

Does Playing for a National Championship Adversely Impact Grades of Student Athletes?

By

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## Abstract

In NCAA Divisions I-AA, II and III, there has been a single-elimination playoff system to determine football's national championships for over 25 years. In the same weeks that student athletes compete in the playoffs, they would be finishing their fall semester work and (perhaps) taking final exams. For athletes at XYZ, the demands made on a football player were made even more demanding by the success of the team. And football players at XYZ were able to handle the increased demands of playing lengthy seasons, even when those lengthy seasons conflicted with the final exam schedule, *with no detriment in their grades.*

## Does Playing a Lengthy Football Season Adversely Impact Grades of Student Athletes?

In Division I-AA, II and III, there has been a single-elimination playoff system to determine football's national championships for over 25 years. In Division II and III the playoff system started in 1973. The Division I-AA national championship playoff system started in 1978. The student athletes in Divisions I-AA, II and III can compete for 11 regular season games, and if their team secures a berth in the playoffs, can play four or five additional games before completing the season. The playoff games, especially the later ones, can come at an especially taxing time for student athletes with respect to their academic work. In the same weeks that student athletes compete in the playoffs, they may be finishing their fall semester (or quarter) work, turning in papers or projects, and (perhaps) taking final exams. These playoff games may create extra stress and role conflict for students already heavily burdened with academic work at the end of the semester.

The student athletes have (at least) two different roles in an institution of higher education; students and athletes. With respect to the athletic component, there might be drama, prestige and acclaim from administrators, faculty, staff and fellow students for participating on a team in serious competition for a national championship. The role of team player may become prominent on campus in the situation that a team has a chance to win a national championship. However, what about their role as students? Short of taking incompletes in a semester, academic work is due at about the same time as the football playoff games, especially those that come close in proximity to the national championship game. The length of a football season in Divisions I-AA, II and III can extend for four or five games beyond the regular season. The impact of these games on the student athletes' academic performance is unknown. Our core

research question is the following; do the grades of student athletes suffer if they play 15-16 football games in the fall?

The term student athlete combines two different roles; one of student and the other as athlete. Those two roles might put incompatible demands on a student athlete at any one time (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005).

### *Interrole conflict*

The literature identifies many different types of interrole conflict; role ambiguity (Beechr & Drelexer, 1986; Goldman & Chang, 1992); role boundary and role conflict stressors (Edwards, Clarke, Harrison, & Reeve, 2001; Gupta & Jenkins, 1981); role insufficiency (Rayburn, 1988) and role overload (Thomas, 2001). Most of these studies have investigated the relationship of inter role conflict between the worker and family (Aryee, 1992, Beechr, King, & King, 1990; Cooke & Rousseau, 1984; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Wiley, 1987), or student and outside agents such as work or family (Gerson, 1985; Settles, 2004)

Interrole conflict has been seen as both a negative and a positive influence on task performance. On the negative side, with incompatible expectations, people perform below their expectations (Goode, 1960). One perspective on inter role conflict is that psychic and physical time and energy of student athletes are finite. Students operate in a “zero sum” environment. The time and energy that the student invests in family, friends, athletics and other outside activities represent a reduction in the time and energy the student has to devote to his or her studies (Austin, 1984; Cohen, 1984).

However, interrole conflict has also been viewed as a positive influence on performance (Marks, 1977). These theorists take the perspective that human time and energy are both flexible and expandable (Marks, 1977). Multiple roles improve mental health (Gove, 1972) and provide

opportunities for the development of effective time management skills (Archer & Lamnin, 1985; Desmond & Glenwick, 1987).

*Interrole conflict applied to the student athlete playing football*

If we use Bryant and Clifton's 3-4 hour estimate and multiply that estimate by five (the number of practices a player would attend in a typical week during the season), and add six hours for a home football game, we come up with an estimate that 23.5 hours is spent by the student on athletics. The estimate of 23.5 hours would assume that the student athlete is off the day after a game and exercise routines like weightlifting are done in the same block of time as practice. Additional time should be factored in for travel to away games. At one NCAA Division II school (called XYZ), the team typically flies to games that are 750 or more miles away (given sufficient funds since it costs \$50,000 each time the team gets on a chartered plane); these away games can consume 18 hours of a student athlete's time. Round trip bus rides to games 650 miles away from home can consume over 24 hours of a student athlete's time. Averaging the amount of time for away games, plus practices gives us an estimate of about 38.5 hours for the road games, and an overall estimate of 30.3 hours a week that a student athlete devotes to football if a team played 55% of its regular season games at home. A workload of 30.3 hours for athletics is 80% of a 37.5 hour work week.

Reducing the credit load in season is one way for a student-athlete to deal with interrole conflict proactively. The student-athlete, anticipating a heavy total workload in the fall (academic + athletics), reduces that work load by taking fewer courses. Bryant and Clifton (1990) found that football players attempted fewer course credits in season, but there was no difference between the grades of football players' in-season (fall) and out-of-season (spring).

### *Hypotheses*

Given the disagreements in the literature on the positive and negative impact on interrole conflict on task performance, we test two non-directional hypotheses on length of season and in season/out of season grades. Bryant and Clifton's (1990) study lead us to hypothesize that the number of credits attempted by student athletes will be impacted partly as a function of whether the team is in-season or out-of-season.

H<sub>1</sub>: Increasing the length of a football season will impact student athletes' grade point average.

H<sub>2</sub>: In-season and out-of-season grades will be different for football players.

H<sub>3</sub>: Football players will attempt to take fewer credits in-season than out-of-season.

### *Methods*

Quantitative research methods were used to test the three hypotheses.

### *Dependent Variables*

Data was gathered in March, 2006, based on records of student athletes' grade point averages over the 2000-2004 academic years. Grade point averages and number of credits attempted were collected and analyzed for the fall and spring semesters, as well as the summer sessions for five academic years. Grade point average at XYZ was calculated on a scale where the grade of "A" was worth 4.0 points, a grade of "B" was worth 3.0 points, a grade of "C" was worth 2.0 points, a grade of "D" was worth 1.0 points and a grade of "F" was worth 0.0 points.

### *Independent Variables*

*Length of football season.* Each year of data was independently marked so that the researchers could distinguish the two years that XYZ played for the national championship, compared to the three years that XYZ was eliminated two or three weeks before the national championship game.

*In-season or out-of-season.* For football, the fall semester was considered in-season and the spring semester and summer was out-of-season. However, the distinction between in-season and out-of-season is not absolutely clear cut in football. In season, the players have a minimum of 10-11 games to play and practice five times a week when competing on Saturday. In the fall season, we estimate the players are spending about 30 hours a week on football.

The NCAA allows teams to practice for 15 days in the spring, so football spills over at least a little bit into the spring semester. Additionally, football players often lift weights regularly on their own out-of-season (Bryant & Clifton, 1990). Combining a rough guess for the amount of time a football player will spend weightlifting and the 15 spring practices gives us an estimated 9.4 hours per week spent on football during the spring, a savings of 20 hours a week, when compared to 30 hours spent in the fall. The summer sessions are out-of-season with respect to organized team practices, although student athletes may follow an exercise routine on their own.

## Results

Table 1 shows the results of the test for H<sub>1</sub>, the length of a football season hypothesis. We find the mean grade point average at XYZ in the years the team advanced all the way to the national championship game was 2.42, compared to 2.36 when the team was eliminated earlier in the playoff system. The mean difference in grade point average, 0.06 was statistically insignificant ( $t=0.63$ ,  $df=379$ , ns), so we find no support for H<sub>1</sub>. The effect size, 0.07, would be considered below small by Cohen's (1988) criterion.

*Table 1*

Grade point average of football players at XYZ by whether team played for national championship

Played for national championship?	Mean
Yes	2.418
No	2.364

Table 2 shows a partial test for H<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>3</sub>. We found the mean grade point average in the fall to be 2.41, virtually identical to the mean grade point average in the spring, 2.41. The mean difference in grade point average by semester, 0.006, was statistically insignificant ( $t=0.15$ ,  $df=343$ , ns), so we find no support for H<sub>2</sub>. The effect size, 0.01, would be considered below small by Cohen's (1988) criterion. We found that football players attempted an average of 12.85 credits in the fall and 12.49 credits in spring. Since we hypothesized that student athletes would take more credits out-of-season (in spring) than in-season (in fall) but we found the opposite, we have no support for H<sub>3</sub>.



Table 2

In season/out of season grade point average and number of credits

	Mean
Fall grade point average	2.408
Spring grade point average	2.413
Fall credits	12.85
Spring Credits	12.49

### Discussion

Student athletes did not suffer academically when playing an extended season of 15 football games and traveling from campus to play in a national championship game that forced the players to miss virtually the entire final exam schedule at their institution. Results for  $H_1$  showed that the student athletes' grades were slightly *higher* in the years XYZ competed for the national championship, compared to the years XYZ was eliminated earlier in the playoffs. Thus, the results for  $H_1$  support the notion by Marks (1977) that students' time and energy can be stretched, at least up to a point, and the extra 30 hours per week student athletes put into the football program at a sensitive time in the semester was not detrimental to their short term academic success, as measured by grade point averages.

Theorists who posit that interrole conflict will be detrimental to task performance discuss the "zero sum" environment for student athletes. The 30 hours per week a student athlete is putting into inter-collegiate competition takes away from the total time available for academics. But theorists positing a zero sum environment may be taking too narrow a view of the potential expansion of human energy when faced with incompatible demands. One can try to study and/or read on long bus trips. Effective time management skills can reduce interrole conflict, if student

athletes are able to focus on their academics during the short windows they have to complete their work. For athletes at XYZ, the demands made on a football player were made even more demanding by the success of the team. And football players at XYZ were able to handle the increased demands of playing lengthy seasons, even when those lengthy seasons conflicted with the final exam schedule *with no apparent detriment in their grades*.

If the results of this study can generalize to NCAA Division I football, we would conclude that the extension of the length of the football season from 11 to 12 regular season games won't make a difference in the grade point averages of student athletes. Additionally, we would conclude that if NCAA Division I went to the same type playoff structure as the other three football divisions (I-AA, II and III) the grades of the student athletes competing for the national championship would, on average, be no different than if their team was eliminated from competition weeks earlier, or participating on a team that was not playoff bound.

The presidents of NCAA Division I football programs have argued against a playoff system used at the other three NCAA levels because the presidents felt that the student athletes would be disadvantaged in the classroom due to increasing the length of the football season. The analysis reported here shows the presidents of NCAA Division I football programs may be mistaken in their conclusion that increasing the length of the football season decreases academic performance at least as measured by grades. We find virtually no difference in grade point average in seasons with maximum length (a team playing for the national championship) and shorter seasons (team eliminated before the national championship game).

Lastly, the public can take some comfort in knowing that athletes playing for a national championship, used successfully by presidents, athletic directors and other administrators for fund raising and highlighting the accomplishments of an institution of higher learning did not

come at the price of students performing poorly in the classroom. The athletes can compete for a national championship; the institution can bask in the honor and prestige of such an event knowing that the student athletes were performing at a high level on the football field, and their success in athletics was not detrimental to their other role on campus, those of students.

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