control over how they are portrayed in the current study. While there are interviewees who volunteered to be identified by their given (legal) name, including last name, they are given pseudonyms in this study. This ensures consistency among names used, and allows for research to be more consistent.

### ***Relevant Literature***

Using Critical Race Theory, I am interested in seeing whether the messages student-athletes of Color are different from the messages White student-athletes receive in terms of emphasizing success academically or athletically, and which sources of messages and which specific messages resonate most clearly with student-athletes. As Delgado and Stefancic (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1998) contend, this theory holds that "racism is normal" (1998: 7) or institutionalized in the United States. They suggest that while overt and de jure racism has been mitigated due to the Civil Rights Movement, racism is now more hidden in social institutions, including education. Color-blindness allows for racist practices to persist, so long as the practices are not overtly or formally about race. Delgado and Stefancic (2000) also argue that culture creates its own reality, meaning that power structures in society are there intentionally, not accidentally, and that those in power only relinquish some of their cultural advantages when it ultimately benefits them. Given this, are the messages that student-athletes receive different based on racial stereotypes that are pervasive in the United States? Further, Delgado and

Stefancic (2000) highlight the importance of storytelling, allowing people to share their own narratives rather than assuming that general explanations of racism are universal. Given this, I ask student-athletes to describe their own experiences, their challenges and successes, and what they want non-student-athletes to know about their experiences as student-athletes.

Yosso (2004) and her colleagues argue that “U.S. schools continue to limit equal educational access and opportunity based on race (Kozol, 1991; Lewis, 2003). Students of color remain severely under-represented in historically White colleges and universities, and the few granted access to these institutions often suffer racial discrimination on and around campus (Lawrence & Matsuda, 1997; Smith, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2002; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).” (2004: 1-2) This racial history, combined with racial stereotypes, now manifest themselves in the attitudes that student-athletes encounter in their classes, with faculty and peers assuming student-athletes are attending school only as athletes, not as students.

Benson (2000) suggests that there are “two distinct stereotypes that have emerged regarding African-American males” (2000: 57), both of which emphasize physical strength over “primitive, temperamental, overreactive, uncontrollable, violent, and sexually powerful” (2000:57) or as being “benign, childish, immature, exuberant, uninhibited, lazy, comical, impulsive, fun-loving, good-humored, inferior and lovable” (2000: 57). These stereotypes ignore intelligence and maturity, and extend to the sporting arena, where Caucasian athletes are praised highly for their intelligence and

determination (but not their athletic skills), and African-American athletes are praised for their athleticism and strength, but not their intelligence. Wiggins (1993) writes that these myths “ultimately rest on beliefs that the success of African-American athletes results more from innate physical skills than from hard work and determination” (1993: 42), which thus devalues the hard work that the athletes put in to excel. Davis (2000) points out that while African-American “football and basketball players are graduating at rates that exceed those they achieved prior to the enactment of Proposition 48...at many institutions, graduation rates for African-American male student-athletes in revenue-producing sports lag far behind those of other male student-athletes.” (Benson 2000: 249)

Proposition 48, enacted in 1986, introduced a minimal level of academic qualifications for freshman participation in college athletics. This built on a series of academic policies that set to strike a balance between academic success and athletic eligibility. Prior to Proposition 48, student-athletes were required to earn a 1.6 grade-point average across their high school courses. Under Proposition 48, only grades from 16 core courses, along with standardized test scores, would count toward student-athlete eligibility, which means that effectively, student-athletes would not be rewarded for high grades nor punished for low grades in courses outside of the core courses, in order to qualify to be collegiate student-athletes. This supported the “cornerstone principles of the NCAA” (Newman and Miller 1994).

The literature also suggests that African-Americans are underrepresented as university students, but are overrepresented in the revenue-generating sports of football

and basketball. Benson suggests that “African-American student-athletes are different from the two student constituencies with whom they share the most in common – White student-athletes and African-American non-athletic students” (2000: 136), due to their overrepresentation in sport and underrepresentation as undergraduate students. She also suggests that African-American student-athletes “enter college with very different educational and sociocultural backgrounds than both White student-athletes and other African-American students” (2000: 137) because they disproportionately come from families with lower socioeconomic statuses, both in terms of income and in terms of parental educational attainment.

Simons and his colleagues (2007) find that student-athletes were viewed negatively by both professors and their peers, reporting that:

33% of the collegiate student-athletes in their study reported they were perceived negatively by professors and 59.1% by students, Only 15% reported positive perceptions. 61.5% reported they were refused or given a hard time when requesting accommodations for athletic competitions. 62.1% reported a faculty member had made a negative remark about athletes in class... The comments reflected the dumb jock stereotype; low intelligence, little academic motivation and receipt of undeserved benefits and privileges. There were race, gender and sport differences in the stigmatization. Due in part to the dumb jock stereotype athletes are stigmatized (devalued social identity) in the academic domain. (2007: 251).

This suggests that racial stereotypes are still felt in the university, and that student-athletes broadly, and African-American student-athletes specifically, are stigmatized based on the work they do as athletes, and that they are viewed as academically incompetent.

The literature also suggests that many student-athletes are not motivated to succeed in the classroom and blames their attitude for poor academic preparation. This places the onus of academic success on individual student-athletes, rather than examining what constraints these student-athletes are operating under with respect to their academic and athletic obligations.

### ***Intercollegiate Sports and Academic Standards in the United States***

Newman and Miller (1994) traced the history of intercollegiate sports from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-1990s. Originally, college sports were student-organized. Between 1874 and 1898, college-faculty control and athletics committees were formed due to a perceived inability of students to control the programs (Smith 1983). Individual institutions began to exert control over athletic programs, and an inter-institutional regulatory process was initiated in the late 1800s (Smith 1983). In 1905, two opposing football committees faced mediation by President Theodore Roosevelt, which led to the creation of the NCAA in 1920 (Lewis 1975). The NCAA has always taken the position that “athletics must be conducted as an integral part of the dignity and purpose of higher education” (Toner 1984). However, the NCAA was relatively unimportant until the middle of the 1950s, when the American Council on Education (ACE) “conducted an inquiry into the nature of college sports” (Hanford 1979) and eventually decided that athletic directors, presidents, and college trustees should be the overseers of college sports (Newman and Miller 1994).

In 1965, the 1.600 Rule was adopted, requiring college first-year athletes to achieve a GPA of at least 1.66 (out of 4.0) during their freshman college year to be

eligible for athletic scholarship assistance (Dealy Jr. 1990). In 1971, this was increased to the 2.000 Rule, requiring a graduation from high school with at least a 2.0, or C+ average, in specific core courses instead of all courses taken (Dealy Jr. 1990). This now meant that the admission of marginally-prepared students was unregulated, because it was no longer based on an across-the-board preparation score, but only on performance in core courses. After the removal of the 1.600 rule, student-athlete graduation rates fell consistently for at least ten years (Phelps 1982).

It is well-established that part of the motivation or incentive for college athletics programs to support this decreasing academic requirement has been money. Football and basketball programs routinely market their teams and receive handsome profits in return (Duncan and McMillen 2013, Hanford 1979, Hillborn 1995, Kahn 2007). But is it only the money that draws student-athletes into the game, or is there a different motivator? Prior research suggests that the main motivators for student-athletes include the possibility of a professional career as a positive motivator, and demotivating messages about their perceived academic ability from non-athlete peers, professors, and even coaches as a negative one. Watt and Moore raise the possibility that student-athlete's surroundings also provide positive and negative reinforcement, and can push a student-athlete into identifying more as athlete than as student, which can be detrimental to their overall academic success (Watt and Moore III 2001).

Adler and Adler (1985) looked at the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance among athletes involved in big-time college sports, namely

football and men's basketball. Their findings demonstrated a shift from optimism to pragmatism and eventually academic apathy in student-athletes.

[M]ost athletes enter college with optimistic and idealistic goals and attitudes about their impending academic careers. However, their athletic, social, and classroom experiences lead them to become progressively detached from academics. As a result, they make pragmatic adjustments, abandoning their earlier aspirations and expectations and gradually resigning themselves to inferior academic performance. (Adler and Adler 1985)

The Adler study also found that student-athletes perceived their professors as largely uninterested in student-athletes' athletic performance, aloof, and hard to approach about academic issues (Adler and Adler 1985). Those who tried to enroll beyond basic academic courses were surprised by the requirement that they had to go beyond memorization to succeed in the course. Many did not even understand what was required of them (Adler and Adler 1985). They were also left to sink or swim by their teachers and by their coaches in their classes, so they threw their self-investment towards athletic achievement instead (Adler and Adler 1985).

Watt and Moore (2001) also found that student-athletes often have very little control over their class choices or their schedules (Watt and Moore III 2001). Adler and Adler (1985) reported that the content of classes was often dumbed down for the players, who did not get to choose their coursework – their coaches chose it for them (Adler and Adler 1985). Even student-athletes who were not especially interested in academics felt that the courses were watered-down, demeaning, or impractical. One sophomore who was enrolled in classes on nutrition, mental retardation, square dancing, and camp counseling expressed the typical opinion, "I thought I was goin' learn something here. It's a bunch o' b.s." (Adler and Adler 1985). Athletes who enrolled in more advanced

courses were overwhelmed because they did not have the time, energy, or skill set necessary to handle them (Adler and Adler 1985).

Benson (2000) also found that athletes perceived their academic advisors as choosing “easy classes” without finding out if they wanted to take them or wanted a more challenging class. Whitner and Meyers (1986) profiled a student-athlete and found that he felt intense fear about academic work. The student-athlete thought that college would be like high school and that if he was good in his sport, he would get a passing grade even if he did not do his classwork (Whitner and Myers 1986). Their study suggests that student-athletes were not offered guidance, either in high school or early in their collegiate careers, explaining how college would be different from high school. Nor was it made clear to them that being a good athlete would not be enough to achieve high grades in classes. These findings suggest that an academic support network was lacking, if these intense fears about academic work persisted.

Engstrom and Sedlacek found that first-year students “perceived student-athletes negatively in situations dealing with academic competence” (1991). The authors argue that the student-athlete culture is “susceptible to prejudice and discrimination” (Engstrom and Sedlacek 1991), in that they are treated as less than capable in the classroom. Combined with Benson’s findings with respect to the messages student-athletes receive (Benson 2000), this means that student-athletes are entering the classroom at a social disadvantage compared to their peers, and receiving negative messaging about their academic ability from teachers and peers as well.

Benson reported that student-athletes perceived their teachers not taking attendance as a message that they didn't really need to show up to class, because the teachers did not care whether they were present or not (Benson 2000). They found that black student-athletes, specifically football players, perceived college academics as unimportant relative to college athletics. They also received implicit and explicit messaging that they were not expected to be intellectually capable or do well in school. These messages began during the recruiting process in high school, well before the students even arrived on campus (Benson 2000). In Benson's study, student-athletes perceived teachers as not caring whether they were present in class or not. They also perceived the teachers as "pushovers" when it came to getting extra-credit work.

Aries and her colleagues (2004) found that student-athletes report greater difficulty in being taken seriously by their professors due to their student-athlete status, relative to students who were members in other groups Aries et al. (2004). Like Engstrom, this research group found that student-athletes' peers constantly question the student-athletes' academic competence. This research group also found that in a self-assessment of learning skills, athletes scored lower than non-athletes on a range of learning skills, including writing, foreign language ability, analytical ability and quantitative ability (Aries et al. 2004).

Adler and Adler (1985) looked at the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance among athletes involved in big-time college sports, and found that most athletes enter college with optimistic and idealistic goals and attitudes about their academic careers (Adler and Adler 1985). However, their athletic, social, and

classroom experiences lead them to become progressively detached from academics (Adler and Adler 1985). Student-athletes quickly realized that their academics were negatively affected by their participation in sports; the physical demands of practice and game plus the time demands of practice and game wore them out to the point that they could not concentrate on schoolwork, even if they had had the time for it (Adler and Adler 1985). Perceiving sports as their area of competence, they abandoned academics in favor of focusing on their sport.

This research paints a picture of student-athletes as having low confidence in their academic abilities – a situation that is exacerbated by the culture of their athletic peers, the opinions of their non-athlete peers, and their professors’ reactions to their presence in class and their requests for help. This seems to drive student-athletes into abandoning academic pursuits, something they do not feel competent in, and focusing mainly on the game, where their competence is recognized and praised.

Most of the literature that focuses on student-athletes studies them as students, rather than as athletes. Messaging about what “success” looks like on the field or the court are often left out of such literature. However, there are several examinations of these messages in current literature.

For example, in the Adler study, one of the main messages that student-athletes received from coaches was an emphasis on the increasing commercialization and professionalization of their sport. Student-athletes who had played their games because they loved the game now found that their sport had become an occupation. Student-athletes in this study reported that their coaches often pressured them with messaging

about the coach's financial standing and how, "[i]f they don't win, they may get the boot, and so they pass that pressure onto [sic] us athletes" (Adler and Adler 1985).

Student-athletes also reported pressure from teammates to focus on the sport first. Gayles (2009) reports that student-athletes who live together are "socially segregated from the general student population", and the Adlers (1985) confirm that this creates a "peer subculture" in which interest in academics was ridiculed while the athletic dimensions of athletes' lives were played up and emphasized. Aries and her colleagues (2004) dispute that this is an across-the-board problem, instead arguing that the problem is limited to certain groups of athletes rather than generalizing to all student-athletes. However, Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991), as well as Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992), provide a strong argument that the norms of behavior and problems created by the student-athlete culture should qualify student-athletes to be considered nontraditional students.

Comeaux and Harrison (2011) similarly report that student-athletes are focused more on establishing a reputation and identity as athletes in their sports, and that their personal relationships influenced their commitment to their sport – as respect and validation rose, so did sport commitment.

### ***Methods***

Tracy (2010) offers eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. These criteria include: "having a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical research, and meaningful coherence." I strive to fulfill these eight criteria with this dissertation. Given the recent academic scandal at the

University of North Carolina, and similar concerns with other universities concerning student-athletes' grades and graduation rates, this is a timely and important topic to investigate.

My stance on multivocality and triangulation comes from the various interviews conducted, so that when an interviewee raises an idea or a pressure that has not been previously mentioned, I ask other interviewees about these ideas or pressures, to understand whether this is something that other student-athletes face, or whether the student-athlete who mentioned it is an outlier of sorts.

Given my positions as researcher, photographer, teacher, and fan, I approach this project and athletes seeking to better understand the pressures student-athletes face and to offer pragmatic solutions to ease these pressures. To best understand what it means to be a student athlete from multiple angles, interviews and analysis must be rigorous, and to do so, multiple interviews with the same participants are needed. To conduct ethical research, I give my interviewees the opportunity to decline to answer questions that they do not feel comfortable with, and I maintain confidentiality. Part of confidentiality is that I do not disclose the universities they attend or attended, and describe them as being private or public and a general geographic region. Further, I ask the athletes how they wish to be identified in interviews, giving them the opportunity to present themselves as they wish.

This project is based on interviews with both former and current student-athletes. My initial hope was to interview a total of 40 college football players, as that sport has the biggest rosters in college, the most high-profile draft potential (seven rounds,

compared to the NBA's two), and the most roster spots available professionally (53 players are active for an NFL roster, with an additional practice squad, compared to 12 in the NBA, in addition to having a developmental league).

For research, interviewing student-athletes in the same sport would have kept the sport participation consistent across my participants. However, I found that I could interview college football and men's basketball players only after they had graduated, rather than while they were student-athletes. I suspect this is because I did not have an "in" with current football and basketball programs, and student-athletes were unlikely to respond to an interview request from an email address they did not recognize, regardless of the school they attended. At the same time, these interviews did not spotlight the athletes themselves or highlight athletic success, and so coaches and athletic directors had little motivation to have their athletes respond to my interview requests. I had rapport with some graduated student-athletes, and had access to them and their former teammates through them. However, the current student-athletes interviewed in this study came from other sports, including baseball, basketball, and track and field. While these are not known as revenue-generating sports for universities, the schedules athletes face in these sports are just as grueling as those in football and basketball.

The interviews I conducted were done in person, either in my office or at a public location such as a coffee shop. They were also conducted online and by phone. Because of my part-time sports photography job, and the access this job gave me at various minor league baseball stadiums, I was able to talk to baseball players before or after games, and that allowed me to build rapport with more graduated student-athletes. My position as an

instructor gave me access to current student-athletes, whether they were my students, and would be interviewed after grades had been submitted, or whether they had teammates who were willing to be interviewed. I also tried to reach student-athletes who had not graduated and were not in the process of completing school, but no one was willing, possibly due to the stigma of not finishing school.

I used convenience and snowball sampling for this project. I had rapport with the graduated student-athletes by being an amateur photographer, as I have given various players and their families prints of photographs that I have taken, and have also linked them to the website where I host my photos. After interviewing them, I asked them to talk to teammates from college or their current team, as long as they had attended college and played sports while they were undergraduates, in order to help grow the number of possible respondents. I also interviewed former students of mine who play or played intercollegiate sports, and like the graduated student-athletes, asked them to refer me to teammates for interviews.

### **Methodological Limitations and Strengths**

One limitation in doing interviews is that because I was not part of a team, I had outsider status, so what players told me – even with the guarantee of confidentiality– might be guarded if they are afraid of bad-mouthing their teammates or coaches. Part of my outsider status meant that I did not – and currently do not - have firsthand experience of possible stresses like having to lift weights early in the morning, followed by video sessions or practices, followed by classes and more practices afterwards. I do not know what it is like to have to work a physically demanding job (as an athlete) followed by

classes, nor do I have firsthand experience of having to worry about scheduling my classes based around a consistently-demanding, highly competitive extracurricular activity.

Further, student-athletes who already graduated may not remember the pressures they faced as vividly as student-athletes currently experiencing the same pressures. This is not likely due to intentional repression as much as it is an effect of time elapsing and moving into a new career, whether inside the sports world or not. However, even if not every detail is remembered, most people remember what they were told; who gave them these messages, and have a recollection of what pressures they faced.

On the other hand, there may be advantages associated with my outsider status. One way my outsider status may help is that players might not view their class schedules or academic struggles as something worth discussing, and my sports fandom helps in that I understand some games and can talk to athletes about their sports (hopefully) knowledgeably as well as the academic side of being a student-athlete.

While I am an outsider in some respects, being a photographer gives me quasi-insider status compared to other fans. This is because my work as a photographer means I am at the same stadiums regularly throughout the season, and can talk to players either formally or informally. This allows me to discuss anything from daily minutiae to individual or team successes or struggles to conversations directly related to this study.

Finally, as an instructor at a public university in the southwestern United States, I have had student-athletes in my classes. While I cannot interview them during my time as their instructor due to possible conflicts of interest or power imbalances, I do get to

know and can interview these students at the end of the course. This gives me rapport with them as their instructor, and given that I make sports analogies regularly in my courses, my students know I am a self-proclaimed avid fan. Several of my former students, namely two soccer players and a track and field athlete (discus), refer to me as “the sports guy” when it came to instructors, so I have a reputation as for being interested in sports.

### **Research questions**

The major research questions examined in this work include:

- What messages do student-athletes receive while they are in school about succeeding academically compared to athletically? Who sends these messages?
- What considerations do student-athletes have with respect to academics?
- How do student-athletes define success for themselves in various areas?
- What do student-athletes want others to know about their experiences?
- What can be done to help student-athletes succeed academically?

More research is needed to understand the effects of non-athlete, coach, and professorial messaging. If student-athletes continually receive the message from professors that what they do on the field or the court is not important or valid, it is hardly surprising that they respond by rejecting what is important to the professor – namely, academic work. Similarly, the effects of money on student-athlete success should be investigated. Although none of the athletes reported money as a motivating factor, the reports of college athletics departments using “fixers” and “paper classes” to maintain student-athlete eligibility is troubling (Wolverton 2014, Stripling 2014). The effects of money as a motivator in college athletics may be more concentrated or more powerful for the staff of athletics departments, rather than student-athletes, but it is an additional issue that needs to be addressed.

If Cardale Jones in 2012 is typical of the interviewees in their freshman years, his aggravated tweet becomes less surprising. Jones now puts forward more effort towards academics in his later years in college, while still maintaining a strong presence in Ohio State's athletics program (Ward 2014). Although student-athletes may be hampered by the issues identified in previous research, ways to help them focus on academics may be a combination of controllable factors: interesting majors, having the university adjust schedules so that more difficult courses are offered in the off-season, encouraging intimate-other support of academics, and simply allowing for maturity over time.

In addition to examining the relevant academic literature, this dissertation examines issues both former student-athletes and current student-athletes face. Both graduated and current student-athletes have a chapter devoted exclusively to them, and the last empirical chapter compares findings across both groups. The project concludes by addressing educational policy implications that arise from this study and examines how this project can be developed further.

The chapter on former or graduated student-athletes includes examining messages they receive on succeeding athletically and in the classroom, who delivers these messages, how they viewed their own teammates' efforts in the classroom, and how they define success athletically, academically, and professionally, and what earning a degree means to them.

The chapter on current student-athletes also examines the messages student-athletes receive as well as the messengers, but also examines differences faced in

attending a junior or community college compared to a four-year university, the pressures they face in both their student and athlete roles, how much the student-athletes value academic achievement themselves, as well as how they define success and what they want people to know about being a student-athlete.

The last empirical chapter, chapter four, compares and contrasts themes that emerge in interviews across both groups of student-athletes, examining specifically the obstacles student-athletes face in terms of academic achievement, the pragmatic considerations they make in scheduling their courses, examining whether student-athletes really are hindered by their attitudes or whether there are alternate explanations for their struggles in the classroom, and what educational policy changes can be made in order to help student-athletes thrive academically while they are in school.

The final chapter summarizes the findings from this chapter and examines ways to extend and expand the research proposed in this dissertation, and explains what advantages a wider research project allows.

## **Chapter Two: Student-Athletes Who Graduated**

This chapter focuses on the messages received by student-athletes who graduated by the time they were interviewed for this project. These messages were imparted during their playing days, and I ask them to discuss the pressures and obstacles they faced. I examine patterns across different sports and schools. This chapter does not address macro-level issues, such as academic fraud, the commercialization of college sports, or college athletic programs' economic priorities. Although these may influence student-athletes' perceptions of sport and study, the chapter will not go beyond the effect of such priorities on the messaging that student-athletes received from collegiate coaching and athletics advising staff. Instead, this chapter focuses on the micro-level effects of student-athlete perception of social expectations from significant others.

This chapter asks and attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What messages did student-athletes who graduated from college receive relative to academic success? Who provided them these messages? Were these messages explicit or implied?
2. What messages did they receive relative to success in their sport? Were they encouraged to focus on athletics in the hopes of a professional sports career, or were they guided toward academics? Who gave them these messages? Were these messages explicit or implied?

3. How did student-athletes who graduated prioritize academics or sport based on the relative importance of these messages? How did they choose which classes to take?

After an overview of the development of academic standards relative to college sport participation for student-athletes, I examine each of the first two questions as separate sections, to discover what the literature reveals on each one. Based on interviews with 20 graduated student-athletes, I then discuss the student-athletes' experiences of messages they received on these three questions, and compare them with the literature where applicable. I also asked these former student-athletes how they defined success in the classroom, on the field, and professionally. These graduated student-athletes are atypical in one key sense: a majority of them have had some professional athletic career following graduation (13 out of the 20). Some of these careers were outside of North American professional leagues, and many played in minor leagues in North America. However, the minor leagues are considered professional, especially as some were drafted by major league teams and were attempting to play their way up to the majors. Further, the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter are all success stories – even those without a professional sports career – as they had earned a degree by the time they were interviewed.

While prior research focuses on current student-athletes based on their race or social class groups, or on specific sports, this chapter examines a group of 20 student-athletes who differ from others mainly by their academic (graduated) status. Studies that focus on student-athletes' ascribed characteristics are obviously important, as the issues

that some race, gender, or social class groups face are ongoing, and while this chapter has a different focus than these studies, I do not intend to minimize their importance.

The student-athletes interviewed in this chapter participated in different sports and attended different universities – both public and private – in different athletic conferences, and different NCAA divisions, which affected scholarship availability, and different parts of the United States. I address possible routes forward for assisting current student-athletes to succeed, by changing the messages they receive from these various sources, and suggest areas for further research.

Social imitation and social learning theories can explain how student-athletes are socialized during their playing days. Beamon (2010: 284) argues that people learn by imitating behaviors from people close to them as well as those seen in the media. This is different from social learning, as social learning examines how other people reinforce behavior, whereas imitation assumes they provide a template or model of behavior.

The socializing environments respondents identified include their homes when growing up, their high schools, and collegiate atmosphere. This is expected, as family is a strong socializing influence from an early age, and during high school, adolescents are maturing and beginning to manage the roles of students and as athletes, including making sure their grades are satisfactory to allow them to keep playing. During high school, student-athletes begin to learn the issues of managing their time and energy, and this stays with them into their college career. However, high school classes meet more

frequently and student-athletes' schedules are more regimented in high school than in college, meaning that in high school, student-athletes have their time structured somewhat uniformly within their teams. In college, student-athletes have differing course schedules, and often live with their student-athlete peers in dorms that are separate from non-athlete students. The attitudes their teammates have permeate the practice field, the weight room, but also their living areas, and they are surrounded by messages and attitudes from their teammates and other student-athletes. Thus, family, teachers, coaches, and teammates act as agents of reinforcement, with the question being what message is sent and reinforced.

Interviewees discussed messages they received from their coaches, teammates, friends outside of sports, families, and their significant others. Some of the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter had opportunities to play professionally after college either in the United States or abroad, and came from various athletic programs with varied histories of placing student-athletes in different professional sports leagues. The next section focuses on academic literature as it relates to the research questions set forth earlier in this chapter.

### **Issue 1: Messages About Academic Success**

The first research question asks: *What messages do student-athletes receive about success in terms of academics? Who gave them these messages?* Numerous studies have investigated this issue with currently-enrolled student-athletes. The academic literature paints a picture of student-athletes as having low confidence in their academic abilities – a situation that is worsened by the culture of their athletic peers, the opinions of their

non-athlete peers, and their professors' reactions to their presence in class and their requests for help. This seems to drive student-athletes into abandoning academic pursuits, something they do not feel competent in, and focusing mainly on the game, where their competence is recognized and praised. Student-athletes enter college with the hopes of being viewed as competent or excellent both in their sport and in the classroom, but after encountering negative opinions regularly about their academic performance, many choose to focus exclusively on athletic success and become detached from their classes. The repeated negative messages and doubts wear down their desire to do well in the classroom.

Adler and Adler (1985) looked at the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance among athletes involved in big-time college sports, namely football and men's basketball. Their findings demonstrated a shift over time from optimism to pragmatism and eventually academic apathy in student-athletes.

[M]ost athletes enter college with optimistic and idealistic goals and attitudes about their impending academic careers. However, their athletic, social, and classroom experiences lead them to become progressively detached from academics. As a result, they make pragmatic adjustments, abandoning their earlier aspirations and expectations and gradually resigning themselves to inferior academic performance. (Adler and Adler 1985)

This study also found that student-athletes perceived their professors as largely uninterested in student-athletes' athletic performance, aloof, and hard to approach about academic issues (Adler and Adler 1985). Those who tried to enroll beyond basic academic courses were surprised by the requirement that they had to go beyond memorization to succeed in the course, and many did not understand what was required of them. They were also left to sink or swim by their teachers and by their coaches in their classes, so they threw their self-investment towards athletic achievement instead of academic achievement (Adler and Adler 1985).

Watt and Moore (2001) found that often, student-athletes have very little control over their class choices or their schedules. According to Adler and Adler (1985), the content of classes was often dumbed down for the players, who did not get to choose their coursework – their coaches chose it for them. Watt and Moore reinforce the idea that coaches or counselors choose the athletes' coursework, but did not discuss the content of the courses and whether material was dumbed down or kept the same across all students.

According to Benson (2000), athletes perceived their academic advisors as choosing “easy classes” without finding out if they wanted to take them or wanted a more challenging class, and reported that student-athletes perceived their teachers not taking attendance as a message that they didn't really need to show up to class. She found that black student-athletes, specifically football players, perceived college academics as unimportant relative to college athletics. The players also received implicit and explicit messaging that they were not expected to be intellectually capable or do well in school.

These messages began during the recruiting process in high school, well before the students even arrived on campus. Student-athletes also perceived teachers as not caring whether they were present in class or not. They also perceived the teachers as “pushovers” when it came to getting extra-credit work (Benson 2000).

Aries and her colleagues (2004) suggest that student-athletes report greater difficulty in being taken seriously by their professors due to their student-athlete status, relative to students who were members in other groups. They argue that student-athletes’ peers constantly question the student-athletes’ academic competence, due to their status as student-athletes. They also found that in a self-assessment of learning skills, athletes scored lower than non-athletes on a range of learning skills, including writing, foreign language ability, analytical ability and quantitative ability (Aries et al. 2004). This suggests that the role of athlete is the student-athletes’ master status to their professors and peers, and this master status is stigmatized as being less competent in the classroom compared to non-athletes.

## **Issue 2: Messages About Athletic Success**

The second research question asks: *What messages do student-athletes receive about success in terms of their sport? Were they encouraged to focus on athletics in the hopes of a professional sports career, or were they guided toward academics? Who gave them these messages?*

Literature that focuses on student-athletes examines them as students only, rather than as athletes, which many respondents suggest is the opposite of how student-athletes are viewed when they are in school. This means that at least one part of their role is

ignored in the literature. Messages about what “success” looks like on the field or the court are often left out of such literature. However, there are several examples of these messages in current academic literature.

For example, in the Adler study, one of the main messages that student-athletes received from coaches was an emphasis on the increasing commercialization and professionalization of their sport. Student-athletes who had played their games because they loved the game now found that their sport had become an occupation. Student-athletes reported that their coaches often pressured them with messaging about the coach’s financial standing and how, “[i]f they don’t win, they may get the boot, and so they pass that pressure onto [sic] us athletes” (Adler and Adler 1985).

Student-athletes also reported pressure from teammates to focus on the sport first. Gayles (2009) reported that student-athletes who live together are “socially segregated from the general student population,” which creates a “peer subculture” in which interest in academics was ridiculed, while the athletic dimensions of athletes’ lives were played up and emphasized. Although Aries and her colleagues (2004) disputed that this is an across-the-board problem, and may be limited to certain groups of athletes rather than generalizing to all student-athletes, Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991), as well as Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992), provided a strong argument that the norms of behavior and problems created by the student-athlete culture should qualify student-athletes to be considered nontraditional students, akin to students who work full-time in addition to their coursework.

Comeaux and Harrison (2011) reported that student-athletes are focused more on establishing a reputation and identity as athletes in their sports, and that their personal relationships influenced their commitment to their sport – as respect and validation rose, so did sport commitment.

### **Messages From Significant Others: Those Who Are Close, Matter**

Beamon (2010) argues, “Sports sociologists have noted that family, including parents and siblings, is the earliest and most influential socializing agent into sports participation, and the current study confirmed this. Several respondents noted the clear emphasis on athletics in both their immediate and their extended families” (2010: 288).

The interviews in this chapter suggest that for graduated student-athletes, the messages they receive from intimate others, such as their immediate family or significant others, play an important role in how they view the value of both sports and education. Respondents pointed to family, college teammates, and high school as influencing them to succeed academically and athletically, with most (14 of the 20) mentioning their family, especially parents, rather than siblings, as pushing them to succeed in the classroom. This is perhaps expected, as siblings would assume 1) the presence of siblings, meaning student-athletes who are only children would not have siblings, and 2) parents are who children learn from first, and so anything parents say carries a lot of importance. Tim, who played football at a Division 1-A private school in Northern California, explains:

The emphasis for my mother (she was the boss) was always school, she did not care about sports at all. Sports was a bargaining tool – it was a real

thing – she took me off of track because I got a bad grade on a pop quiz. I got an A in the class, but my mom meant business. She did it one more time in 7<sup>th</sup> grade with basketball. Growing up, I loved sports, and I got the message – if I wanted to play, I had to bring home the grades. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade I wanted to go to [Private University], and I wanted to get the grades for myself – they had the best of both worlds, top notch athletics and academics, and that pushed me to dominate on the field and in the classroom.

For Tim, sports were viewed as a reward for getting good grades, with the priority being on schoolwork and grades. Tim emphasized that the bad grade was on a quiz, not for an entire course, yet that was sufficient reason for his mother to remove him from the team. Tim’s interview shows how parental influence can affect how sports and school are viewed, and he mentions his high school as fueling his competitiveness in the classroom and on the field.

Similarly, Bob, who also played football at the same university as Tim, said his parents emphasized school over sports, “I couldn’t play until homework was done, and I couldn’t play if my grades slipped. They saw the importance of sports, but cared far more about grades. My family is all about schooling, so I had many influences [with respect to grades]. Ultimately, graduating was a bigger goal, although playing at the next level wasn’t far behind.” Jeff, who played football at a Division-1 A public university in Northern California, echoed these sentiments when he explained, “My parents knew I

loved sports and threatened to take them away if I didn't do well academically". The threat of having sports taken away by parents served as an incentive for some to keep their grades at a sufficiently high level. From a young age, the message of sports acting as a reward for grades being sufficiently high for someone in a position of power was sent. The difference is as children, the authority is parental and based on close ties and supervision, while in college, the authority is the NCAA and the coaching staff of each team. In both cases, the message of grades being a priority are sent, but sent from different parties.

Parents were not the only influence on student-athletes' grades outside of school; student-athletes' romantic partners also often cared about their grades as well. Mike, who played football at a Division-1 public university in California said "My wife, girlfriend at the time, pushed me very hard to get my degree within the five years of my athletic scholarship. My parents would check on me but had very little affect since they were too far away. My wife just wanted me to stay healthy while playing, success on the field wasn't as important to her." This was echoed by Alex, a basketball player at a Division-1AA public university in Southern California, who explained, "My girlfriend always pushed me to getting good grades and finishing my degree while playing ball."

Jared, who played baseball in North Carolina, highlights the importance of his teammates and maturity. He claims, "teammates held their own with grades. My teammates who were sophomores and up excelled pretty well in the classroom. The freshmen were just feeling it out and not working too hard." In doing so, he highlights

that there is a range of attitudes about succeeding in the classroom among his teammates, but what is interesting is that the newer students did not maximize their effort; instead that came after a year or so of getting used to being student-athletes. Mark, who played baseball in the Midwest, highlighted messages from his parents, coaches, and teammates as influencing him to succeed in the classroom, stating:

When I was 13, 14, I looked up to my coach – dad was my biggest role model – he was an amazing guy, we’d practice, and he’d talk to us about life after. He was huge in my maturation, especially during those years. He said you need to do your best to excel in whatever you do – if you don’t try in class, what makes you think you’ll try on the field? My parents took it bigger than that, and if I didn’t do schoolwork or chores, I would miss a game... In college, my role models in college were the head coach and pitching coach. Pitching coach taught me the work ethic – he’d work us hard, and I loved it. As far as grades go, they were more important than in high school, but to a lot of guys – for 25%, very important, 50% were flip of the coin – “I’ll do more than a C average to be eligible, but if it’s less than a 3.0, then no big deal) I think 2.5 put you on academic probation. The last 25% were like “whatever,” I’m sure they were smart enough to pass, but cared more about playing/partying.”

In his case, coaches and parents consistently preached academic effort and excellence, while teammates had more of a mixed reaction, with some putting in more effort to their classes than others.

Vincent, a student who played hockey at a private school in New England, focuses on the roles coaches played in players maintaining their grades, noting:

Grades were very important as if you didn't meet a certain GPA set by the coaches, you could not play. So, obviously, you had to take your grade seriously and coaches would randomly check classes throughout the year to make sure that you were attending, and if you were caught not in class, not sitting in the first three rows, or wearing a hat in class, you would face some sort of punishment. All the guys on the team knew they had to take classes seriously and attend or you basically would not play.

Alex, who played football at a Division-1A public school in the Pacific Northwest, said that coaches "weren't that strict – if you missed class or an assignment, they would punish you, but they wanted us to play. They would have us do extra running/conditioning if we missed class and were caught." This contrasts with Mark, who says coaches emphasized academic success, but did so in a positive manner. The message of maximizing effort and achieving good grades was preached, but he did not mention punishment short of academic probation if grades were below a certain threshold.

Alex, Mark, and Vincent both highlight the roles that coaches can play in emphasizing grades, but that role was limited. While coaches can check on student-athletes attending classes and their grades, any discipline the student-athletes faced is limited to either extra work during practices or by limiting playing time. While there is

the incentive of participating in games, which can potentially influence whether a player would be seen by professional scouts, neither punishment – reducing playing time or increasing exercises - ensure that grades remain at a high level, and their comments suggest that athletic eligibility is the baseline that coaches emphasize. Coaches enforce compliance with grade-point average through coercion, either through additional exercises, which players do not enjoy, or through reducing playing time, which hurts players both in the interim as players want to compete, as well as in the future as there is less tape for professional scouts to evaluate them with, and players are stigmatized for missing games for any reason other than serious injury or personal or family matters. Thus, a student missing games due to low grades may be viewed as a disciplinary issue or as being unable to balance the responsibilities of academics and athletics, and that may warn other teams to stay away from said player. Rather than viewing struggling academics as a price paid for academic success, the label applied suggests a level of immaturity on behalf of the player, especially if the label is applied repeatedly. A student-athlete missing a game or two for academics may be viewed as lazy or problematic, with no context offered for why a student's grades may be lower than desired.

Alex further explains, “It’s not like our teammates were pushing each other to go to class or get better grades – we had the coaches and the department down our throat about grades, so players weren’t on each other’s cases. The guys who were slacking off had extra study hall hours, and some guys had people showing up to their apartments telling them to go to classes.” Alex highlights the idea of study hall hours being offered for student-athletes who need to raise their grades, as well as highlighted surveillance –

not only are student-athletes watched on the field and in the classroom, but run the risk of personal home visits by university personnel if they are caught missing classes. Rather than viewing teammates not emphasizing academics as a sign of apathy, this was viewed as a sign of camaraderie among teammates. For them, if the boss is already on someone's case, why should they have more people, especially teammates, asking about classes? While one way of viewing teammates' lack of response to their peers' struggling grades as them not caring, another way of understanding it is a response to constant surveillance, and instead of adding another layer of surveillance, their response is an empathetic and understanding apathy of sorts. Student-athletes know when their teammates are struggling with classes, but are sympathetic as they know coaches act in a panoptic fashion, keeping tabs on who attends classes and is on top of their grades, and so they feel less need to be extra eyes for the coaching staff themselves.

### **Structural Support Offered & Perceptions of Teammates' Successes and Attitudes in Class**

Athletic programs offer tutoring to athletes, and while coaches care about academic success to some extent, what plays a big role is perceptions of teammates' successes and attitudes towards academic success. While coaches may offer support programs in terms of study halls, and provide surveillance of their players, they do not allow their players to miss practices, even if the missed practices are to accommodate class requirements. Thus, players are offered many sticks if their grades slip, but few carrots or rewards for maintaining high grades.

The student-athletes interviewed in this chapter had specific perceptions of their teammates' successes and attitudes in the classroom. A common theme among them was reporting at least half of their teammates, if not more, as taking their studies seriously and noting no conflict between succeeding academically and athletically. Some interviewees mentioned a split among their teammates, that is not roughly equal, between those who take their studies seriously and those who do not, typically with more student-athletes caring about academics than being apathetic. These interviewees place themselves in the camp that did not take academics seriously at the beginning of their college career, but as they advanced through college, they placed more importance on succeeding in the classroom. However, teammate perceptions were mentioned as important influences after family and romantic interest, suggesting that while spending time with teammates and seeing their attitudes can influence a player, who matters most are people close to the student-athlete as a person – family or romantic interest. Jeff, a football player at a Division-1 public university in California, explains:

The majority of my teammates did well and were great students. My coaches always did class checks and checked our notes from class. They made sure we gave them our course syllabus and kept us accountable for assignments. It took me two or three years to take my academics serious. Once I got the hang of it, I did well. I struggled initially and found it difficult to manage my time. To be eligible, you needed to maintain a 2.0 GPA (C average) **Most of the guys took their academics serious.** The ones that didn't usually became ineligible or dismissed from school...**I**

**would say 85% of the team was serious and cared about school. The other 15% was more concerned with football.** Initially, I was part of the 15% and just wanted to schedule classes that I knew weren't that difficult.

Mark echoes this when he says that roughly half of his teammates could either care or be ambivalent about their classes, and about one quarter of them not caring beyond eligibility. Mike, who played football at the same school as Jeff, explained that, “To be eligible, I believe cumulative GPA (grade point average) had to be 2.0 (meaning C-average) and quarter grades were the same, 2.0. I know some circles of teammates had school as first priority, while the majority of the team valued football much more. There were a few that didn't care about school at all but they don't last too long, so the common theme is good grades off season and bad grades during season.” The idea of maintaining the 2.0 for eligibility was a common thread, as were perceptions of teammates’ attitudes toward grades. Other interviewees also mention taking easier courses while in season to maintain eligibility, rather than getting bad grades in season and compensating with higher grades during the off-season. This suggests that while the NCAA discusses cumulative grade-point averages, players can improvise a way to maintain a high grade-point average while they play by taking easier classes, and take more difficult or rigorous classes in the off-season.

If messages received from family and significant others can be viewed as informal motivation and social control, then the formal motivation student-athletes receive and formal social control they are subject to revolve around the need to maintain at least a 2.0

grade point average (C) to maintain academic eligibility and scholarships. Few of the interviewees mentioned their coaches having a higher-than-minimum GPA for eligibility, suggesting that for these coaches, eligibility is the goal, and anything above it is acceptable, but not emphasized.

Interviewees who played football and basketball mention the 2.0 baseline exclusively, while those in other sports mention having team-specific grade-point averages that were substantively higher than the NCAA threshold. For example, Al, a baseball player from a Division-1A public school in the northwest, explained that on his team, “Grades were very important; team GPA was very highly stressed. A team GPA of 3.0 was a team goal.” Brendan, who also played college baseball at a Division-1A public school in the Midwest, explained that:

Grades were extremely important to our coaches in college. Not only did good grades ensure that we were gonna [sic] be able to play baseball, but it also made our coaches look good if their players had good grades. We had mandatory study hall hours every week, along with tutors for certain classes we struggled with. Big universities made it hard for a student to fail at school due to all the help they give you to make you successful.

Tim echoes Brendan’s sentiments, saying “it was all football all the time, but it was also all academics all the time. It was NEVER ‘you’re an athlete, we’ll let you skate by.’ It was academically rigorous, but we were expected to keep up. We had study halls, they helped us as much as possible... I don’t even think we had an issue with grades. I don’t remember anyone having trouble – we had tutors, we had all the support we

needed. I was on two different teams [football and track and field], never an issue.” This suggests that when coaches emphasize academics for their student-athletes, they do so in part out of practicality – making sure their players are eligible to play, and thus, offer the team the best chance of winning – or do so out of wanting to present themselves well publicly as coaching student-athletes who do well in their classes, and would offer the message that student-athletes are expected to excel in the classroom and on the field, with tutoring offered as a resource on campus.

### **When Class and Sports Schedules Conflict: The Role Scholarships Play**

Student-athletes mentioned being proactive when classes and practice or travel schedule overlapped. A common theme among interviewees was discussing any scheduling conflicts with instructors if travel meant missing a day of classes (or more) and making alternative arrangements if they missed an exam or a paper. While this may be attributed to wanting to portray a positive, responsible self-image, there are also practical considerations to this behavior. By discussing scheduling conflicts and making alternative testing arrangements, student-athletes portray themselves as responsible to their instructors, which could lead to greater leeway if need be, but it would also signal that they cared about academics – at least enough to maintain eligibility – and that could affect how both instructors and coaches viewed them. The student-athletes interviewed in this chapter did not mention encountering hostilities from instructors when they requested alternative testing dates/assignment due dates due to conflicts between academics and athletics, and this may be because being proactive gave their instructors a positive image

– one of student-athletes who care about succeeding in class – and may have contributed to a general positive, professional working relationship among student-athletes and their instructors. Rather than assuming that sports and academics are in constant conflict, being proactive allowed for both facets of being a student-athlete to work in tandem.

Given that athletic scholarships are the main avenue student-athletes have towards maintaining their academic and athletic careers, staying healthy while maintaining academic eligibility is crucially important. Jeff explains that “Grades were not important to me until I wanted a football scholarship. Prior to that, I was a below average student.” Alex echoes similar feelings, stating that “as long as grades earned are C or better, then coaches, presumably, were happy, and players could continue to get playing time.” Alex links his academic performance to his health, explaining that “my grades plummeted my sophomore season after I broke my leg. I wasn’t travelling with the team on the road, so I was either in bed all day or partying, because I knew I wasn’t playing anyway.” Having less supervision by his coaches and teammates led Alex to neglect academics, and he would eventually lose his athletic scholarship. He argues that if he had not been injured, he would have maintained higher grades, because there would have been incentive to keep the grades at eligibility or better levels, but once he realized his career would end from his injury, then the incentive to remain eligible disappeared, as he would not be able to play regardless of grade-point average.

### **Priorities: School or Sports**

Extant literature shows that student-athletes' relationships with others are an important factor in how they set their priorities between sports and schooling (Comeaux and Harrison 2011), and the findings in this chapter support this point. One part where it differs is that the literature discusses the role that academic counselors and advisers play in selecting student-athletes' schedules, but this was not echoed in my interviews. Instead, student-athletes mentioned the need to remain eligible academically in order to compete, and schedule their coursework accordingly.

The need to maintain academic eligibility affects how student-athletes schedule their classes. This need also affects how student-athletes prioritize their sport while in season, and explains why academics are prioritized during the off-season. While in-season, interviewees describe scheduling their classes around practice times. Out of season, players report taking more challenging courses or those related to their major, as there are no set practice or game times, and no travel for games or competitions.

This suggests that the structure of practices and games provides some support and framework for time management in terms of support from teammates and coaches, but academics were not necessarily prioritized while in-season. Instead, while in-season, the primary focus of coaches and players is winning, and student-athletes will do what they can to remain academically eligible, but have no incentive to go beyond that. During the offseason, without the constraints of practice, travel, and game times, athletes take more challenging courses as they can devote more time and energy to hitting the books in the off-season. Further, they mention their teammates' attitudes toward classes as being

important both for their own class choices as well as the general attitude of the team toward school.

Mike explains that “Class choices revolved heavily on practice schedule...off season is when we would take hard courses, and during season I always looked for electives or teachers that were recommended because of their understanding with athletes.” Mike’s comment suggests that courses taken are not based necessarily on academic interest in the course material, whether the course was major-specific, or because of the course schedule during the week. Rather, for Mike and others, professors’ attitudes and personality toward working with student-athletes took precedence. Having flexibility with things like due dates for assignments and exhibiting sympathy and understanding for student-athletes’ dual roles are things student-athletes value. Jared explains choosing his courses “based around practice time and having some down time, and Jason echoes this by explaining that “grades were largely secondary to playing time. No one was being evaluated on the field for their performance in the classroom. I think there was a broad spectrum of attitudes regarding grades and classes -- some obviously caring more than others.” Jason’s comment highlights that student-athletes are aware that people are paying tickets to watch them compete as athletes, rather than seeing them succeed academically as students. Given that, they care more about being able to play, as that is their primary source of performance evaluation, and academics might be an afterthought for some players. However, he also emphasizes that there is a range of attitudes, so that it is inaccurate and unfair to assume a universal student-athlete attitude toward academics. These three interviewees highlighted what virtually every interviewee

in this chapter mentioned: scheduling courses around practice times. This is a practical concern for student-athletes, especially those in team sports. Attendance at practice is mandatory, as players need to develop both individual strengths as well as work with their teammates. This means that any practices missed do not just affect individual student-athletes, they affect the team broadly because the team is forced to substitute a different, potentially less-experienced or less-skilled player, either in practice or in a game, and this places the team at a competitive disadvantage. Given that teams are comprised of student-athletes in various stages of their academic careers, it is not feasible to have all members of a team take the same classes during the season. However, practice times remain a constant constraint that student-athletes must consider, and so they schedule classes around their practices, knowing their participation in practice is expected daily.

Tim, who played football at a Division-1 private school in California, says his teammates cared about grades depending on what they were studying. He explains:

We had a handful of pre-med on the football team, and they took grades seriously because of wanting to attend med school. Eligibility never played a factor for 99.9% of football players, and our track guys – 1/3 of our guys were pre-med. We had engineers and scientists, everybody worked as hard in the classroom as they did on the field. We had both clever guys and smart guys: clever guys find a way to do well without putting in the same effort...they would figure out what classes to take with a high GPA, but with much less work.

Tim highlights teammates as influencing attitude toward succeeding in the classroom as well some of the pragmatic considerations student-athletes have. Tim highlights that some teammates choose less demanding classes while in season to maintain a high grade-point average. Taking courses that are easier in some shape or form, be it through instructor flexibility with test dates, ease of tests and assignments, or easier due to interest and being major-related are all considerations student-athletes have when selecting their schedules. This is due to the need to remain eligible while regularly practicing and competing. Student-athletes expend a lot of energy while in season as they train and compete, but have to do so while keeping their grades at a certain level (2.0 average). However, once out of season, the NCAA pays less attention to student-athletes' grades, as there are no games immediately a student-athlete could miss if their grades are not up to par, and so many student-athletes choose to take more difficult classes when they are in their offseason. Doing so allows them to expend more energy in the classroom, as there are no games for a given semester, and practices are less frequent. Student-athletes essentially must prioritize either academics or athletics in a given semester, but alternate between the two based on pragmatic considerations of academic and athletic eligibility.

Further, Tim focuses on course workload, not in terms of number of assignments and tests, but in terms of teammates' attitude in knowing where to maximize efforts and where to perhaps not be as intensely focused on academics. His distinction between clever and smart being based on effort put into classwork suggests that to be smart is both a matter of understanding the material and putting effort into classwork. On the other

hand, being clever means having academic competence, but finding classes that demand less work to have visible academic success (e.g. a high grade-point average) but without having to put the same amount of work or effort in. Being clever exemplifies rationalistic thinking – how to get maximum output or results from minimal input or efforts, or finding a nice balance between effort and results that keeps the student-athlete eligible. However, this way of thinking is needed, given the demands of maintaining a certain grade-point average to be eligible to play and receive an athletic scholarship. In order to do so, many employ this rationalistic thinking, not necessarily out of laziness, but out of getting the best results for their efforts.

### **Differences Between Easier and Harder Classes**

Student-athletes differ in how they schedule their classes and the rationale behind it, whether going with value-rational thinking and maximizing efforts in all classes due to interest in the material, or whether to go with instrumental-rational thinking in selecting some classes that allow for good grades earned with less than maximum effort spent. Most (12) of the student-athletes in this chapter emphasize they enjoyed taking courses in their major specifically, due to interest in the major and thus, its focal classes. Because of the interest in the material, the classes seem easier, because they are more willing to maximize efforts in order to learn more. However, four student-athletes interviewed in this chapter mention they did not consider any of their classes especially easy, whether in terms of interest or workload. In addition to course material, six of the athletes indicate

that a professor's openness to students voicing opinions in class made courses easier for them. George, who played football at a Division-1A university in California, explains:

Well I wouldn't say that any class was particularly "easy". Most of the classes I took involved interesting material and themes that made it "easy" to want to study and get involved in the class. My time management skills, which were already well-tested in HS were further honed at [School], which made it so that I rarely felt overwhelmed with my class load, leading to each class being relatively easy to handle and manage by my ability to devote the necessary time and energy.”

Thus, even though the workload and requirements for classes may not be particularly light, and the course material not easy, interest in the material fueled academic interest for George and others, and this made difficult classes seem easier, as the effort was voluntarily offered. Cory, who played hockey at a public university in New England, echoes similar thoughts to George when he explains, “Some of the easiest classes for myself were the classes that were in my major, psychology. I think the main reason for this was because I was very interested in the material so I enjoyed studying these topics.” For student-athletes like George and Cory, class difficulty is related to whether a class is in their major, thus fueling an interest in the topics of the class, rather than the reputation of the instructors, course schedule, or the ensuing workload. This highlights the importance of student-athletes selecting their majors individually, rather than having advisors or others choose for them, as classes in the major allow for more

voluntarily dedicated research on the part of the student-athletes, and this allows them to excel academically. George also highlights an aspect from high school that translates well to succeeding in college – developing time-management skills. Student-athletes have multiple time demands from their sport (practice time, weightlifting and conditioning time, travel time, and game time) as well as taking a full course load. Knowing how to manage one’s time and energy is paramount in order for a student-athlete to succeed in both of these roles.

Jeff has a different opinion on what made his classes easy, as he emphasizes the freedom to express opinions in the classroom:

Any classes that allowed me to form my own opinions were usually easy.

For example, if we were learning about theories or political views and asked to compare one to another, I always found it easy to back up my own belief or preference. It wasn't about workload necessarily. It was about how the information applied to me.

Like other student-athletes, Jeff does not focus on the workload for a class in determining how easy it is, instead choosing to focus on how comfortable he felt expressing his opinions in class and if course material was applicable to him.

Thus, this shows that while student-athletes may look to make their course schedules “easier,” what constitutes “easier” is defined differently, whether it is workload, instructor attitudes in terms of accommodating schedules and due dates, comfort in the classroom, or interest in the material. The next two sections

focus on how graduated student-athletes define success for themselves academically and athletically.

### **Defining Academic Success**

Just as student-athletes have different definitions for what makes their courses easy or difficult, they also define their successes differently, both in the classroom and in their sport. George found his college experience transformative, and explains the importance of earning a degree for him:

A college degree meant and still means a lot to me. Beyond the inscriptions and lettering on the degree itself, when I look at that hallowed piece of paper I am reminded of thousands of memories, both positive and challenging that resulted in my four years at [school] to be tremendously transformative, especially from a personal maturity standpoint.

Jeff echoes similar sentiments to George, explaining:

Given where I was raised, what I had seen & what I've been through...a degree was much more than a piece of paper. It gave me validity. That I wasn't just some gang member from LA. That I was competent and powerful. Capable of doing anything in the world if I put my mind to it. I don't think many my peers felt the same way about their degree as I did about mine. Only 3% of the student population was black, most were athletes. Even out of that 3%, most were not

raised by a single parent in Watts & Inglewood. Personally, my degree(s) means the world to me.

Student-athletes have immense pride not only in both their on-field successes and their successes in the classroom. While George highlights personal growth he noticed, Jeff compares social expectations based on how and where he grew up and outperforming them by earning his degree. Cory similarly emphasizes his pride in earning his degree because of his family background, stating:

I was determined to get my degree because my father and mother never went to college and I wanted to become the first in my family to graduate. I took a lot of pride in doing the best possible job I could in school throughout my studies with this in the back of my mind to make my family proud. As I look back on it some six years ago I believe my parents are really proud of me and my brother for graduating college, and being very successful because of the opportunities it has given us.

Like Jeff, Cory emphasizes the importance of his family and overcoming obstacles from growing up as sources of pride for earning his degree, and emphasizes the opportunities earning a degree affords him professionally.

While pride in achieving a college degree is a common theme, it is not universal. Alex, who played football at a Division-1 public university in Idaho, explains that for him, a college degree did not open as many doors professionally as he had hoped:

I think I was better off not going to college, but I do appreciate my experience – it’s a culture shock, and the friends I made were amazing, I had a few friends who played in the NFL. It kind of worked out, but I’m paying for it – I’m working a job where I get paid \$14 per hour (code enforcement for a home owners association), so I can go to school for my teaching credential.

While Alex has doubts about whether he should have attended college, he, like Mike, expressed interest in returning to school for an advanced degree in education. Similarly, other student-athletes interviewed in this chapter returned to school for advanced professional degrees in law and medicine, suggesting that they, like other undergraduates, used the BA/BS degree to springboard their professional careers. Alex is the only student-athlete interviewed in this chapter who expresses some hesitation or doubts about his college experience. Most mentioned their pride in earning the degree because of their families, suggesting that the family is a source of inspiration and amplify the message of earning a college degree, even if – or perhaps, because of – them not earning a degree and seeing how difficult life could be. Other sources of pride include personal growth and seeing the degree and education earned leading to a professional career, even if outside of sports. Significant others were mentioned alongside family, suggesting that those who are close to student-athletes personally, though not necessarily professionally, express more pride in the academic achievement of earning a degree. While coaches emphasize academic success, the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter did not mention their coaches or teammates as a source of pride for the degree. This does not imply that coaches or teammates are ashamed or apathetic about academic

success; rather, it highlights that those who are more intimately known by a student-athlete carry more weight in terms of pride in these achievements.

### **Defining Athletic Success**

The academic literature does not ask how student-athletes define success for themselves athletically, academically, or professionally. It assumes that the goal of all athletes is to win and to play sports professionally, but this is not explicitly discussed. Further, just as easiness of classes varied among interviewees, as did sources of pride for academic success, so did their definitions of athletic success. George explains what athletic success looked like to him:

My definition of athletic success was as varied as it was one singular percentage. My first goal was to not get cut from the team during week 1. I ended up finding myself in the starting lineup (...only through the grace of God, I can assure you!!). From then my goal became earning the starting spot and being placed on scholarship...As I talk through the varying stages of what I deemed to be success athletically, the singular metric of success that seemed to hang over my head as if a neon sign ever-illuminated was my field goal percentage. As a kicker, that number loomed over me with impending power and I was desperate to make sure it was "good"; before my senior year I deemed "good" to be above 85%.

As a kicker, George was in a unique spot, as he focused on an individual statistic within the context of a team sport. While other players certainly look at their stats, there are more components that go into how well a quarterback, receiver, or running back do, whereas for a kicker, their successes or failures are attributed solely to them. A wide receiver can have a poor game because their quarterback had a rough day, but for a kicker, no such understanding exists. As such, George defined his athletic success based on how many kicks he successfully made and whether he kept his scholarship. Cory suggests that for him, athletic success meant “[being] the best possible guy on the ice every night. It was not all about points but how I was going to make my team better and ultimately I would be successful.” While all student-athletes are competitive, neither George nor Cory defined their personal success by team record.

Through George’s answer, athletic success can be related to a financial incentive (i.e. receiving and maintaining a scholarship) that is related to on the field success (in his case, determined by his field goal percentage), but it also includes the idea of being a good teammate in addition to being a proficient kicker. This suggests that just as the idea of “athletic success” is multi-faceted and means more than statistics, although individual statistics are a metric of success. Cory’s answer, echoed by other interviewees, suggests that statistics are not always the best metric for defining success – the best player on the team may not show a lot of offensive success some nights, but may be instrumental on defense, and as long as the team wins, that is a successful game. For some, being successful athletically meant consistently giving their best efforts when playing, even if their individual statistics did not stand out.

## Discussion

Beamon (2010) asserts that “social imitation theory maintains that individuals learn roles and behaviors vicariously by observing them and their consequences.” (2010: 297) The student-athletes interviewed in this chapter were socialized to emphasize sports by their teammates, while their families and romantic or marital significant others emphasize academic success. While few of the interviewees mentioned their coaches caring about grades beyond eligibility, none of those interviewed said they felt pressured by coaches to prioritize athletics over academics. Student-athletes’ decisions about the balance between the books and the playing field are largely based on pragmatic considerations, such as taking harder classes in the off-season, as described by the Adlers. However, their intimate personal connections with family and significant others have an influence on whether they exercise that pragmatism or whether they emphasize athletic success over academic success.

Maturity and aging also appear to have some effect on increasing pragmatism and academic focus for some student-athletes; as they progress through college, sports’ importance diminished and putting a priority on getting good grades increased. This is related to receiving feedback about whether a professional athletic career is feasible, whether from coaches, scouts or teammates.

Most of the interviewees discussed participating in professional leagues as a big motivator for pursuing their sport, but again, intimate personal connections created pressure to finish school and get the degree. Having a major that interests them encourages them to focus on academics, as Cory’s comment about his interest in

psychology indicates. Apart from scholarships that allow student-athletes to remain in school and on the team, none of the interviewees mentioned money as a motivating factor for playing college sports. Rather than an immediate payday, student-athletes emphasize the hope of competing professionally following their collegiate careers, and the joy of their success and competence in the game, which motivate their athletic endeavors.

Virtually all (19 out of 20) of the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter are explicitly proud of graduating with a degree, and speak of their collegiate experience in reverent terms. However, this reverence seems to conflict with the idea of scheduling easy classes when in season, or figuring out which classes demand less work. This can be explained as student-athletes needing to be pragmatic when going through school, in terms of taking full course loads and working long hours both as students and as athletes, while at the same time being able to reminisce about the academic journey after it had been completed, and feeling proud in navigating both roles as intercollegiate athletes and as undergraduate students concurrently. Even student-athletes who may have been ambivalent about their grades at some point in their academic career discuss the pride they feel in graduating and earning a degree. Some of the interviewees discuss continuing their education, either earning a professional school (medical school or law school) degree or a graduate degree, and credit their experiences as athletes as getting them used to working long hours, dealing with high-pressure situations, assessing a lot of rapidly-changing information, and adapting to it or thinking quickly on their feet.

The student-athletes interviewed here report that intimate relationships, their majors, and having classes that interested them served as motivators to keep them

focused on academics. Additionally, student-athletes had to consider the timing of their classes both with respect to practices in-season and in terms of ease of maintaining their eligibility while in-season. The pragmatic adjustment of taking harder classes in the off-season makes sense, and colleges should investigate the possibility of structuring course loads such that these classes are offered in the off-season for student-athletes.

Gayles and Hu (2009) find that student-athletes who participate in academic-related activities in high-profile sports such as basketball and football do not reap the same gains as those who are part of low-profile sports, so different types of educational interventions may be necessary for student-athletes in high-profile sports. These and other educational policy suggestions will be discussed at the conclusion of chapter four, which compares findings from this group of student-athletes who have graduated to those who are currently in school.

**Figure 2.1 Index of Graduated Student-Athletes Interviewed for This Project**

<b>Player Name (in study)</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>NCAA Division/Conference</b>	<b>Transferred from JC</b>	<b>Professional Sports Career After College?</b>
Alex	Football	1-A/Big Sky	No	No
Bob	Football	1-A/Pac 10 (now 12)	No	Yes
Brock	Baseball	1-A/Big Ten	No	Yes
Cory	Hockey	1-A/Big East	No	Yes
Jeff	Football	1-A/Pac 10 (now 12)	No	No (but coaches high school now)
George	Football	1-A/Pac 10 (now 12)	No	Yes
Brian	Baseball	1-A/Pac 10 (now 12)	No	Yes
Patrick	Baseball	D-3/Allegheny Mountain Collegiate Conference	Yes	No
Peter	Soccer	D-3/Empire-A Conference	Yes	No
Mark	Baseball	D-2/Great Lakes Valley Conference	No	Yes
Jason	Football	1-A/Pac 10 (now 12)	No	No
Jeremy	Baseball	D-2/California Collegiate Athletics Association (CCAA)	No	Yes

Jared	Baseball	1-A/American Athletics Conference (AAC)	Yes	Yes
Joe	Hockey	1-A/Hockey East	No	Yes
Mike	Football	1-A/Pac 10 (now 12)	No	No
Tim	Football	1-A/Pac 10 (now 12)	No	No
Vincent	Hockey	1/ Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC)	No	Yes
Alex B	Baseball	1-A/Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Pac-10 (now 12)	No	Yes
Mario	Hockey	1/Summit League	No	Yes
Robert	Basketball	1-A/Pac 10 (now 12)	No	Yes

## Chapter 3: Current Student-Athletes

This chapter focuses on interviews with 16 current student-athletes. These athletes are competing in baseball, basketball, and track and field, and are at a variety of schools, ranging from Division 1-AA to Division 3. The differences in athletic divisions are based on the number of athletic scholarships available, with D-1A schools having the most scholarships available due to their football teams. Further, Division 1-A schools compete against one another regularly and are considered to be top competition, and typically play against lower-division schools early in their seasons in order to get younger players used to competing before facing off against tougher opponents. These schools' football and men's basketball teams bring in considerably more revenue than other sports at these schools, and bring in more money than lower-division opponents. To be compliant with Title IX, schools must offer an equal number of scholarships to female athletes as they do male athletes, and with football teams having upwards of 80 scholarship athletes in a given year, that means that there are at least 160 total athletic scholarships offered, and often there are more than that. However, typically the schools these interviewees come from do not offer football, and offer a more limited number of athletic scholarships. These scholarships are offered one year at a time, and are renewable based on athletic and academic performance, and are highly competitive given their scarcity.

I focus this chapter on how student-athletes scheduled their course schedules when their sport is in season and when it is out of season, how important grades are for

them and for their teammates, and what their teammates do if they struggle academically. I also explore what it means to be a student-athlete to them. The athletes interviewed in this chapter include nine women and seven men, and range from those in their first year of college to those in their fourth year. Almost half (seven of the sixteen) attended a junior or community college prior to transferring to a four-year university, and I discuss the similarities and differences in their experiences between the two types of colleges or universities attended.

### **Messages Received from Family and Coaches**

Like the graduated student-athletes in chapter two, virtually all the current student-athletes who were interviewed specifically mention their family as pushing them to succeed academically. The influential individuals mentioned are almost exclusively parents, with older siblings also being socializing forces in terms of academic success, regardless of whether the relatives had earned a university degree or not. Even if their parents are sports fans or had played collegiate sports themselves, they emphasize academic success, typically with sports as an afterthought. One notable exception is Stacey, who runs track for a Division-1 school in southern California, whose parents placed a heavy emphasis on athletic success because earning an athletic scholarship is a pathway to earning a college education.

In addition to family, interviewees mentioned that their coaches placed heavy emphasis on academic success, beyond maintaining eligibility, with a common theme of coaches reminding student-athletes that they are expected to be students before they are

athletes, and backing up this reminder by making accommodations for students who need to miss a practice due to academic obligations, while not punishing them for not showing up by reducing or eliminating playing time.

However, unlike the graduated student-athletes interviewed in chapter two, the interviewees in this chapter do not mention significant others, teammates, or friends as pushing them to focus on either school or on sports. This might be due to the differences in schools attended or sports played by interviewees, as track and field tends to be more individualized than football or basketball, for example. One possibility is that the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter may not have been in a romantic relationship that influenced how they viewed school and sports at the time of the interview. Instead, the current student-athletes discussed in this chapter focus heavily on messages from parents and coaches as influencing and shaping their attitudes toward school and sports.

### **Differences Between Junior College and Four-Year Schools**

Seven of the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter report attending a two-year junior or community college prior to transferring to a four-year university. The differences that challenge interviewees center on the differences in campus sizes, physical issues with campuses in terms of classroom accessibility both from athletic facilities as well as general layout of the campus, the differences in 10-week trimesters as opposed to 15-week semesters, as well as differences in academic rigor or difficulty between the schools.

Five of the seven interviewees who attended community college prior to transferring report that they found the junior or community colleges more difficult for them than the four-year schools they attend. Cass, who runs track and field in both a community college and at a Division-2 public university in southern California, remarked, “As you get higher in your education, you zero in on a focus. It's nice to focus on topics that interest you as opposed to studying a little bit of everything.”

Transferring to a four-year school also offers student-athletes the opportunity to focus on courses related to their major. This allows student-athletes a better chance to succeed more in the classroom at the four-year university than at the junior college, where they take general education classes in order to transfer to a four-year school. In addition to being able to focus on material they view as more interesting, as it was part of a major they chose, some interviewees mentioned a noticeable difference in attitude from their instructors.

Ryan, who ran track and field at a junior college before attending a four-year public school in southern California, commented:

Maybe there (the junior college) they just grade too hard, they [were] more intensive in grading, because there is a competition for people trying to get out in two years, or people who ruin the curve. Here (the four-year school), the academics aren't easy, they require a lot of work, but I don't feel the same amount of pressure here that I did there. It might be class because I was taking my GE classes there, and my major courses here.

Ryan and others discuss junior college as preparing them to succeed academically after transferring. However, students like Ryan report feeling more pressure academically at the two-year community college than at the four-year school, and attribute it to differences in instructor grading but also the nature of the courses taken: general education courses, meaning a broader variety of courses, versus courses for his major, which would have a narrower focus. Ryan was not the only student-athlete who mentioned junior college as preparing them to succeed after transferring. Alicia, who plays soccer at a Division-2 public school in southern California, said:

The easiest part [of transitioning from a junior college to a four-year school] was playing soccer, even though it was for a new team. It's one of the things I know I have mastered so it comes quite easy to me. I feel that my junior college prepared me well enough for the course material and work here...I feel as though the material might be harder, but the amount is still quite similar to the workload I had at [the junior college].

Alicia's comment suggests that, like their non-athletic peers, student-athletes learn to navigate a college workload in terms of amount of work and type of work expected beginning at the junior college level, and face the challenge of taking courses outside their areas of expertise, rather than in their major. In junior college, all students are expected to expand their breadth of knowledge, while in the university major, students expand the depth of their knowledge in a specific field.

At the junior college level, attitudes from instructors go a long way in shaping how student-athletes perform in their classes, as Ryan alluded to. Given that this is

students' first experiences in college in terms of how courses are structured and the work necessary to succeed, all students – not just athletes – are navigating new demands and course structure, and messages from those in authority are taken seriously and internalized. Due to the novelty of the college experience, students may be somewhat susceptible to feeling pressured to succeed both in the classroom and at their sport, in addition to the desire to transfer to a four-year school. Thus, any messages coaches send this early in the academic and athletic career for these student-athletes may resonate loudly, and any negative remarks may sting and persist. This suggests labeling theory as a possible theoretical lens for understanding messages promoted and received. The theory suggests that a label applied to a person by an authority can shape how others view and react to them, and the label may become a master status – the overarching way they are viewed and treated. As such, if an instructor labels and treats a student-athlete as incompetent or as lazy with respect to their coursework, their peers may view them negatively, as the instructor has power and status in the classroom.

### **Pressures Student-Athletes Face**

The authorities that student-athletes are susceptible to are their coaches and their instructors, and negative messages can affect how student-athletes' teammates and academic peers may view them, and if internalized, may shape the amount of effort and energy student-athletes place into either endeavor. However, the quotes suggest there may be room for misunderstandings and miscommunication between student-athletes and instructors. Student-athletes may struggle academically, especially early in their careers,

not due to a lack of competence or effort, but because they face new challenges in terms of academic rigor and learning to schedule and manage their time differently. If a student-athlete's grades drop, then one possible reaction is to assume that the poor grades are reflective of a poor attitude toward classes, with a further assumption being that instead of focusing on classes, student-athletes focus exclusively on their sport. This generates a negative reaction from the instructor who voices this displeasure. Once the displeasure registers, a student-athlete may feel less motivated to work for an instructor who assumes the worst on them, and channel their energy into other classes and their sport. However, this reaction does nothing to help the student-athlete better understand the demands of college in terms of material and in terms of time management, and instead promotes the idea that a lack of academic success is solely due to laziness and/or incompetence. In reality, a more sympathetic approach from instructors as well as having support from others may help student-athletes find success in the classroom earlier in their careers.

Carol, who attends and runs track and field at the same Division-2 school as Alicia, says that "In [the junior college], you're focused on the next step of transferring out, but you're trying to shine so you can get recruited, get a scholarship. [At a four-year school], you're just trying to hold your spot, stay competitive. I feel like the junior college was really good with their levels of education."

A major difference between junior or community colleges and four-year universities appear is what student-athlete goals are at each institution. At the junior college level, the primary focus of athletes is transferring to a four-year university, either

based on location, scholarship availability, and/or athletic reputation. Location of a school may allow student-athletes to remain close to family or significant others, thus allowing them a chance to maintain an established support network, and in some cases, may offer the practical advantage of living at home while attending school, rather than having to pay room and board at a university or renting an apartment.

Scholarship availability may be the only way a student-athlete can attend a four-year university. These scholarships are typically one year in length, and are renewed at coaches' discretion. While many coaches rubber stamp scholarship renewals, student-athletes face the risk of having their scholarships revoked due to poor academic performance, or not renewed for the same reason or due to injury. However, these risks are worth the reward of the opportunity to earn a four-year degree. These scholarships offer student-athletes an opportunity to attend school without taking out an exorbitant amount of loans.

The athletic reputation of a school also affects decision-making, but that is for a small group of student-athletes who play sports that offer a professional career following college. Typically, the reputation is based on recent athletic history as well as athletic conference, not just being Division 1-A. The pragmatic consideration is exposure on television, as the more times a team is televised, be it nationally or regionally, the better a chance a student-athlete has of being seen by professional scouts. These scouts attend games as well as use video, so attending a school with high visibility can – but does not necessarily – increase a student-athlete's chances of playing professionally.

Once a student-athlete transfers to a four-year university, their academic focus shifts from worrying about transfer requirements to focusing on their major and graduation, and athletically their focus shifts from transferring to either competing for fun or competing for a professional career. In all cases, student-athletes worried about maintaining NCAA eligibility with their grade point averages, while some had to worry about maintaining team eligibility if the coach demanded a higher GPA. Some student-athletes interviewed compete with few, if any, professional aspirations, both in terms of succeeding athletically and academically, but do so both out of the desire to maintain a scholarship to attend a four-year university as well as enjoying competition and being part of a team, representing a school.

### **Selecting Course Schedules: The Role of Academic Counselors**

Roughly half (seven out of 16) of the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter explicitly mentioned advisors or counselors as helping them pick their course schedules. Brendan, who plays baseball at a major Division 1-A university in the Midwest said “Every sports team had what we called our financial adviser. This person sat down with us and helped us pick out which classes were good for us to take. Classes that educated us and classes that would go towards our major as well.” In this sense, the advisors advised, but didn’t choose the specific classes that student-athletes would take. Brendan emphasizes that the classes that are advised are “good for them to take” in terms of counting toward fulfilling major requirements, rather than classes that are easy to inflate grade point averages, which would allow student-athletes to maintain eligibility while allowing them to focus exclusively on their sport. This approach allows student-athletes

to graduate in a timely manner, enabling them to earn a degree while competing for their universities.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Julie, who ran track for a Division-1A school in Southern California, when she said, “I just go to my academic advisor, and she tells me what classes I need, and I’m told by my coach which hours to keep free for practice, and I build my schedule around that.” Julie’s quote raises the tension faced by athletes of needing to keep certain hours free for practice while taking classes toward her major. While an advisor can suggest classes for the major, they do not have control over the times these courses are offered. This means there are multiple factors student-athletes must account for, similar to non-athletic peers who work in addition to school, in that timing of classes, not their mere availability, affects how schedules are combined. Classes are chosen due to fitting a student-athlete’s major, but timing a further consideration is whether class time clashes with time for practice, as time becomes rather regimented for student-athletes.

Carol, who ran track at both a Division 1A school in Nevada and a junior college in southern California before transferring to a division-2 school in southern California, said:

At [the Division 1A school], they [counselors] tend to be nicer to athletes – the counselors pick your classes, and they tend to help athletes pass classes. The classes picked are weird, really easy online classes. I think they do that to keep your focus on athletics. Here everyone is fair toward athletes, there’s not that

other standard for athletes. They want everyone to pass, but they have that standard... The biggest difference (between school) was levels of focus.

Advisors' or counselors' goals were not just making sure student-athletes would be on pace to graduate in four years, but also maintain a high enough grade point average in order to maintain academic eligibility to compete. What stood out is that advisors, though formally serving the same function and role regardless of school and division, helped tailor athletes' academic schedules around their athletics and made sure that athletes would remain eligible by enrolling them in easier classes, while at lower athletic levels, advisors would help athletes choose classes, but would not necessarily enroll them in easier courses solely for the sake of maintaining eligibility. Instead, at the non-Division 1-A level, the emphasis was on academic achievement, specifically graduating within four years.

Ryan, who ran track for a junior college and continues to compete for a Division-2 school in Southern California, explained:

Counselors at both schools – they gave me a paper on how, once to figure out what major I was going to specify in, they gave me a paper on what courses to take. At the JC, I took courses to transfer out, and those are different than if you are going for an AA. I stayed more into getting my (general education courses) done, so when I transferred I could focus on my major.

Ryan asserted that the counselors he has encountered are rather hands-off, giving general guidelines on courses to take, but ultimately leaving the class scheduling decision

up to the student-athletes themselves. This approach gives the student-athletes more oversight over their own course schedules by highlighting courses to take both for transferring as well as for fulfilling major requirements. This approach is contrasted with the advisors or counselors at Division 1-A schools, who schedule each athlete's classes based on their athletic schedule, making the athletics the focal point of the pragmatism and the goal for student-athletes, rather than focusing on graduation or academic success. Ryan suggests that his courses are based on what his academic goals are – he started by taking courses that would allow him to transfer to a 4-year school, and after transferring, he focuses on taking classes for his major. Thus, his academic goals are highlighted and are what advisors focus on, rather than what courses would be easiest to maintain NCAA eligibility or on what his practice schedule is.

Some interviewees emphasize their education, choosing their classes first, irrespective of sports schedule. Vanessa, who cheers at a Division-2 school in southern California, said, "I would let my classes determine my cheer schedule – going into cheer, I wanted to graduate within two years, and everyone had a crazy schedule, but we met up three times a week. Sometimes we had two practices a day, so if you made one, you didn't go to the other, which I thought was fair. For me, classes came first, then cheer." Vanessa emphasizes her academic goals when choosing her schedules, and works her sport around her academic, rather than the other way around. Cass, who runs track at a Division-2 school in Southern California, explains that she tries to schedule breaks throughout the day:

I try to get a gap in between classes. We have practice in the morning, afternoon, then weight room, and we have to build in time to train or see the trainers. I try to have evening classes but it doesn't always work. It's an individual sport so you can run on your own, which is my plan B if classes conflict with practice.

Cass is the first one to mention practicing her sport on her own time, which may be because with track there are more individual events, so team coordination is not as key as it would be for sports like football, basketball, soccer, or baseball. In other team sports, while there are individual components (such as stretching, weight lifting, or other exercises), there is much more coordination needed, meaning a student-athlete needs to work with their teammates, while for track and field, a runner can run on their own time away from coaches and teammates. Ryan also mentions trying to schedule breaks in his day between classes and practicing:

My first year at [junior college], I tried to do morning classes because high school, wake up early, but then I realized no, it got me really tired, and professors don't care if you show up, so I switched to night classes after practice. I was definitely tired in those classes – I fell asleep in one of my classes. Practice ended at 2:30, class was at 3, and I had to change and find something to eat in that window, but it was something I had to get used to, and after 2 weeks, I got used to it. I found out that taking classes later in the day or evening worked way better for me, and it was better for me than taking classes in the morning and hating life.

Ryan echoes part of the academic literature when he says he feels that professors did not care if students did not show up. However, instead of internalizing this as professors not caring about student success, he understands this as a way of choosing classes that do not conflict with his practice schedule and allow him to get some breaks throughout the day. He also hints that being awake and attentive in class is unrelated to course material, workload, or instructor's attitude, but instead has a practical component – does a student-athlete have enough time to rest between practice and classes, and can they get enough rest each evening. An instructor sees a student-athlete asleep in class and may assume that it is due to boredom or apathy, when the reason for the sleep has nothing to do with course material and everything to do with demands on a student-athletes time.

Al, who plays baseball at a Division-2 school in the Midwest, explained that for him and his teammates, class schedules are “pretty structured by the college, as for specific professors for required classes, primarily through older teammates, asking who they recommend.” He was the only interviewee to explicitly mention asking teammates for advice on which professors they recommend, with the school providing structure for the courses that he needs to take to graduate. While Al mentions asking teammates for advice with classes, he does not ask friends or peers who were not on the baseball team. This suggests the team schedule takes precedence over everything, and who better than teammates who have taken classes previously to advise on difficulty of classes while playing baseball, as they have that additional responsibility that non-athletes do not have to be concerned with. While other peers would certainly be able to offer their own opinions on course workload or offer insights on instructors, they may not understand the

same time and energy demands on their schedules that Al's teammates would, and given that teamwork is key, practice has to be scheduled when the team can work together. Al could lift weights or go to batting cages on his own time, but needs to work with his teammates in order for the team to succeed and for that to happen, schedules have to allow for some set hours of practice.

Like the graduated student-athletes discussed in chapter two, some current student-athletes mentioned that they choose their courses based on when their sport is in season, with tougher, more rigorous courses taken when the sport is in its offseason, and easier courses taken during the competitive season. Stacey explains, "I usually do my easiest classes the last quarter (spring) when we're in season, or my elective classes. For the other quarter, I'll do my major classes or the harder classes. The only time I struggle with managing in-season classes is when it came to Spanish – it's so time-consuming, and it's a foreign language so it was hard to understand." This sort of scheduling allows Stacey and other student-athletes who create their schedules the same way to maintain academic eligibility while focusing her energy on her sport (track), and when the sports is not in its competitive season, she takes courses that are related to her major and may be more work-intensive. This allows her to devote her energy to her classes when she does not have to compete against other schools, and allows her to focus on her sport when she is in season.

Alicia explained that when creating her course schedule, she also focuses on when her sport is in-season, saying "I go based off my soccer season, so since it's in fall, I tend to take my easier or less difficult courses in the fall and my harder courses in the spring to

have more time to study and focus.” This was echoed by Cass, asserting “I choose my classes according to my practice and work schedule.” In Cass’s case, because she is not receiving an athletic scholarship, she may work off campus without that violating NCAA eligibility rules. This was something echoed by other Division-2 athletes, adding yet another constraint on their time and energy. Not only do these student-athletes practice and compete in their sports while juggling coursework, some also work outside the university. While this opportunity exists for them as a chance to earn money while competing for their schools, it comes at the cost of their time and energy. This is contrasted with Division 1-A student-athletes, who are prohibited from working off campus, due to fears of undue influence on their athletic careers (e.g. the fear of players being influenced to perform a certain way in games due to gambling considerations, or players being paid for their celebrity status rather than for actual work performed).

The pattern of taking easier classes in season and taking tougher or major-related courses out of season appears to be a regular pattern among both former and current student-athletes, suggesting that the desire to remain academically eligible is a guiding force in choosing classes. Given the variety of motivations and strategies for choosing classes, the question becomes how important grades are for student-athletes.

### **Importance of Grades for Student-Athletes Themselves**

The student-athletes interviewed in this chapter repeatedly stressed earning high grades as a form of academic achievement matter a great deal to them, and they emphasized academic success over the possibility of a professional sports career following their college years. Given that not everyone works, and everyone is currently a student, it is expected that grades would be a focal point. Stacey, who runs track and field, said, “[Grades] are very important now. Once I hit my second year, grades became really important. The idea of grad[uate] school and feeling good about having good grades, feeling accomplished.” She draws a sense of satisfaction from doing well academically, and set a goal for herself of attending graduate school. Her comment suggests that student-athletes are not just focused on success in the interim, but some look longer-term, and do not only focus on future athletic success.

Ryan and Mike from chapter two echoed similar goals, as both discussed the importance of higher education. Ryan explained, “The way I see it is my parents never went to college, I don’t think they even graduated high school. My sister went to a trade school, then went to JC, but didn’t finish. At least I got my Associates Degree, now I’m working on my Bachelors, and am thinking about my Masters, but don’t know what I want to get in. Ultimately I want to teach.” Mike mentioned that as a student-athlete, his focus was on football constantly, but is currently in the process of earning a Masters Degree in education, while Ryan has his goals on academics more so than track and field. Where they differ is that Mike had a singular focus on his sport, and it took his significant other to focus on education, while Ryan has higher education as his goal, with sports

being an afterthought, and without mentioning a significant other as a prodding or motivating figure. This may be due to the differences in athletic divisions and sport both play, as Mike played football at a Division-1A school, while Ryan runs for a Division 2 school, meaning that due to athletic division and sport of choice, Ryan has less of a chance of running professionally than Mike has playing football professionally. Mike had a stronger chance of playing football professionally, given his sport, school, and availability of professional career. Conversely, Ryan faces less opportunities to run professionally, and that may help him focus on academics even while competing.

Andrew, who runs track and field at a Division-2 school in Southern California, says:

They're (grades) important, but I don't like school, I guess, it's just boring to me. Get rid of GE's (general education courses) teach us things we need to use in real life like how to do taxes, like how our government is, not in terms of the history books, but the reality of our country, racial issues, discrimination and all that, and how to work with people who are different than us – we live in such a diverse country, we should be able to work with anybody. Maybe take more language classes, we're the only country where we expect everyone to speak English, other countries learn English and speak their native language. When we do learn math and measurements and all that, using the metric system instead of inches and feet. In high school, we are all used to feet, but in college they use meters.

Andrew is interested in earning high grades, but at the same time, he is not enjoying school. He wants the results (high grades), but also wants education to be

structured differently, with more of an emphasis on practical skills, as suggested with the learning multiple languages, learning to do taxes, and using the metric system. In addition to this practical knowledge, Andrew wishes education would emphasize a critical perspective toward how the government operates, and feels like there is a disjunction between what is taught in school and what is useful in life after school. While he is critical of the content of his education, he still wants to earn good grades to remain academically eligible to compete as well as to graduate.

These are concerns that can be hidden behind a façade of apathy or ambivalence, which would give the impression that Andrew doesn't care about his grades. However, what he suggests is a different emphasis in his classes, going from more theoretical to practical or applied knowledge, but at the same time, he wants to earn high grades, so he does what he can to succeed in courses he feels do not serve him well. This leads to a form of Mertonian ritualism, as Andrew has accepted earning high grades as a goal in and of itself, but he feels like the classes he takes won't prepare him well, so to some extent he goes through the motions as a student, doing enough to earn good grades despite his dissatisfaction with course material. This also suggests that students like Andrew may wish to have a different point of emphasis in their education than their schools offer, and this disjuncture may lead to apathy about learning the material. At that point, academic eligibility becomes the primary concern rather than earning high grades or on focusing on course material.

Four of the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter specifically mentioned earning a 3.0 (B) grade point average, with John, a basketball player at a Division-2

school in southern California, explaining “I get down pretty hard on myself when I receive anything less than a B. If I get less than that, then I feel like I failed and should have tried harder”, while Alicia said, “I try to make sure that I at least get a 3.0 for the semester and am very disappointed when I’m not able to accomplish it.” While these were the only interviewees who mentioned a specific grade-point average that they consider as “good,” most mentioned they want “good” grades, but did not offer a specific range as to what they considered “good”.

Cass explains the challenges she faces in running track competitively while trying to earn good grades, stating that “grades are super-important to me. I’ve tried to maintain a good GPA. But it’s hard, especially during indoor track because of the travel. Indoor, because we go to New York, we fly out Wednesday or Thursday, so I’d miss those classes, and also Tuesday to pack, and you’re nervous about the meet so you don’t study as much.” This highlights travel for competition as another structural challenge that student-athletes face. Some of the lengthy road trips for meets or games away from the school means missing more than one day of class in a given week. In addition to physical travel time by bus or air, the time spent on packing, travelling, and competing for one meet took her away from campus for almost a full week.

This travel schedule is compounded by a lack of down time, as student-athletes are expected to focus and prepare for the meet or game at hand, rather than on their coursework. This means that their physical and mental energies are diverted away from school and on their athletic competition, and they have a very small window of time to

get coursework done when they travel for road games or meets. Cass is determined to maintain a high grade-point average, but says it is difficult balancing track and school. This suggests some role tension, as student-athletes may wish to succeed academically and athletically, but face repeated constraints on their time due to their role as athletes and the expectations associated with them competitively, and these constraints affect how well they can perform in their role as students. If grades are important to the student-athletes themselves, the next question is how important they felt grades are to their teammates and coaches – people with whom they spend a great deal of time.

### **Importance of Grades for Teammates and Coaches**

Twelve of the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter report that grades are important to their coaches, and that academic success is emphasized, sometimes at the expense of athletic success. Some mention that on rare occasions when a class obligation conflicts with practice time, their coaches tell them to attend class rather than participate in practice. Ryan explained:

To my coaches, very important, they want every student-athlete to get their degree. They are happy you can compete for the team, but they want you to take care of your business. As for my friends, it is important for them as well, but every now and then they would slack off or procrastinate, but in the end, it is important to them. We all share the goal of graduating and starting a career.

Most of the student-athletes interviewed in this chapter mention the academic goal of getting good grades as going hand in hand with graduating and starting a career,

but professional sports is not the career they aim for. Instead, having a non-athletic professional career is a shared goal, and being an athlete is viewed as a source of pride and enjoyment. While undoubtedly proud of their roles as athletes, this is not their overarching master status. Instead, they take pride in academic achievement. Similar sentiments, were echoed by John, who said:

Grades are very important to my coaches. They constantly emphasize that we are student athletes and not just athletes meaning that we need to put as much effort, if not more, in our studies. We have a midterm progress report and if we have C's or below we are required to do study hall hours and meet with tutors. Most of my teammates also emphasize the importance of grades.

What stands out is that at non-Division 1A schools, coaches make academics a source of emphasis, and would employ various tactics to ensure that their players are not only NCAA-eligible but are achieving grades that are better than eligible, informing their players that as student-athletes, being a student is a critical component of their identity, and not to neglect it for the athlete part of their identity.

In order to help student-athletes succeed, study-hall hours are a common theme with student-athletes, with most saying that while it took a 2.0 (C) average to remain eligible for NCAA competition, coaches schedule mandatory study-hall hours for students whose grades are below a higher threshold, typically 2.7 or 3.0 (B- or B). These hours are held so that student-athletes can get their coursework done or meet with tutors, all in an attempt to raise their grades. Seven of the student-athletes mentioned that as long as they attend study-hall hours, they are allowed to practice with teammates, but if their

grades are not up to par, then they are not allowed to compete in meets or games, and they risk having reduced practice time, which would further reduce future playing opportunities. Study hall attendance hours are monitored by both coaches and advisors, with some, but not all, focusing on the work done by student-athletes in this time frame. However, not all coaches emphasize academic success equally. Andrew, who runs track and field, explains:

Our coach is constantly reminding us that we are students first before we are athletes. So I would say grades are important to them. They check on us individually during progress report time/eligibility checks. Due to the fact the track team is so big it's hard to keep track individually. Our event coach didn't really ask about our grades as much as to make sure we were at least passing.

In a sense, the head coach cared more about student-success, but the event coach, who worked closer with Andrew, focused on maintaining eligibility as the academic goal, rather than having a higher standard for grades.

While some coaches, such as Andrew's, emphasized academic success, this message was not universal. Two student-athletes, both in track and field, explained their coaches' approaches to student-athletes who struggle with their grades, anonymously citing their own teammates and coaches as examples. Because it is rather sensitive to talk poorly about one's teammates and coaches, and especially given the power differential between coach and athlete and potential consequences, I omit even pseudonyms from these quotes:

It's kind of bad, I think the track and field program has one of the worst GPA's on campus. My coaches give us progress reports for professors to sign off. I don't see a big motivation for academics for my teammates. The distance team, we have a lot of upper classmen, so they're really close to graduating. I don't know if they're graduating, but they're not that serious about classes. It might be senioritis, but when I was on the team last year, but even the girls on the team didn't care about grades. It's a struggle, it's hard to balance both. (Anon. Student-Athlete 1)

For my coaches, grades are important, but it depends – sometimes if you're a good athlete and you don't have good grades, he'll give you more of a chance than if you're a not so good athlete and don't have good grades. We only need to have a 2.0 which isn't hard, so some people shoot for that, but I have some teammates who have 4.0's. If you're going for grad school or law school, you're focused. (Anon. Student-Athlete 2)

The discrepancy in how athletes are treated based on how successful they are on the field is a common refrain in football and men's basketball – big revenue-generating sports – but less so for track and field, soccer, and baseball. This is likely due to the difference in pay among head coaches, with those in football and men's basketball receiving higher pay than head coaches in other sports. However, when coaches feel the pressure to win, even in a non-revenue generating sport, some emphasize athletic success

and grant some leeway to students who may be struggling academically but are good at their sport.

This suggests that while coaches may want their student-athletes to succeed academically, their primary focus is on wins, as winning keeps them hired, not team-wide or athlete-specific grade-point average. If winning a game or performing better at a meet means allowing an athlete who is struggling academically to compete, then coaches will do that, barring the school, conference, or NCAA withholding that player's eligibility. Thus, while the spoken messages may mention academic success, pragmatically, coaches emphasize effort in sport for their student-athletes rather than on schoolwork. Student-athlete interviewees report that typically, teammates who struggle in the classroom also struggle at their sport. This suggests that student-athletes are not sacrificing academic performance for their sport, but are instead so it was not a case of sacrificing grades for athletic success. This is not viewed favorably by teammates, as it is viewed as doing the bare minimum to remain eligible and remain as teammates, but not doing more than that. One can understand this as apathy in one aspect of life spilling over to other areas.

### **Teammates Who Struggle Academically**

Brendan, who plays baseball at a Division-1 school in the Midwest, emphasized the positive image projected by the team earning high grades:

Not only did good grades ensure that we were gonna be able to play baseball, but it also made our coaches look good if their players had good grades. We had mandatory study hall hours every week, along with tutors for certain classes we struggled with. Big universities made it hard for a student to fail at school due to all the help they give you to make you successful. The attitudes of my teammates towards their grades are pretty mutual for the most part. When you are at a big university, you take pride in representing your school and team with good grades. So having good grades and being eligible is something my and my teammates all strive for.

Pride is earned not only through competing and winning games, but also succeeding in the classroom. Brendan's comment mentioned that some universities make it hard to fail because they offer structured support in terms of tutor availability as well as mandatory study hall hours. Having extra study-hall hours is a common theme that interviewees mention for teammates who are struggling in the classroom. Julie who runs track for a Division 1-AA school in southern California, explains what happens when some of her teammates struggled academically:

We did a study session if they were doing really bad. It was mandatory. We had to complete 3 study hours a week, but it wasn't like they necessarily studied. If their grades dropped, they were put on probation – our female coach put them on probation. We had academic cards that the professor filled out showing if you were coming to class and how you were doing...I think everyone struggles

academically – my grades aren't where I want them to be, even though I am eligible. Those who struggle academically take an academic redshirt and take a year off from track. I know some basketball girls who could practice but couldn't compete in the games. For us, you're allowed to practice but not compete, which is your punishment.

Alicia echoed similar thoughts, saying, "We have study hall hours that need to be completed for those who need the extra study time. I feel that these hours force us to take a step back and really dive into our work. It forces us to set aside time for our homework."

Student-athletes are given an opportunity to raise their grades, but if they do not do so, then they are placed on academic probation or are given an athletic redshirt designation, which allows student-athletes to practice, but not compete in games. This works as a punishment in that meets or games are where student-athletes can compete and potentially get noticed by professional scouts, depending on the sport. By limiting playing or competition time and relating it to grades, coaches use the study halls as a carrot to raise grades and redshirts or probation as the stick if grades are not sufficiently high. Some mention that some teammates emphasize academics over athletics, and transfer to new schools or leave the team in order to focus on academia. Cass summarized this by saying, "I think maybe three or four on the team are really driven to do well, and those who did well left the team. They left the team because they didn't like the environment, they wanted to be good in academia, and track was a distraction." Thus,

some students who transfer do so to focus on academics, whereas the assumption with transfers is that it is done due to concerns over playing time.

Seven of the student-athletes interviewed mentioned effort on their teammates' part as

being something they pay attention to in addition to grades earned. Al, who plays baseball, said:

I see that most of the athletes that care only about their grades (for eligibility) are not as good at their sport, but those who perform super low, they don't get to travel as much because they're not eligible. It depends on how bad your grades are – I've never been in that position before, I know a lot of people got kicked off the team for having 1.0 or lower. If you are consistently getting below a 2.0, there are problems.

What this suggests that even the 2.0 (C) grade-point level that the NCAA mandates for eligibility is hard for some student-athletes to achieve, and is was not an isolated student or one specific course affecting grade-point average, but instead hints at a systematic pattern. Given that Al plays at a lower-division school, it was a bit surprising to hear that so many struggled and were dismissed from the team due to poor academic performance. In addition to study hours, restricting travel was an option some coaches used to help student-athletes raise their grades. The thinking behind this is without the travel or game requirements, a student-athlete can focus on their schoolwork until they become academically eligible. The risk of this is that the student-athlete is less supervised during that week, and may feel isolated or shamed, and that may or may not help to serve as

motivation to raise grades. It eases some of the time demands with respect to the sport, but given that in some cases, they are still allowed to practice with their teammates, there is an unspoken expectation to practice and lift weights, even if they are not travelling. Thus, the travel restriction reduces, but does not eliminate, some of the time and energy demands from the sport on students, but comes so with the risk of stigmatizing a student-athlete who is struggling academically.

Student-athletes view their teammates who struggle in the classroom as doing badly in sports too. This suggests that student-athletes are not necessarily trading grades for athletic success or vice versa. Instead, those who struggle in one aspect are struggling in the other, and those who are doing well academically also tended to do well athletically. Effort was emphasized by most (nine) of the student-athletes interviewed.

Cass explains:

The team is split with those who take their grades very seriously and those who are smart, but very lazy with their study time and attending classes”, and the other saying “Mostly I think it's more of an effort issue. Reaching out to professors for extra help generally seems to get the job done. Professors are almost ALWAYS eager and willing to help out whenever possible. Being a small school also, we generally have teammates who have gone through the same class even with the same professor, so we have a good network there as well to reach out to.”

What stands out is that professors are not viewed as the enemy, trying to keep student-athletes from being able to succeed on the field. Instead, the idea of initiative is

introduced, with professors responding favorably to student-athletes who take time to ask for help. This suggests having to perform a different role – a student asking for help – rather than a student who does not care about their grades. Student-athletes not taking their grades seriously can be understood as either performing their role as an athlete to an extreme or not feeling comfortable with the role of a student who needs help, or some combination of the two. Ryan, who runs track and field, says some of his teammates feel that:

C's get the degrees – they would aim for a C average to remain eligible, even if that meant study hall. Some tried hard but struggled, because college isn't easy. I didn't get housing here, so I commute every day. But some of my teammates do live here, so that's why grades are so important to me – I put the effort in to come here. But my teammates who live here and figure that they have the library here, so they don't have to worry about driving. But some of my other teammates only have track and school, so they study hard. It goes both ways.

For Ryan, the fact that he commutes to school, rather than lives on campus, helps him focus on both athletics and academics, because he cannot take it for granted that he will have all of the resources he needs at home. Instead, as he puts it, he has to make an effort to come to campus, and while he is on campus, he makes an effort to succeed in the classroom and on the track. What stands out is that in the academic literature, student-athletes who do not succeed academically are perceived as incompetent with respect to academics. However, the interviews in this chapter suggest that academic struggles are

more a matter of time constraints, energy demands, and in some cases, effort, rather than issues of competence.

The first parts of this chapter looked at academic goals and struggles, and the next part examines how student-athletes define success in the classroom, on the field, and after they graduate. I begin by examining how students who are currently in school define academic success.

### **Defining Academic Success**

Nine of the interviewees mentioned that they define success by the grades earned in a class, often aiming for a B or higher, and some aim for extrinsic awards. However, of these interviewees, seven are explicitly concerned about the usefulness of their knowledge and skills earned. Daniel defines academic success as “having a deep understanding of the subject as well as being able to apply what one has learned”, which Cass echoes:

Obviously a nice letter grade at the end of the day is nice, and the GPA that accommodates good letter grades is helpful in turning a degree into actual value, but I have many times valued a certain course over another that I got a better grade in because I felt more accomplished after. So, I guess success academically to me is a sense of accomplishment, having actually grown and learned something through the course, rather than push through just for a letter grade.

Carol changes her definition of success as she progresses through different schools. In her words:

Success academically would be really participating in the class – I found something that I loved studying, and since I'm passionate about this, I am really into the subject so I don't worry about the grades as much. When you're at JC, you're focused on GE's and trying to transfer out. That changed at [four year school] because I finally studied things related to my degree programs. I think professors like passionate people, I'd go to office hours, that reflected in grades. I have a 3.49 GPA, though I wish it was higher.

While grades earned are a tangible measure of academic success, often this is not the only measure that student-athletes use in order to gauge their own success. For student-athletes similar to Cass and Carol, the definition of success shifts from being able to transfer to focusing on material they care about due to their major. This interest allows student-athletes to focus on the material they are learning and not just focus on grades exclusively. It is clear that success in the classroom is defined by most athletes as their grades earned, but we now turn the question of how athletic success defined by student-athletes.

### **Defining Athletic Success**

The student-athletes interviewed in this chapter define academic success similarly to athletic success, focusing on doing their best and putting effort into their endeavor. Just as grade-point average is used as the benchmark for academic success, numbers play a

role in defining athletic success, whether it is an athlete's time in a race, distance for a jump or a throwing event, or things like batting average or scoring average or shooting accuracy in team sports as their definition of success. None of the interviewees mentioned having a professional athletic career as their definition of success. However, even some of those who mention statistics as mattering also look for intrinsic success. Stan, who plays baseball at a Division-3 school in the Midwest, explains:

I am obviously interested in my batting average, on base percentage, fielding percentage etc. but more importantly I'm interested in how I grow as a leader and teammate. Furthermore, how my individual efforts (both on the field and in other ways) help accomplish team goals such as conference championships, regional appearances and championships etc.

This was echoed by Julie who says that athletic success is “enjoying the sport you play, not because of winning, but because you genuinely enjoy playing. Also winning major tournaments or receiving individual awards are another factor.” There is a mix between looking for extrinsic rewards, such as actual individual or team awards or improved statistics, and intrinsic rewards, such as developing leadership skills or enjoying the sport for its own sake. Other athletes emphasized continual improvement as their benchmark of success, with Andrew explaining that “athletic success would be constantly surpassing one's last performance and doing better each time” and Ryan, who says, “It transfers into what your times are – it's like your LSAT scores. Or success is how much heart you put into it – I would say your time or what level you compete at

(nationals, conference). For me, it's my time." While it is rare to hear the comparison of a sport statistic to doing well on the LSAT or on any test for professional school, the idea of effort being rewarded and trying to improve in meets was a common refrain, regardless of the result.

Student-athletes in this study mention that competing at tougher levels works as their marker of athletic success – the higher up they go the tougher the competition they face, the more success they have by definition of facing tougher competition. Stacey defines her athletic success as “when you make nationals, when you make the national meet. I’ve gotten to regionals, but never to nationals. After your conference championships, if you’re top 48 in your event in your region, then you compete against the other...if you’re top 9 or top 16 there, then you go to nationals, which is both the West and the East. Nationals is all the D-1 teams”, and this is echoed by Julie, who defines success in different stages of the athletic career, explaining “short-term [success] is like to PR (personal record), placing in our conference championship and eventually winning CC, and by senior year, getting to nationals and placing (top 3) or winning in nationals.” Adrienne, who was soccer teammates with Alicia at a Division-2 school in southern California, mentioned success being both related to results as well as personal satisfaction. For her, success is “enjoying the sport you play, not because of winning, but because you genuinely enjoy playing. Also winning major tournaments or receiving individual awards are another factor.” Most (twelve) of the interviewees discuss some balance of looking at individual statistics, team success in terms of winning, and personal satisfaction involved in their definitions of athletic success. If success in the classroom is

based on intrinsic rewards rather than the grades earned, and if athletic success is a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, how do student-athletes define success professionally?

### **Defining Professional Success**

Only one of the sixteen interviewees in this chapter mentions reaching a financial goal as their benchmark for success, with Julie defining professional success as “being able to make over \$100,000 a year.” Most of the student-athletes define professional success in terms of personal satisfaction and growth. Cass explains that for her, “success professionally would have to be having plenty of connections, being a role model, and being seen as a professional and credible in the field that one had studied in.” This is echoed by Colin who says success is “doing something that you are passionate about every single day. Don't work for the paycheck, rather have the paycheck be an added bonus to fulfilling work you are already passionate about” and Alicia supports this by saying that “success professionally is not only monetary success, however, being satisfied with what you do in your life. Just like winning a competition you put in time and work into something you're passionate about and you want to see a positive outcome.” In doing so, student-athletes highlight intrinsic rewards as a signal of success, rather than looking for external markers.

Most of the athletes (twelve) interviewed say that money does not matter in their definition of success, so long as they enjoy the work they perform. Further, most do not mention aspirations of competing professionally. They are intrinsically motivated, but also look for various forms of external rewards. The fact that few mention a professional athletic career as a goal may be a motivation to succeed academically, as these student-athletes are not expecting a professional athletic salary, and thus are compelled to focus on developing their academic skills and knowledge. I also asked student-athletes what they want people to know about being a student-athlete that may not be known.

### **Being A Student-Athletes: Hardships and Difficulties**

Student-athletes are unquestionably proud of managing both their roles as students and as athletes, and are proud they represent their universities. However, they also mention that this is a more difficult life than what they feel outsiders think. This toughness fuels their pride in navigating these roles.

Six of the student-athletes interviewed focus on the sacrifices they made to succeed as in both roles. For example, Stacey mentions sacrificing having a social life in order to compete in track and field:

A lot of people think being a student-athlete is super-easy, I'm not saying it isn't, it's easy for me because I'm good at time management. But when it came to doing things outside of school or athletics, I literally had no life. I have my boyfriend, I had no friends, I did no fun things. If I could go back to my previous years here I

would have tried to make more friends outside of athletics – all the people I know are athletes, and it sucks because I don't have friends outside of athletics.

For Stacey, having a significant other is one of her only ties outside of school or sports, and she credits her boyfriend for helping her focus on grades. Other student-athletes, such as Cass and Colin, quoted respectively, mention the difficulties in their daily schedules:

It's hard. I don't think people understand how much work it takes, balancing school and sports – it's like having a job we don't get paid for. It's not easy, we don't get paid, and we're practicing 30 hours a week and going to class full time, taking 5 classes, it's hard to balance sometimes. Toughest parts are when you're tired but you have to handle your school, so you wake up early. Me personally, it was hardest when I had to go to practice early in the morning, go to class, figure out a time to eat, finish classes, practice in the afternoon, then go home and study or do my homework. (Cass)

It is harder than outsiders want to admit. It isn't all the glamour all the time like some may think. We are a just a small, division II baseball team yet a normal schedule for me still looks like this: class till 1 or 2. Arrive at the complex around 2:15 for pre-practice treatment, practice from 3:00-5:45 lift from 5:45-7:00 then dinner and any time left is devoted to studies. It's easy to fall behind and tough to catch up. (Colin)

The most difficult challenge student-athletes mention is managing the time demands of being a both student and an athlete without fatigue catching up to them. They realize that both endeavors require a lot of time and physical energy, and that they are not paid for work they put into their sport. This is a somewhat separate, but related challenge to examining student-athlete academic performance. It is not necessarily the material that is daunting, but rather finding enough time and energy to complete assignments well while still making practices and competitions, with at best, the hint of a professional sports payday looming for a select few. Given that this payday does not exist, and that most student-athletes are not paid as they are undergraduates, they are not compensated for the work they do as athletes, and some work in order to help pay their bills. However, this may not be known to instructors. Ryan mentions the difficulty he faces when it comes to navigating course and schoolwork schedules when encountering hostile professors:

Some professors are ok with you being a student-athlete, and try to work out an accommodating schedule, and we work ahead of time. Some professors, however, are really mean about it, and when I say mean, they put a lot of attention on you because you're an athlete and grade you harsher. I didn't get that here [4-year school], but I got that at the JC. In one instance, I had to miss due to a meet, and he straight up told me "I don't like student-athletes" – what sort of message does that send to the student-athletes? There is a stereotype about student-athletes getting passed due to them being athletes, but I like to think of that as false, because I've never had that. However, they do help student-athletes – if you need

tutors, they put tutors in the study hours. They put the resources to help you pass, and that's something that people don't understand.

Ryan felt hostility from his instructors primarily at the junior college level, rather than at the four-year university. This could be due to professors at the four-year school having more experience with student-athletes or perceived reputations of student-athletes at both schools. Ryan mentions one resource four-year schools employ – tutors whose job it is to work with student-athletes. While there are documented cases of tutors doing coursework for athletes at high-profile Division-1 schools for football and men's basketball players, this behavior is not seen at lower-division schools and for athletes in lower-profile sports. This could be due to the greater pressure to keep student-athletes eligible academically when they are playing a sport that brings revenue to their university, while lower-division schools and lower-profile sports do not have the financial pressures for their athletes, and this reduces the incentive to cheat. However, his questioning about the message sent suggests that cynicism expressed by instructors may have a detrimental effect on student-athletes' willingness to learn or take certain instructors, as they do not want to contend with the obstacle of an instructor they feel may be hostile toward them because of their roles as athletes.

### **Hard but Rewarding (positive overall)**

While six interviewees focus exclusively on the difficulty of being student-athletes, most interviews show that despite the stress and frustration that is experienced, some student-athletes enjoy their experiences as collegiate student-athletes. For example, Cass and Carol said, respectively, "All the stress, frustration, excitement,

disappointments, everything that being a student athlete entails, it's all worth it” and “There’s times when it gets difficult and you feel like quitting both school and the sport, but after that time passes, it is really fun and one of the best experiences I could have.” Thoughts of quitting the sport or school are somewhat common, but student-athletes find satisfaction in powering through their frustrating times and persevering.

Carol expands on these thoughts:

It’s one of the best experiences you could have in college. It’s cool to be able to compete and be a student – you feel close to your community and your university, and it helps you hyper-focus on your academics. A lot of what you learn athletically you can apply to the classroom I feel honored to represent the school...I’m very competitive in races and classes, I want to have the high scores, I want the professors to know my name, but I want people to know my name from track too. I try to be patient when I’m reading 60 pages on the Salvadoran civil war...you transfer skills you learn in track into the classroom.

This is echoed by Jasmine, a track and field athlete at a Division-2 school, who explains:

Being a student athlete is such a rewarding position. One learns to push the limits other people set and realize that there are no limits whether it be in sports in academics. There is always something to learn or to better improve performance wise. Being a student athlete encourages health, strength and perseverance in the classroom, the track and the real world.

The idea of overcoming obstacles and learning to manage time to succeed both in sports and in classes leaves many student-athletes with a sense of accomplishment and pride, and in addition to these, the camaraderie they experience as part of a team representing their schools translates into overall positive memories and images (both for themselves and others) as student-athletes. However, the overall message student-athletes emphasize is that it is more difficult to successfully navigate both roles as students and as athletes than more people assume, and while this difficulty may lead to intrinsic rewards such as pride and satisfaction, it does not offer a tangible reward in terms of pay. Further, part of the difficulties may lay in the mixed messages received – coaches encourage academic participation, but some may encourage academic success more than other, and instructors may be cynical about student-athlete aspirations or competencies in the classroom, though the latter was not a commonly-mentioned theme. The next chapter compares similarities in themes across both current and graduated student-athletes, and offers possibilities for policies in order to help student-athletes succeed academically.

**Figure 3.1 Index of Current Student-Athletes Interviewed for This Project**

<b>Player Name (in study)</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>NCAA Division/Conference</b>	<b>Transferred from JC</b>
Ben	Baseball	1/Ivy League	No
Joshua	Basketball	2/California Collegiate Athletics Association (CCAA)	Yes
Cass	Track and Field	2/CCAA	Yes
Milan	Track and Field	2/CCAA	No
Colin	Baseball	2/CCAA	Yes
Alicia	Soccer	2/CCAA	Yes
Carol	Track and Field	2/CCAA	No
Stacey	Track and Field	1-AA/Big West	No
Ryan	Track and Field	2/CCAA	Yes
Brendan	Baseball	1-A/Big 12	No
Al	Baseball	2/Greater Midwest Athletic Conference (GMAC)	No
Julie	Track and Field	D-2/CCAA	Yes
Vanessa	Cheer	D-2/CCAA	Yes
Adrienne	Soccer	D-2/CCAA	No
Derrick	Basketball	2/CCAA	No
Jasmine	Track and Field	2/CCAA	Yes

## **Chapter Four: Books or Ballgames? Understanding Student-Athletes' Academic Struggles in a New Way, and What Can Be Done to Alleviate Them**

Previous literature has suggested that student-athletes fare worse academically than their non-athlete peers due to attitudinal reasons, either on the athletes' part or on the part of professors and instructors. Previous research has also suggested that student-athletes begin their academic careers with high ambitions and goals, but get progressively detached from academics and more attached to athletics as they are given negative messages about their academic acumen. This leads to the appearance of either apathy or incompetence in the classroom, and leads to student-athletes receiving lower grades.

Simons and his colleagues (2007) found that student-athletes were viewed negatively by both professors and their peers, reporting that very few received positive perceptions, while over half were refused or given a hard time when requesting accommodations (such as an alternate testing date or assignment due date) for athletic competitions. Student-athletes in this study also referred to faculty making negative remarks about athletes in class, disparaging their intelligence and academic motivation while receiving, in the professor's opinion, undeserved benefits and privileges due to their status as athletes. (2007: 251). This suggests that racial stereotypes are still felt in the university, and that student-athletes broadly, and African-American student-athletes

specifically, are stigmatized based on the work they do as athletes, and that they are viewed as academically incompetent.

The literature also suggests that many student-athletes are not motivated enough to succeed academically, which leads them to underprepare for their courses (2000:145). Such framing places the onus on individual student-athletes, rather than examining what constraints these student-athletes are operating under with respect to their academic and athletic obligations.

This chapter compares similarities and differences in themes across both graduated and current student-athletes to better understand the messages they receive in their roles as students and as athletes, and the challenges they face in succeeding academically and athletically.

Based on 37 in-depth interviews with student-athletes (20 graduated, 17 current), I suggest that student-athletes who struggle do so more due to structural barriers and constraints on their time and energy, rather than the struggles being due to poor attitudes.

### **Obstacles Faced and Pragmatic Responses: Scheduling Classes**

Both current and former student-athletes stressed the challenges of being a student-athlete. These challenges include fitting their course schedules around their practice schedules, both in terms of figuring out when during the day to take courses so that they would not overlap with practices; figuring out when during the academic year to take more rigorous courses; and generally balancing both academics and athletics, with a few student-athletes also working part time in addition to these time demands.

Additionally, some student-athletes in non-revenue-generating sports in lower divisions (meaning lower than 1-A) worked part-time in order to earn money.

Academics, athletics, and work are all time and energy-consuming activities, and at some point, it becomes difficult to juggle classes, practices, games, and possibly work, and eventually, performance in at least one of these areas declines. Some morning practices involved weightlifting as well as other exercises, along with possibly a video session to prepare for an upcoming game. All this was done from early morning hours (5 or 6 am) until mid-morning (9 or 10 am). This means that by the time an athlete started their first courses for the day, they had already been up for hours and had put some time preparing for their sport, likely up and busier before most of their peers in classes. Classes are typically scheduled between morning and early afternoon, allowing for late afternoon or evening practices. After these practices end, student-athletes have to go back after a full day of practices and courses, and still have to work on coursework, same as any other student, but with another early day awaiting them. Athletes report that they would go home wanting to make sure coursework was taken care of, but would be exhausted from their day and instead would sleep. While on the surface, it may appear that the sleep indicates laziness or a lack of caring about academics, I believe it is more indicative of an exhausting schedule that eventually demands too much energy and spreads student-athletes' time too thinly.

Related to the concerns about demands on time and energy shared by the student-athletes interviewed is the prevalence of pragmatic thinking with respect to course

scheduling. For some sports, typically team sports such as football, basketball, and baseball, practice time is heavily regimented, allowing little flexibility as far as time is concerned. Practices are scheduled both for early mornings and for afternoons, allowing a small window of time for classes to be taken, but by the time student-athletes reached their first class of the day, they had often already undergone a taxing practice session. Some of the more flexible sports were team sports with individual components, such as track and field. Athletes in track and field had set practice times as teams, but some events, such as running, offered some individual athletes the option of practicing separately. This gave some athletes greater flexibility when designing their course schedules for the term, as they had an alternate time window to practice in. By the time these morning and early afternoon classes had concluded, student-athletes had to go and have a second practice session – this one team-wide and on the field or court, rather than in the weight room. After this second practice session for the day had concluded, student-athletes either had to go and work on things for school, and some worked part time. This does not include any time needed for meals or for rest and recuperation.

Pragmatic thinking is not limited to when courses are taken based on athletics schedules, but also on which courses are taken each academic term, meaning there are both short-term (daily schedule) and long-term components to student-athletes scheduling their courses. While many schools offer student-athletes counselors or advisors, the role they play differs based on the school they work for. Some advisors are more hands-on in terms of consistently working with student-athletes to schedule their classes, while others are more hands-off. Typically, those who are hands-off might schedule courses for the

first term a student-athlete enrolled at a school and then only advise if the student-athlete was struggling academically or came to them with questions. More regularly, advisors or counselors would schedule classes for the first year for student-athletes, and do periodic checks to ensure they were making satisfactory progress toward graduation, and if grades were low, then study hall hours would be assigned by the coaches after consulting with the advisors.

Given that remaining eligible was a priority for student-athletes, many would take easier courses when they were in-season, and more rigorous, challenging courses when they were in their off-season. This allowed athletes to focus on their majors when remaining eligible wasn't a concern, and allowed them to have some leeway with their grade-point average without suffering an athletic penalty, such as reduced playing time. While coaches may not have intended to send the message of sacrificing grades for playing time and wins, if they did not build in flexibility for their student-athletes to miss a practice for schoolwork then that raised an obstacle for student-athletes to overcome.

### **Maximizing Effort in the Classroom: Fighting the Apathetic Student-Athlete Image, and A New Way of Examining Student-Athlete Attitude**

Given the challenges entailed in navigating course schedules and in balancing sports, school, and/or work, student-athletes are justifiably proud of their accomplishments in the classroom and on the field. Student-athletes are highly motivated and highly competitive, and these characteristics translated to both sports and the classroom. The idea of “emptying the tank” by giving a maximum effort was consistent

for the student-athletes interviewed in this study, and applied to both schoolwork as well as sports. This suggests that some student-athletes believe in maximizing their efforts both in the classroom and in their sport. This can be related to professionalism and competitiveness. Given that athletes are competitive, they want to appear and perform at their best, and may not care what the setting is. What matters is succeeding as they define it, be it wins, setting personal records, matching their competition, or earning high grades. This also suggests that given the prevalence of maximizing effort, that poor grades may not be related to apathy or a lack of effort on coursework. The student-athletes in this study emphasized eligibility as a minimum, but often reported striving for earning no lower than a B-average in their classes. Student-athletes were asked about their effort in the classroom, what they strived for in terms of grades, and could report whether they were successful or not as they defined it. However, I did not request academic transcripts or progress reports in order to allow their grades to remain confidential.

Despite the prevalence of the belief in maximizing effort, there was an acknowledgement among student-athletes that not all of their teammates care about doing well academically. There were no explanations offered as to why this split existed, with some suggesting that those who did not care about doing well in class also did not do well in their sport, meaning that the ambivalence crossed both areas for some student-athletes, rather than substituting competence in sports for academic competence. This may be due to student-athletes was not wanting to gossip or be treated as a gossip or snitch by their current or former teammates. The lack of explanation given by these student-athletes allows their teammates a chance to save face, as they were not

individually identified, and no reason given for their struggles. This further suggests that there that every school, regardless of athletic division or specific sport, has players who prioritize academics over sports as well as those who prioritize sports over academics and focus the goal of remaining eligible, but do not focus beyond that. However, it is important to note that there was no comparative group of non-athlete students in this study, so one cannot assume that student-athletes are more apathetic or less apathetic than their non-athletic peers. With that in mind, given the number of students enrolled at any given point, and the number of student-athletes playing intercollegiate sports, it is not surprising that there is variation in how seriously academics are viewed, with some students highly motivated, some students not motivated at all, and most students falling somewhere between the two extremes.

### **The Role Coaches Play**

Generally, student-athletes received messages from head coaches in their respective sport indicating that coaches cared about academic success. This caring manifested itself in different forms. The student-athletes interviewed in this project rarely mentioned negative messages from instructors, and those who did received them at the junior college level, rather than at the four-year university level. This suggests that instructors are aware of the messages they send to their students, and try to send positive messages to encourage success in the classroom. Further, none of the student-athletes mentioned receiving negative messages from their non-athletic peers, suggesting either other students respect athletes' abilities in the classroom, or are careful not to send

negative messages, or that they did not have an opinion on athletes' academic abilities. On the contrary, many mentioned receiving positive messages from people close to them, meaning that the overwhelming messages sent to and received by student-athletes were encouraging. Given that the messages sent by coaches tended to be positive, this suggests that it is important to examine how coaches supported their encouragement for student-athlete academic success.

The ways coaches at all athletic divisions showed they cared about student-athlete success took two forms: class attendance checks and weekly study hall hours, especially if student grades were below a certain threshold. However, there was a difference between coaches at high-profile schools (Division 1-A) coaching football and basketball, compared to those coaching non-revenue generating sports or coaching at non-1-A schools. Coaches for revenue-generating sports at Division 1-A schools effectively limited their influence on academic achievement by only enforcing study hall hours and classroom attendance checks, with the understanding that as long as student-athletes were academically eligible to play, they could play.

Coaches for smaller sports and at smaller schools, on the other hand, supplemented these study halls and attendance checks by allowing student-athletes to occasionally miss practice time in order to take care of academic responsibilities, such as taking exams or turning in assignments without penalizing them with reduced playing time. Thus, the student-athletes in these smaller sports were given more leeway with athletics in order to focus on their academic work. Additionally, these coaches tended to

enforce a higher team grade point average than the NCAA-mandated 2.0 average, and would have study hall hours until student-athlete grades met the team threshold. While student-athletes generally avoided missing practices if they could help it, having that safety net to ensure academics as a priority acted as a safety valve, allowing student-athletes to continue competing as long as they were focused on their academics as well.

I suggest that the main reason coaches approach grades differently is due to their own pragmatic job considerations. Athletic coaches, especially football and men's basketball coaches at Division 1-A schools are paid handsomely, and their primary responsibility is to win games. The more games a school wins, the more they are featured on television, and the more they can bring fans to games. Both are revenue streams for the university, along with revenue generated from merchandise sold.

For these coaches, if a player misses a practice, even for something like completing schoolwork, then that player is less ready for that week's game (or games for basketball), and playing that athlete puts the team at a disadvantage because they are not as prepared as their teammates. Being less ready means an increased chance at losing an upcoming game or games, and given how competitive coaches are, losses are to be avoided at all costs, as too many losses can result in job loss for the coach. Thus, coaches at these sports and these schools care about academic achievement to the extent that their athletes can remain eligible to play, but beyond that, it is on the athletes to do well in their courses.

There is no incentive for coaches to make sure their athletes' grades are above the NCAA threshold, as they are paid for wins, not for grades, and they would like to keep their well-paying jobs. This financial pressure does not exist at smaller schools and for non-revenue-generating sports, and this allows coaches in these schools and sports a bit more flexibility with their student-athletes. Because the promise of a professional sports payday is far less visible for student-athletes at smaller schools and in non-revenue-generating sports, education is emphasized. On the other hand, even though the odds of a student-athlete successfully entering and playing professionally in the NFL or NBA, those in Division 1-A programs are highly visible on television and comprise most of the players in these leagues. Coaches in smaller schools and/or non-revenue generating sports realize that virtually all of their players will not play professional sports, and while they may encourage their student-athletes to pursue their athletic dreams, they emphasize academics in order to allow their athletes to succeed after graduating.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that we cannot attribute differences in academic achievement to attitude alone. Instead, student-athletes face some structural barriers in their pursuit of a degree while playing. These barriers include the amount of practice time demanded to succeed at their chosen sport as well as when this time is scheduled. There simply is a lack of time and energy available to be able to consistently succeed in sports, classes, and work. Also, there was nothing in these interviews suggesting that student-athletes cared less about doing well in classes than non-athletic classmates. Rather, the correlation between grades and visible attitude was assumed, but not proven.

This suggests that the apathetic attitude displayed by student-athletes may not be a reason for their academic struggles. Instead, I suggest that this attitude helps mask the difficulties they face in dealing with their demanding schedules. A way to look at this is either through Goffman's dramaturgy or through Simmel's blasé attitude. While Simmel said that this attitude was employed in order to appear more intellectual and civilized, he importantly said it was a coping mechanism due to rapid change and constant stimulation. In the case of student-athletes, this coping mechanism is a way of hiding struggles, and allows them to draw on a familiar role and script. Borrowing from Goffman, the stigma of being a student-athlete who doesn't care about doing well academically is a familiar one to athletes and instructors alike. While asking for extensions on schoolwork may be viewed as a sign of weakness – that one cannot handle the rigors of both an academic and an athletic schedule simultaneously – acting like one does not care allows the student-athlete to mask these difficulties while saving face in front of their peers.

### **How to Help Student-Athletes Succeed Academically: Policy Implications**

There are educational policy implications that come from this study. The fundamental issues addressed in the study are how to improve student-athletes' academic performances while reducing institutional incentives to find shortcuts such as grade inflation, paper classes such as what the University of North Carolina had, or tutors doing student-athletes' coursework and tests. These policies are aimed at the individual universities, athletic conferences, and NCAA broadly. While UNC was exonerated of their paper class controversy, the students who took these classes received high grades for

minimal effort. While students may wish to take easy courses, regardless of student-athlete status, offering these paper classes regularly, with no way of evaluating students, means students are paying for a grade that means little at best, and their academic skills and knowledge base are not broadened or sharpened. It has the cumulative effect of students paying thousands of dollars and getting one practical advantage – a degree – while not gaining the practical advantages of a broadened knowledge base or skill set, meaning they are at a disadvantage while on the job market. While they may earn a degree, they are at a skills and knowledge deficit compared to their peers who did not take easy classes regularly.

One possibility is to allow student-athletes to take a lighter courseload in terms of credit hours when their sport is in season. This would allow them to devote more time and energy to their team, and allow them to take a heavier courseload during the off-season when eligibility is not as much of a concern. Student-athletes already report scheduling their classes in-season based on practice times and taking tougher classes out of season in order to not jeopardize their eligibility, this would enable student-athletes to focus on athletics during their season when playing time is a salient consideration, and allow them to focus on academics exclusively when games are not going on. However, one problem that could arise is multi-sport athletes who play sports during multiple academic terms in a given year, as they may not have an actual offseason. One possibility to help both multi-sport athletes and single-sport athletes is to extend the academic scholarship to a fifth or sixth year to allow for the degree to be completed after the student-athlete is no longer playing.

Another option would be to have professional sports leagues have clauses in contract reward degree completion for athletes who enter their league's draft prior to earning their degrees. This could take the form of giving an incentive to players who complete their degree within a specified time after entering the draft. By having leagues pay these bonuses rather than individual teams, players avoid conflicts with owners who may not want to pay for degree completion, as they may argue that the players are there to play, not to finish school. Having leagues compensate gives players incentives to finish their degrees, and may act as an impetus to take academics seriously while in school. While in school, their athletic eligibility is a motivating factor, and offering financial compensation for completing the degree may act as an incentive to excel in the classroom before and after the student-athlete career is completed.

Another possibility is having schools adjust either the athletic or the academic requirements for student-athletes. While game schedules are set by the NCAA and athletic conferences, rather than member schools, schools have certain off-season regiments for their athletes based on NCAA guidelines in terms of time allotment per week. Often, these activities are described as voluntary, but the hidden reality is if players do not appear for these activities (ex: weightlifting sessions), they may face reduced playing time. Thus, merely renaming certain activities as voluntary may not change student-athlete behavior in terms of attending the activities. Another possibility would be to reduce off-season practice time in terms of number of hours allowed. However, this could result in more player injuries due to poorer conditioning, and may result in sloppier on-field products, which means that coaches would be jeopardizing their jobs due to

worse results on the field or court. Academically, the idea would be to increase the number of hours that student-athletes can devote in the classroom, but this may be argued against for the reasons mentioned above.

Some of the student-athletes who reported doing well in classes did so in part because their teams demanded a higher grade-point average for team eligibility. While the NCAA sets the bar at a C average (2.0), there are student-athletes whose teams demand a higher academic threshold, somewhere along a C+/B- team average (2.5-2.7). By doing so, these schools help emphasize the importance of educational achievement by encouraging higher grades by connecting grades to playing opportunities. However, motivation alone is not enough. Schools can teach their students, including their student-athletes, to be proactive with their studies. For student-athletes, that would mean allowing for practices to be missed due to academic reasons, with no penalty. The idea is to reward students for being proactive with their academics, and at the very least, not punishing them for doing so. This idea maintains the possibility of punishment of reduced playing time if grades are not to the team's requirements, and rewards student-athletes who exhibit academic effort by allowing them to continue to compete without a penalty.

Teams can also start including mentoring programs, in which older teammates help younger teammates succeed in their classes. While this may be interpreted as figuring out which instructors have the lightest workload, the idea is to not only demonstrate the skills in the classroom, as upper-level students are not in the same

classes as lower-level students, but to offer advice, encouragement, and working together to succeed academically.

Depending on the NCAA division a student-athlete competes in, an athlete may be allowed to work for money. This is allowed at smaller schools which offer fewer athletic scholarships. However, this means that student-athletes have even more demands on their time – their academics, their sport, and their job. Given the rigors and demands of all three, this places heavy responsibilities on student-athletes. One way to improve student-athlete performance in the classroom would be the NCAA offering a monthly stipend to all student-athletes to cover expenses such as rent, food, and other necessities, in addition to an athletic scholarship. This would remove some of the time constraints on student-athletes' time, and having a stipend covering certain expenses means that student-athletes could focus both on academics and athletics without worrying about not having enough money for groceries or rent. This would be a uniform stipend covering all NCAA student-athletes, regardless of division, athletic conference, or sport.

Another possibility to help student-athletes, and students in general, acclimate to the work and time demands at a university, is to offer a course for all incoming students, including student-athletes and transfer students, detailing what is needed to succeed in the classroom. Often, students enter school without a clear idea of what is necessary in order to succeed academically, from time management to bringing materials to class to attending class regularly. If instructors do not take the time to explain early on in a student's academic career and instead, assume that all students know what it takes to

succeed, then students who do not succeed are viewed as failing due to personal choice – they know what it takes to succeed, yet don't succeed, suggesting that they must not want to succeed. However, it may be the case that students do not know what the requirements are in order to succeed, and one way of addressing that is a course that all take that emphasizes study skills, time management, and general rules to succeed in school. This study suggests that student-athletes are pragmatic with their course schedules based around their athletic responsibilities, taking easier classes in-season when eligibility is a paramount concern, and taking more challenging classes out of season when they can risk lower grades because playing time is not at stake. This suggests that making academic success something practical and pragmatic would help student-athletes, as they are already making decisions based on pragmatic considerations.

Another aspect that can be changed is instructor attitudes toward student-athletes. Given that previous studies focused on instructor hostility toward student-athletes' abilities in the classroom, and that this hostility has a cumulative effect, then changing this attitude on a wide scale can influence student-athlete achievement.

While this was not mentioned extensively by interviewees, there were a few remarks made by student-athletes discussing instructor hostility toward student-athletes. Reducing this hostility can be achieved by instructors talking with student-athletes specifically early in the term what the expectations are, the standards that the professor has, and explaining when classes may be missed due to athletic obligations and what the requirements are to make up the absences. These standards are up to the instructor's

discretion, and as long as standards are kept consistent throughout the term for student-athletes and their non-athletic peers, this can help reduce negative feelings on both the instructors' and student-athletes' ends, and can help improve student-athlete academic achievement. Just as athletes adapt to how referees call a game, they can adapt to standards set by their instructors. In both cases, issues of fairness, communication, and consistency are paramount. Student-professor relationships fall under the purview of the university, and this means that messages communicated to students about their expectations and about instructor attitudes can be subject to review. Just as incoming students, including student-athletes, should be taught what is expected behavior for classes, so too can instructors be taught what appropriate communication about standards are, and the effects of negative messages on students from instructors. Reducing these negative messages can have the effect of improving student-athlete success in the classroom, as their competencies are not disputed. Further, making instructors aware of the time demands on student-athletes can encourage flexibility in some areas (such as what to do if a student-athlete has to miss time due to an athletic obligation). However, I would argue that it is up to the student-athlete to be proactive in terms of seeking reasonable accommodations from their professors, but it is up to the professors to communicate that these accommodations are available and accessible to student-athletes early in the term.

While student-athlete apathy may appear to be the cause of and subsequent result of poor grades, it may be a mask to disguise the difficulties inherent in managing a full courseload along with practices and competitions, and in some cases, employment as

well. Rather than being the root cause of student-athletes struggling in the classroom, I suggest the issues stem more from a lack of available time and energy in order to consistently succeed in multiple endeavors. To alleviate these, student-athletes could take a reduced course-load when their sport is in season to allow them to focus on their sport. These academic terms would be saved for future use by the student-athlete after their athletic eligibility had expired. This would allow student-athletes to focus their energies on their sport while competing, and on academics while not. It would reduce the temptation and justification for universities to offer paper classes as were seen at North Carolina, as academic eligibility would be less of a concern due to the reduced course-load.

Further, while the idea of the hostile professor may be exaggerated, depending on university, there are steps that can be taken to help student-athletes, along with their non-athletic peers, to succeed in their courses. Universities could offer an introductory course to all new students, socializing them to the expectations of college life. Student-athletes may have a differing course to account for their additional time constraints, but with the same idea of familiarizing student-athletes with this new step in their lives.

# **Chapter Five: Findings, Limitations, and Future Research**

This study has examined the messages student-athletes receive about their dual roles – as undergraduate students working toward a degree, and as athletes representing a university. It has explored the obstacles student-athletes face in terms of succeeding academically, and is the first study to focus on how student-athletes define success for themselves in terms of academics, sports, and professionally. This project also examines how student-athletes see themselves, and allows them to clarify misconceptions they feel exist about student-athletes in general.

Unlike what was hypothesized in chapter one, student-athletes' race and gender do not appear to play a role in the messages received. Student-athletes are given the same messages from their coaches, and what matters is the sport a student-athlete is in and what NCAA athletic division they compete in. The higher the division and if the sport is considered a revenue generator for a school, the more emphasis is placed on athletic success over academics. This affects the messages coaches send their student-athletes, whether verbally or with sanctioned behavior.

This study suggests that messages from family members, significant others, and coaches influence the way student-athletes devote their energy and time between school

and sports, with teammate and classmate messages playing less of a role. This is likely due to coaches having significant power over student-athletes in terms of controlling playing time and the availability of athletic scholarships, and to the fact that family and significant others are key socializing factors for people. The messages student-athletes are given can be both verbal and unspoken, and in some cases, messages from the same source can conflict. Family members, significant others, and coaches all vocally preached the importance of student-athletes earning their degrees and in succeeding academically.

However, some coaches leave their support at this comment and focus heavily on academic eligibility rather than academic excellence from their student-athletes. If student-athletes need to miss a practice to take care of academic issues, they risk being effectively punished by risking reduced playing time, as coaches may assume that missing practice time would make the player – and thus the team – less ready for an upcoming game. Thus, while coaches verbally preach academic excellence, their behavior suggests that student-athletes should focus their energy on their sport. However, this pattern does not extend across all coaches, and is more prevalent with Division-1A football and men's basketball coaches. Coaches in other sports, and in other athletic divisions, offer student-athletes more opportunities to miss practices to resolve academic issues without penalizing players. Instead, coaches in these sports offer study hours to help their student-athletes raise grades, but also allow for an occasional missed practice for academic reasons without the student-athlete risking less playing time. While the student-athletes interviewed in this project did not offer a reason why, I suggest that this is pragmatic thinking on the part of coaching staffs. Coaches are judged professionally

based on how many wins they accrue, and this places all emphasis on winning, rather than on their player's grade-point averages. As such, there is no motivation for coaches to emphasize academic success if they are paid to win games. For coaches in non-revenue generating sports and at lower athletic divisions than 1-A, there is less financial pressure to win, and this allows them to structure their practice times differently, allowing for some more flexibility with their student-athletes.

Just as coaches in certain sports employ pragmatic thinking by emphasizing the importance of sports, so do student-athletes. Given that academic eligibility is a goal for coaches, many student-athletes structure their class schedules in terms of course difficulty and course timing around their sports. They take easier classes while in-season in order to remain eligible, and more difficult courses during the off-seasons when they do not have practices to worry about. However, what constitutes ease of a class differs among student-athletes, with some focusing on difficulty of material, some on instructor attitude, some on workload, and whether material is applicable to their daily lives or if the classes are in their major. Classes are taken based around practice schedules, as even coaches who allow for some flexibility for academics expect regular participation in practices. In highlighting pragmatic thinking, there are several interrelated obstacles student-athletes face: what classes to take in-season, when to take classes, and which messages to listen to – those emphasizing school or those emphasizing athletic success.

Student-athletes are unquestionably proud of their accomplishments, both in the classroom and in their chosen sports. Those who graduate are immensely proud of their

accomplishment, often highlighting the academic achievement of graduating over success in their sport. Current student-athletes mention pride in representing their school, and student-athletes in both groups highlight pride in managing the stresses of being students, thus needing certain grades to be at a certain level, as well as being athletes expected to compete at a high level. They mention the struggles of managing time and energy, and some show more pragmatic thinking by figuring out classes that allow them to earn high grades with less than maximum effort. Rather than viewing this behavior as stemming from laziness, I suggest that taking easier classes when in-season is pragmatic thinking to the structural obstacles of needing a certain grade-point average while having specific times and energy available for practices. These are obstacles that non-athlete students do not face, as workplaces typically do not demand a certain grade-point average to earn a salary, even if energy and time demands are similar. Further, students who work are not considered as representing their workplace when they are at school, while student-athletes represent their school during this work.

I suggest that the prevailing image of the apathetic student-athlete is exaggerated and largely inaccurate, and there may be an alternate way of viewing this. Rather than viewing visible apathy as causing poorer grades or as resulting from academic struggles, I suggest it may be a mask used by and a role that student-athletes play in order to disguise difficulties in managing time and energy across sports, school, and in some cases, work. I suggest this given the immense pride student-athletes take in graduating, and that the theme of maximizing effort – “emptying the tank” – was repeated for both sports and school. Student-athletes are aware they represent their university, and part of that

representation is strength and pride. If student-athletes are struggling academically, they may hesitate to ask for help as they may feel it makes them look weak, and they know that coaches in some sports emphasize athletic success over school, based on the risk of losing playing time for missing practices. However, the role of the apathetic student-athlete is one that is accessible to both student-athletes and instructors, with certain scripts that can be employed. In using them, student-athletes do not have to mention their struggles, which allows them to save face in front of their peers. It is important to note that there is nothing indicating student-athletes are more apathetic about their academic success than their non-athletic peers, yet their apathy is more visible because they represent their university and frequently wear team apparel. Much like Chambliss' Saints and Roughnecks (1973), visibility affects perceptions and fuels reactions to student-athletes. However, this visibility broadly works unilaterally in the academic literature, as it ignores student-athletes who maximize their efforts in classes.

While this study has tried to describe the experiences student-athletes have in their capacities and roles as both college students and intercollegiate athletes, no study is perfect, and there are ways this project can be expanded and continued in the future. Lack of accessibility to student-athletes in certain sports were problematic. It was impossible to interview current Division 1-A football players or men's basketball players for this study. Attempts to go through academic advisors, athletic directors, and coaches were unsuccessful. I believe this is because this study does not highlight student-athletes in their capacities as athletes, and thus, does not generate publicity for schools or teams. Given that coaches have a limited amount of time with their players and their focus is on

winning games, there is no incentive for coaches to make their players available for interviews that do not generate public interest in the teams, as for them, it would be time and energy that could be spent preparing for an upcoming opponent. Attempting to email student-athletes with requests also did not work, as they have no incentive to respond to an email from someone they have not heard of at a school that is not theirs. Because of this, the athletes interviewed in this study came from different sports and athletic divisions, allowing for different comparisons to be made than had sport and athletic division been kept uniform. Further, as with any study based on interviews, there were issues of scheduling conflicts, leading to postponements or cancellations of interviews. While these interviews are priorities for me as a researcher, that does not mean they are priorities for student-athletes, who already have much of their time and energy taken without having to worry about answering questions from a person they do not know.

Future research can build on the themes emerging from the interviews in this project, with the themes lending themselves to surveys. This would allow for a larger sample of student-athletes to be reached, thus allowing for more nuanced statistical analyses to be performed than what the current study employs. However, given that surveys have low response rates, there is the question of whether those who complete and return the surveys are qualitatively different from those who do not. Survey research could allow for more student-athletes to be reached around the country, and be done for different sports and different athletic divisions, thus allowing for greater generalizability with the data collected, and would highlight differences in academic achievement among student-athletes based on geography, athletic divisions, or athletic conferences. This

would also allow future researchers to focus on athletes in certain sports and/or athletic conferences if they so choose in terms of tailoring educational policies rather than having universal policies in place. This means that researchers could oversample Division-1 football and men's basketball teams, rather than trying to get a variety of sports and divisions represented in their surveys. This could highlight differences among sports which are revenue-generators for universities, and the pressures that student-athletes and coaches at these programs feel with respect to academic achievement.

Further, this project is limited as it focuses on success stories, as the student-athletes interviewed here either had earned their degree or are currently attending four-year universities, working toward a degree. Further research could include student-athletes who either transfer schools or stop competing athletically due to their academics suffering. The student-athletes in this project who transferred typically did so as an educational promotion, going from a two-year community college to a four-year university, with one exception (a student-athlete who had transferred from a junior college to a four-year Division 1A school to a Division 1-AA school). It does not examine student-athletes who have to transfer back to a junior college due to academic difficulties, nor does it examine students who are kicked off their teams for poor grades and transfer for that reason, and nor does it examine student-athletes who are placed on academic probation.

What may differentiate successful and unsuccessful student-athletes is not the nature of academic challenges faced, but rather the magnitude of those problems felt, the

comfort in asking for help, and the support network they have, both in terms of encouragement and in terms of offering practical advice and help. Interviewing more student-athletes who struggle academically can also highlight areas to improve the educational aspects offered to student-athletes.

Further research can explore the importance of athletic scholarships to student-athletes, as well as examining any differences in academic achievement among scholarship athletes compared to walk-ons, who are not guaranteed a scholarship. One can explore whether non-scholarship athletes are granted greater latitude in terms of missing practices for academics, as there is less of a financial commitment from the university to them as athletes, or whether they feel greater pressure to attend practices in order to impress teammates and coaches in the hopes of earning a scholarship.

This project found that although coaches at all athletic levels and sports verbally preach academic success to their players, there is a range of actions that coaches undertake that either undermine or underscore this message. Division 1-A football and men's basketball coaches who preach academic eligibility might check on student attendance in classes or rely on academic counselors for periodic updates on student-athletes' grades, but they are rather passive on classroom issues, so long as their players are academically eligible to play. They wait for problems to arise before acting, whether that means not allowing a student-athlete to play or practice until grades are improved, or by assigning study hall hours for student-athletes. They typically do not emphasize having a team grade-point average that is significantly higher than the NCAA-mandated

2.0 C-average. While coaches punish lack of academic success, they will not reward that success with more playing time. Academic success must be pursued and achieved within the context of the sport, as coaches are loath to allow student-athletes to miss practices, even for academic reasons, as any practice time missed is viewed as a player less prepared for an upcoming game, and this puts the team at risk of losing. Given that coaches' salaries are tied to wins and that they and their players are competitive and wish to win frequently, athletics are emphasized practically, while academics are paid lip service.

While Division 1-A football and men's basketball coaches emphasize athletic success, coaches in lower athletic divisions and non-football or men's basketball 1-A coaches emphasize academic success. They do so by encouraging having a team grade point average above the NCAA-mandated minimum for eligibility, and at least occasionally allow their student-athletes to miss practices in order to work on school assignments. These practices are missed with no penalty – student-athletes may continue to compete normally. This stands in contrast to coaches who preach academic eligibility, but not beyond eligibility, as a threshold to meet. The reason for this could be tied into revenue generated by Division 1-A football and men's basketball, which means coaches in these sports at these schools feel institutional pressures to win at costs, including their student-athletes' educations. Coaches are hired, paid, and retained based on their teams' athletic success, rather than how their players perform academically, and so they prioritize athletic success while talking about academic success.

The messages that are sent to and received by student-athletes are both explicit and implicit. While the explicit messages preach academic success, implicit messages also include implied threats, such as assigning extra study-hall hours until grades are raised, reducing playing time for missed practices, regardless of reason, or potentially either awarding or removing a scholarship, depending on both athletic and academic achievement. Coaches can set a goal for a team-wide grade-point average as well as for their individual athletes, but taking concrete action such as allowing players to miss practices without penalty in order to complete academic requirements reinforces academic success as a consistent message. Other forms of concrete action to help student-athletes succeed include assigning study hall hours until student-athletes raise their grades to the threshold set both by the NCAA and the coaches. It is easy to pay lip service to education, but if players face a decision between missing a practice in order to complete an assignment and thus, risk playing time, then coursework suffers as they are competitive, wish to play, and their grades may suffer as a result. Further, if scholarships are tied more to athletic success than academic success, then there is no financial motivation for students to exert themselves beyond the threshold needed to maintain eligibility. While student-athletes are competitive and highly motivated, if scholarships are structured to value athletic achievement more so than academic achievement, then student-athletes will prioritize sports over school.

The importance of money extends itself beyond practical gameday (or game week) considerations for both student-athletes and coaches, and can be used as an impetus to study college player unionization. According to Harriott (2017), the NCAA

earns roughly \$1 billion annually, mostly off the television contract it has for the men's basketball tournament, with ticket sales for championship football games (bowls) raising more than \$100 million. The assumption is that scholarships are sufficient rewards for athletic and academic achievement, but this assumption does not consider the time and energy concerns student-athletes have, nor is the scholarship commensurate with the revenue student-athletes generate for their schools. While there have been attempts by student-athletes to unionize, most recently by Northwestern University's football team, student-athletes are officially not classified as employees of the universities they attend and represent, despite schools making money through television contracts, jersey sales, and gate revenue. In some cases, student-athletes may work and earn money, but for many Division 1-A athletes, this opportunity does not exist for them. This places some student-athletes in a catch-22: attend a school in a lower athletic division and thus, risk less exposure for professional scouts, but retain the opportunity to earn money while studying and competing. The cost of this would be more time and energy spent, as this would be a third set of obligations, on top of coursework and athletics. Those who attend 1-A schools are gambling that playing at bigger-name schools against tougher competition and having more appearances on television (due to conferences having contracts with television stations), but at the cost of being able to earn money while in school, and risking losing their scholarship due to poor grades, injury or game performance. In both cases, student-athletes face demands on their time and energy that their peers don't given their schedules, and some student-athletes have to regiment their time to allow for work, sports, and school. There is a cruel irony that student-athletes at

the schools receiving the most money because of their sports programs are excluded from opportunities to earn money while in school and while having to negotiate in their sport and in their classes. Harriott (2017) also finds a discrepancy in graduation rates among student-athletes based on race, focusing on Division 1-A football and men's basketball, but ignores smaller sports, schools, and gender in his analysis. He finds that African-American student-athletes' graduation rates lag far behind their Caucasian teammates' rates.

Future research can also investigate the roles that academic advisors and tutors play in student-athlete success. Are advisers and tutors hands-on, helping student-athletes throughout the entirety of their academic careers, in terms of scheduling classes and maintaining grades at the NCAA and team thresholds, or do they offer their services for a limited time for each student-athlete, given the number of student-athletes at a school in any given academic year? One might also look at how academic advisors or tutors choose their career path and whether they stay at one university or transfer to different schools and athletic programs, and differences in formal and informal demands among different schools. Further, while there are stories of tutors doing their student-athletes' assignments and tests to help student-athletes maintain their academic eligibility, these are the exception to the rule, as most will not risk their personal or institutional integrity, as being caught could mean termination and the possibility of the athletic program being punished by the NCAA.

Future research might employ more of a longitudinal approach, and examine how student-athletes' definitions of success change as they progress through school and after graduation. Students may have some ideas of what success is when they enter school, and change these definitions as they take classes and as they see their playing career change, and may alter what their goals or definitions of success after school are. New studies can also examine whether definitions of success differ or are similar for student-athletes who transfer schools, as well as examining the common reasons student-athletes transfer and what their trajectories are. This would highlight student-athletes transferring from a four-year school to either another four-year school, or regressing and transferring to a junior college and then transferring to a different four-year school.

Extending the current study would allow for a more robust comparison of student-athlete academic achievement on the bases of race and gender, accounting for sport, athletic conference, and athletic division, and scholarship status. While the current project broadly examines the messages received and pressures faced by student-athletes in general, it does not examine systematic patterns of messages and pressures faced by student-athletes based on their race, gender, sport, or scholarship status. Instead, it focused on what messages and pressures all student-athletes face generally.

One thing to be aware of is the conflation of race and gender with money-generating sports, as football and men's basketball have a majority of African-American male student athletes (56.3% for football; 60.8% for men's basketball teams as of the 2014-2015 Academic Year), and so the questions would be whether they have similar

academic achievement rates, based on their GPA and graduation rates, as their Caucasian athletic peers as well as African-American non-athletic peers for comparison groups. African-American male student-athletes are overrepresented in these sports, as they comprised 2.5% of the undergraduate student-body in 2014-2015 (Harriott 2017). One can also compare academic achievement among male student-athletes and female-student athletes both at the same level and across athletic divisions to see whether both males and females are taught to emphasize a balance between academics and athletics, or if the balance is tilted toward athletics for one, academics for the other, or whether there are different patterns in what is emphasized.

If one finds that academic achievement among these student-athletes is higher in lower division sports than in higher division sports, regardless of athlete's race, gender, sport, or scholarship status, then we can examine why smaller schools' athletes perform better in the classroom, and that may be tied to coaches giving more leeway for student-athletes who are completing schoolwork, and they may be giving this leeway because there is less institutional pressure placed on athletic achievement (winning) than exists at Division 1-A schools, and this would be reflected in lower salaries for coaches compared to their 1-A counterparts. With less institutional pressure to win, coaches are freer to give extra opportunities for student-athletes to succeed academically, and less of a reward for having players earn lower grades to focus on their sport.

While previous research about student-athletes focuses on a psychological and attitudinal perspective, the present study finds that there are structural obstacles and

social settings that affect student-athlete successes. These structural obstacles include the number of courses taken, scheduling classes so that they do not conflict with practice time, the practical considerations of maintaining eligibility while in-season, and the personal challenges of managing time and energy for both classes and sports. The social settings that affect student-athlete success include the athletic division a university competes in, along with whether a professional career in the sport is feasible, with the two being related. Division 1-A universities are higher profile in their athletics programs, and have more games broadcast regionally and nationally, and conferences have television contracts, which they divide among member schools. Given the financial incentive for winning in these sports for coaches and the possibility of a professional career for student-athletes, a heavier emphasis is placed on athletic success. Conversely, because not every sport leads to a lucrative professional career, and because lower-division schools are not on television as frequently, then there is less incentive to focus exclusively on athletics and more of an incentive to focus on academics for both coaches and student-athletes.

This study challenges previous research from an angle related to student-athlete attitude. Rather than student-athletes mentioning beginning with high aspirations that are worn down with skepticism from their professors and peers, as previous literature contends, the student-athletes interviewed in this study emphasize receiving positive messages from significant others as motivations to complete their degrees. With respect to messages from non-relatives or romantic interests, the messages coaches send matters far more than professors' messages. This is because players spend more time with their

coaches than with any specific instructor, and if coaches encourage academic achievement, be it through a high team grade-point average, assigning study hours, and/or allowing for missed practices, the message that school is important is sent, and student-athletes respond to it. The theme of maximizing effort suggests that student-athletes are intrinsically motivated to compete and improve their skills, both in their sports and in the classroom.

None of the interviewees in this study, whether graduated or currently studying, mention skepticism from their peers, and few mentioned negative responses from instructors. While negative comments are not mentioned, many mentioned contending with time constraints placed on them due to their athletics participation, such as practices and meetings. This is because team practices are held at specific times, and with attendance mandatory, student-athletes have to schedule their classes around practices. When coaches allow student-athletes to miss practice time without a penalty due to an academic obligation, it underscores the commitment to academic achievement. Conversely, coaches who do not allow student-athletes to miss practice time for classes do not reward effort in the classroom. This is not due to coaches having something against academics, but instead may be related to the pressures faced of having to win consistently in order to save their own jobs, and convey those pressures to their athletes.

In the rare instances that negative messages were conveyed from instructor or professor to student-athlete, student-athletes mentioned losing interest in their classes and doing enough to pass, but not trying to excel. This could be an example of a self-fulfilling

prophecy and labeling theory, in which someone with higher status – a professor – conveys to someone with lower status – an undergraduate student-athlete – that they doubt their competence or ability in the classroom, and as a consequence, the student-athlete underperforms in class because the message received is that they are not going to do well in the class as is, due to their status as an athlete.

If Cardale Jones in 2012 is typical of interviewees in their early collegiate years, his aggravated tweet becomes less surprising. This can be understood as a young adult frustrated as having to contend with new structural issues – how to manage his classes while competing for a starting job on a high-profile football team. In May 2017, Jones graduated from Ohio State University, and made fun of his earlier tweet, pasting “Sum1 once said we ain’t here to play school” on his graduation cap, and tweeting his intent to attend graduate school in December 2017, writing “went from not wanting to “play school” to wanting to go to grad school.” The contrast in his attitudes and tweets suggests a level of maturity and accepting education as worthy of his effort and time, and similar to other student-athletes, a shift in focus from sports to school. Jones tweeted and posted the picture highlighting his pride in his academic achievement while he was on a professional football roster, getting drafted by Buffalo in 2016, then going to Los Angeles. Jones is a success story in multiple respects: he was a scholarship athlete at a high-profile school, he graduated with a degree, began a professional athletic career, and has aspirations of continuing his education.

Although student-athletes may be hampered by issues identified in previous research, such as negative remarks from peers or instructors about their competence, ways of helping them focus on academics may be a combination of controllable factors: offering a variety of majors, which allows them to explore their intellectual passions, having the university adjust schedules so that there are a variety of easier and more difficult courses in the major are offered year-round, thus allowing for a mix of classes both in-season and during the off-season, encouraging intimate-other support of academics, and simply allowing for maturity over time. Further, schools can allow student-athletes to bank terms that they are in-season and not have them take courses during those terms, but instead reserving them once playing eligibility has been exhausted, allowing student-athletes to focus on their sport while in-season and academics while out of season. Further, being allowed to miss practice time in order to fulfill academic requirements while not risking losing playing time or a scholarship would also allow student-athletes to succeed in the classroom, as they would not have to sacrifice school for sports or the other way around. This would allow for more success in academics and athletics, as student-athletes' time and energy would be better focused. Thus, the keys to student-athlete academic success include both consistent messages from coaches and significant others, combined with the structural changes in how classes are taken and in terms of missing practice time to focus on academics.

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## Interview Guide

What did you study or are you currently studying in college?

Did you play any other sports growing up?

If you played other sports, were these for school, in organized youth leagues informally (just with friends), or some combination?

How do your parents view school and sports?

Did your parents attend college? If so, what degrees did they earn What did they study?

Did you have role models aside from your parents?

Where do you attend school?

What division/conference is it?

When did you start playing your sport competitively?

Did you attend a junior college/community college and transfer to a four-year school?

If yes, what have been the biggest differences between the JC and the four-year school? What was the toughest part of the transition? What was the easiest?

What differences did you notice with respect to classes and classwork between the schools?

Grade-wise, what does it take to be eligible to play in college?

How important are grades for you personally?

How important are grades to your teammates and coaches (both your own grades specifically and grades in general)?

How seriously do your teammates take their own grades?

Have you ever been told by a coach to focus only on your sport or on your classes?

Have you seen any teammates being told by coaches to focus on their sport or on their classes? If so, who told them to focus, and what were they told to focus on?

(If previous question is answered affirmatively): What year in school were these teammates?

Was there a difference in how your coach talked to players based on race or year in school?

How do you choose which classes to take?

What have some of your easier classes been?

What have some of your tougher classes been?

What has been the difference between easier and tougher classes? What made some easier/harder for you?

If so, what are you told about your chances of playing professionally?

If you have to travel out of town for a meet, what do you do to make sure that you don't fall behind in class?

If you had or have a midterm the same day as a meet or a game, how did or do you split your time and energy in preparing for both?

How do you define success academically?

How do you define success athletically?

How do you define success professionally?

What would you like me to know about being a student-athlete?