

Academic Achievement of NCAA Division III Athletes

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Abstract

A study of 215 athletes at a small private liberal arts Division III college revealed that athletes (a) begin their college experience with SATs no different from non-athletes; (b) attain GPAs that do not significantly differ from those of nonathletes; (c) achieve GPAs that do not significantly differ between their “in-season” semester and their “off-season” semester, and (d) perceive their GPA as important to their college and future success. These results indicate that Division III athletes are a valuable and important group of students who exhibit “sustainable” behavior as part of their college experience. The sustainability and growth of Division III institutions can rely on the recruitment of athletes to increase student numbers and revenue while maintaining the prestige and mission of the school.

The topics of academic performance and perceptions of athletes about GPA are areas that have been investigated by many researchers in Division III sports programs throughout the United States. Some studies have asserted that academic performance has been enhanced by student-athletes' participation in the varied sports programs while other studies have indicated a decline in this area due to the student-athletes' multi-faceted roles at Division III institutions.

Because of time demands placed on athletes, many researchers are concerned that athletes' GPAs will suffer, especially when the athletes are in season. Much research has been conducted on the academic performance of athletes, comparing GPA and SAT. The mission of Division III athletic programs goes hand-in-hand with the ethos of many small private liberal arts colleges in that athletics is seen as a valuable component of the athlete's overall educational experience and the student-athletes will be able to successfully complete their academic programs (NCAA mission statement). Despite the clarity of the Division III philosophy and the rules it has imposed to safeguard academic performance, evidence indicates student-athletes underperform as compared to their nonathletic peers (Aries, et al., 2004; College Sports Project, 2009; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). The College Sports Project (2009) reported a “consistent and widening academic performance gap between athletes and nonathletes” in a five-year longitudinal study of Division III schools. The Project examined the GPAs of athletes and nonathletes at 77 of the 447 Division III institutions where 80% of the institutions are private and only 20% are public. The most noticeable differences were found between GPAs of male athletes and male nonathletes. There was a smaller gap (reported as modest) between the female athletes and nonathletes. One important criterion to regard during the review of this study was the breakdown of data based on “institutional selectivity”. Schools' “institutional selectivity” was categorized by the use of

athletes' and nonathletes' combined SAT scores. Institutions with students who scored an average combined SAT score greater than 1250 were deemed "highly selective institutions". The GPA difference between student-athletes and nonathletes in this category was reported to be much greater than for those institutions labeled "less selective" with an average combined SAT of 1150 or lower. The CSP (2009) analysis concluded that SAT scores and precollege aptitude may be among the factors but do not fully account for the differences when comparing the GPAs of athletes and nonathletes. While the CSP (2009) analysis reviewed 77 schools, the CSP (2010) included 84 NCAA Division III colleges and universities. The CSP (2010) indicated similar findings to the 2009 report in terms of GPA differences.

Similarly, Umbach et al. (2006) used a national sample of athletes and nonathletes in Divisions I, II, III, and the NAIA to compare their academic achievement. Umbach et al. concluded that even after "controlling for pre-college achievement (SAT), male athletes earn lower grades and the gap between male athletes and nonathletes is greatest at Division III and NAIA schools" (p. 17). For all divisions, the data showed that female athletes and female nonathletes had similar grades.

Conversely, Hood, Craig, and Ferguson (1992) reported no differences in GPAs between athletes and nonathletes when SAT was "controlled for" first-year students. Additionally, no differences in GPAs were found by Richards & Aries (1999) in a study of 219 seniors (73 athletes and 146 nonathletes) at one Division III institution. The results indicated no significant difference between the GPAs of graduating athletes and of nonathletes, even though the athletes entered college with significantly lower combined math and verbal SAT scores than did nonathletes. Robst & Keil (2000) examined athletes' grades and graduation rates at a single Division III institution and found athletes had higher GPAs and higher graduation rates than nonathletes. From these studies, it is evident that certain variables, such as SAT scores, student classification, college size, population samples, and institutional selectivity affect the findings in regard to athlete vs. nonathlete GPAs.

The academic requirements at various Division III Colleges hold students to a very high standard of academic excellence. This is consistent with the findings of Umbach et al. (2006) who reported that both male and female students at Division III schools reported higher levels of academic challenge; furthermore, male and female student-athletes at Division III schools were more engaged than students at DI, DII, or NAIA schools in the following areas: levels of academic challenge, interaction with the faculty, engagement in active and collaborative learning activities, and gains in personal/social development. While Bowen & Levin (2003) found Division III athletes did not participate in effective educational practices to the same extent as nonathletes, Schroeder (2000) found that athletes spent an average of 15 hours per week studying, and that the majority of athletes earn GPAs exceeding 3.0. Moreover, Hada & Bauer (2006) indicated that Division III athletes showed a slight but not significant increase in their GPAs during their competitive season due to improved time-management skills and more time studying.

The researchers in this current study will ascertain the academic performance and perceived importance of GPA of athletes at a small private liberal arts college located in southern California using qualitative and quantitative research tools.

Methods

Participants

The target population for this study was Division III student-athletes at a small liberal arts college in Southern California. This college has approximately 1300 students, one-third of who participate in intercollegiate athletics. The college athletic department offers 21 sports, 11 male programs and 10 female programs. The sample consisted of 215 participants, 146 of whom were males and 69 were females. Of the 215 participants, 175 matriculated as freshman at the present college. The participants were: 62 freshmen, 63 sophomores, 54 juniors, and 36 seniors. Sports represented in this study include baseball, men's and women's basketball, men's and women's cross country, football, golf, men's and women's lacrosse, softball, men's and women's tennis, men's and women's track and field, men's swimming and diving, volleyball, men's and women's water polo, and men's and women's soccer.

Measures

The Athletic and Activity Participation Questionnaire was developed specifically for this exploratory study. The questionnaire was designed to elicit responses in the categories of athletic participation, academic load, time spent outside athletics, and importance of grade point average.

Data was also gathered from other campus resources. Information was collected from: the registrar's office, admissions' office, and the athletic department to ascertain the academic performance of the athletes during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Procedures

After seeking and receiving study approval from the Institutional Review Board/Human Subjects Protection Committee, the authors asked permission from the various coaches of the athletic teams to administer the survey to their athletes. Throughout the 2009-2010 academic year, the authors meet with the athletic teams to complete the survey during a team meeting. The student-athletes participated in the study voluntarily and the survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The participants were informed that their answers would remain confidential and their names would not be used in any published reports. After the surveys were completed, the participants' cumulative grade point averages as of the end of the spring semester and SAT/ACT scores were obtained from the registrar's office at the institution.

Data Analysis

To explore the relationship between SAT scores, hours spent studying, and perceived importance of GPA to overall cumulative GPA, Pearson Product Moment correlations were conducted. Paired sample t-tests were used to test the significance between hours spent on various activities while in-season versus during the off-season, GPAs of athletes and nonathletes, and GPAs of

athletes when in-season and off-season. In addition, descriptive statistics were carried out on the questionnaire items.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

During the 2009-2010 academic year, the college enrollment was 1335 students of which 406 were athletes (30.4% of the student population) and 929 were nonathletes (69.6% of the student population). The average number of credits taken by athletes was 13.5 and by nonathletes was 13.6. Data for the sample population of athletes found that the largest percentage of student-athletes (39.1%) was registered for 13 credit hours; however, 70% of the athletes registered for a “1 credit” in-season sport course. Also, the largest percentage of student-athletes (50.8%) said they spent 13-16 hours per week in class and labs. The average scores for the SAT exam for athletes were: Verbal = 507 and Math= 535, Total = 1040; and non-athletes Verbal = 535 and Math = 535; total =1069. The average overall cumulative GPA for athletes was 2.88 (males = 2.76; females = 3.00) and for nonathletes 2.91 (males = 2.81; females = 3.01).

Grade Point averages for the athletes were compared during in-season and off-season. Athletes’ GPAs in-season were 2.81 and during off-season they compiled a 2.88 GPA.

Mean scores were found for questions related to student athletes’ perceived importance of GPA. On a scale of 1= not at all to 5= very important, in response to the question “How important is your GPA to you?,” athletes reported a mean score of 4.60.

Relationship between Importance of GPA, SAT score and GPA

Examination of the Product Pearson Moment Correlation revealed a positive correlation between the student-athletes perceived importance of their GPA, SAT scores and overall cumulative GPA.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the academic achievement of athletes and nonathletes. The study reveals that Division III liberal arts athletes at this college (a) begin their college experience with SATs no different from non-athletes; (b) attain GPAs that do not significantly differ from those of nonathletes; (c) achieve GPAs that do not significantly differ between their “in-season” semester and their “off-season” semester, and (d) perceive their GPA as important to their college and future success.

Academic Achievement

Using the criteria of “institutional selectivity” as defined in the CSP report; this college would be labeled “less selective”, with average SAT scores at admission of 1150 or lower. The findings in this study agree with the findings of the CSP (2009 & 2010), Hood, Craig, and Ferguson (1992), and Richards and Aires (1999) in that cumulative GPA scores for athletes (2.88) and nonathletes (2.92) were not significantly different. The male athletes GPA scores (2.70) were lower than the male non-athletes (2.81), female athletes (3.00) and the female nonathletes (3.01). This study agrees with the Umbach et al (2006) findings that male athletes earn lower GPA scores but it does not agree with his conclusion that the gap between male athletes and nonathletes is greatest at Division III institutions, nor does it agree with athletes having higher GPAs than nonathletes (Robst & Keil, 2000).

In terms of academic performance comparing in-season to off-season, the data reveals that athletes actually perform somewhat better, measured by GPA scores, when they are in the off-season (in-season = 2.81 vs. off-season = 2.88). This finding is evident of a small increase in GPA during the off-season but was not found to be statistically significant. These results are in direct opposition to Hada and Bauer’s (2006) findings that Division III athletes achieved a slight increase in their GPAs during the competitive season.

The admissions criteria for this college in terms of the predictors of college success such as GPA (SAT scores) seem to be fairly consistent. Therefore, based on entering scores, the predicted success of athletes and non-athletes in the academic curricular was positive. All three areas of the SAT (verbal, math, & writing) had a positive correlation to earned GPA, significant at the .01 level. The athletes reported that their GPA was highly important for success in college. The athletes’ perceived importance of GPA to earned cumulative GPA was a positive correlation significant at the .05 level. The majority of athletes (80%) perceived the curriculum as very challenging, requiring them to devote a great deal of time focusing on their course work. The time attributed per day to studying was approximately 3.5 hours for in-season and for off-season was almost 4 hours. If the athletes studied 5 days per week for 3.5-4.0 hours each day they would be studying 17.5-20 hours per week. Study time (17.5-20 hours) and class time (13-16 hours) per week for athletes was very similar (30.5-36 hours per week) to the findings of the College Project (2009) of 39.4 hours a week attributed to academics for Division III athletes. These findings agree with Umbach et al. (2006) who found that male and female students at Division III schools reported higher levels of academic challenge. This was especially noted by the transfer athletes who entered the college from the community college system.

Future Research

Since this study was conducted on a single institution, replication studies are needed to determine if these results hold for other Division III liberal arts institutions. Continued investigation of this segment of the student population will provide greater insights into the importance and impact athletes have on the campus as a whole. A greater understanding of these topics may be attained by comparison between and within each classification (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, & Senior) and between and within individual and team sports. In order to investigate these topics more fully, the enhancement of the present questionnaire will be

developed to gather more detailed responses from the athletes and the development of a second questionnaire to obtain similar information from nonathletes for comparison purposes. Besides investigating athletes and nonathletes at the institution, the authors intend to explore the perceptions of faculty in regard to expectations of athletes in the areas of attendance, participation in class, participation in group projects and/or research, and the general concern for the athletes' academic success.

The sustainability and growth of Division III institutions can rely on the recruitment of athletes to increase student numbers and revenue while maintaining the prestige and mission of the school. The cross-disciplinary approach of liberal arts institutions provides a challenging educational curriculum. Athletes have the opportunity to succeed in the classroom as exhibited by the similar GPAs of athletes and nonathlete.

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Table 1.
Grade Point Averages of Athletic Teams

Men's Sports	GPA	Women's Sports	GPA
Baseball	2.80	Softball	2.91
Basketball	2.72	Basketball	2.87
Cross Country	3.08	Cross Country	3.02
Football	2.58	NA	
Golf	2.79	No Women	
Lacrosse	2.65	Lacrosse	3.19
Soccer	2.83	Soccer	3.10
Swimming	2.58	Swimming	3.18
Tennis	3.00	Tennis	3.27
Track & Field	2.69	Track & Field	3.00
Water Polo	2.56	Water Polo	2.56
		Volleyball	2.87
Average GPA	2.76		3.00
Cumulative Average GPA for Men and Women	2.88		

Table 2.
Mean Comparison of Athletes GPAs In-season and Off-season

GPAs	Mean	Std. Deviation	sig. (2 tailed)
In-Season	2.8085	.83402	.132
Off-Season	2.8799	.64258	

Table 3.
Correlations of Select Variables with Overall GPA

	GPA
1. GPA Importance	0.15*
2. Verbal SAT	0.39**
3. Math SAT	0.33**
4. Writing SAT	0.49**

Note: * significant at .05 ** significant at .01