"Going Pro in Something Other Than Sports": The Effect of a Division I Student-athlete's Prospect of Having a Professional Career in Their Sport on Academic Performance

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Abstract

This research proposal addresses one of the most pressing issues in collegiate athletics: the academic performance of student-athletes. The proposed study aims to examine the effect that a Division I student-athlete's prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college has on their academic performance. With the implementation of academic standards set by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), research indicates that certain groups of student-athletes may fair worse in their studies than others, namely male athletes of high-revenue sports, and it is argued that it is the responsibility of the institutions to provide the academic support necessary to help these student-athletes succeed. Many athletes have their eyes set on a professional career in their sport; however, statistics show that most of them will not fulfill those aspirations. Therefore it is vitally important that they gain a valuable education that prepares them for the workforce. This study proposes a quantitative analysis of grade point average (GPA) data of Division I collegiate student-athletes in order to compare the academic performance of student-athletes that participated in a sport that gives them the prospect of having a professional career after college, and student-athletes that participated in a sport that does not give them that prospect while controlling for other factors such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, etc. The findings can aid institutions in enhancing their academic support services offered, thus facilitating their ability to ensure academic success among their student-athletes.

Keywords: college performance, GPA, college sports, career perspective

"Going Pro in Something Other Than Sports": The Effect of a Division I Student-athlete's Prospect of Having a Professional Career in Their Sport on Academic Performance

"There are over 380,000 student-athletes, and most of us go pro in something other than sports." - This was the tagline in a 2007 branding campaign by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), addressing the harsh reality that, despite their aspirations, very few collegiate student-athletes go on to pursue a professional career in their sport after college. That being said, the NCAA emphasizes the importance of athletes gaining a meaningful and valuable education that prepares them to be successful in the workforce (2007). At the Division I level, this has led to the implementation of firm standards of academic performance for student-athletes among member institutions; however, research calls into question the effectiveness of the standards in accomplishing their intended goal (Benford, 2007; Blackman, 2008; Bruton, 2002; Mondello, 2000; Nwadike et al., 2016). There is wide concern that student-athletes are being deprived of a meaningful educational experience due to major "clustering" (Benford, 2007; Paskus, 2012; Paule & Gilson, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2007), academic fraud (Adamek, 2017; Benford, 2007; Ridpath et al., 2007; Upthegrove et al., 1999), and inadequate support services that are designed to merely maintain the eligibility of student-athletes to compete rather than enhance their academic success (Adamek, 2017; Benford, 2007; Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010).

Thus, student-athletes "are placed in a contradictory position--one in which decisions regarding athletic and academic commitment seem at odds" (Upthegrove et al., 1999, p. 734). Many scholars have studied the effects that athletic participation has on the academic performance of Division I student-athletes (Beron & Piquero, 2016; Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; Paskus, 2012; Paule & Gilson, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2007; Routon & Walker, 2015; Scott et al., 2008; Upthegrove et al., 1999; Vogel et al., 2019). Pressure to perform both athletically and

academically, while balancing heavy time demands have been attributed to negative impacts on the academic performance of these athletes, especially those in higher-profile sports (Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; Ridpath et al., 2007; Routon & Walker, 2015; Upthegrove et al., 1999). Although there has been research that acknowledges how a student-athlete's personal goals may affect their academics; very few studies focused specifically on, arguably, the target audience of the 2007 NCAA campaign: those who have their eyes set on a professional career in their sport.

This proposal seeks to gain a better understanding of what drives the differences in academic performance between student-athletes who participated in a sport that gives them the prospect of having a professional career after college, and student-athletes who participated in a sport that does not give them that prospect. The findings of this proposed study can aid athletic administrators, coaches, and academic staff in the enhancement of the academic support services they offer. Identifying the student-athletes who tend to struggle, and the areas that need improvement will be essential in designing programs that ensure their long-term success, both in the classroom and in their future endeavors. Essentially, it will allow them to "go pro in something other than their sport."

Literature Review

Since its founding in 1906, the NCAA has been faced with the challenge of supporting student-athletes to maintain the balance between athletics and academics. In the Constitution of the Division I manual (2022), the NCAA defines its commitment to sound academic standards as one of the primary purposes of the organization:

> "Standards of the Association governing participation in intercollegiate athletics shall be designed to ensure proper emphasis on educational objectives and the opportunity for academic success, including graduation, of student-athletes.

> Intercollegiate athletics programs shall be maintained as an important component of the educational program, and student-athletes shall be an integral part of the student body" (p. xiii).

In order to uphold this standard, the NCAA has developed minimum requirements for current and prospective Division I student-athletes to be eligible to compete in their sport. This includes maintaining a 2.3 grade point average (GPA), achieving a certain percentage of progress toward their degree after each academic year (40% by the end of year two, 60% by the end of year three, and 80% by the end of year four), and more recently, the Academic Progress Rate (APR) evaluation. The NCAA's rationale for its academic standards is to maximize graduation rates among student-athletes. There are data supporting that student-athletes who meet the percentage-of-degree requirements and minimum GPA standards are most likely to graduate (NCAA, 2021). This falls in line with the organization's overarching goal of integrating athletics with academics, and the NCAA website (2021) states, "because we believe success in the classroom is just as important as winning on the field, we have standards to ensure student-athletes make progress toward a degree – every year and every season" (para. 1). In what is arguably the "most passionately contested issue in the history of college athletics" (Mondello, 2000, p. 128), the academic standards set by the NCAA have both critics and supporters, and many have sought out to determine if they are actually effective. Many have argued that the standards have had a disparate impact on both ethnoracial minority and/or low-income student-athletes (Blackman, 2008; Bruton, 2002; Mondello, 2000; Nwadike et al., 2016). However, in the case *Cureton v. NCAA* (1999), which concerned this matter, the court held that the NCAA's desire to raise student-athlete graduation rates was a well-documented and legitimate goal. Scholars have found that the standards have succeeded in increasing eligibility, retention, and graduation of student-

athletes (Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; Paskus, 2012) because schools are able to recognize deficiencies and implement change (Paskus, 2012). However, there is still progress to be made in assessing the academic risk of student-athletes (Paskus, 2012). Benford (2007) and others have argued that these reforms fail to produce lasting structural and cultural change.

As the NCAA raised its academic standards, athletic departments began to commit violations in order to keep their players eligible to compete, known as academic fraud (Adamek, 2017). Bylaw 14 of the Division I NCAA manual defines academic fraud as "knowing involvement in arranging for fraudulent academic credit or false transcripts" and "providing impermissible academic assistance" to a prospective or an enrolled student-athlete (2016). Colleges or universities willing to commit these violations have been accused of putting the athlete status of their student-athletes ahead of their student status (Ridpath et al., 2007; Upthegrove et al., 1999), and prioritizing winning over academic integrity (Adamek, 2017; Benford, 2007). At the basic level, this is seen in what has been deemed "academic clustering." "Academic clustering" is when athletes are systematically guided into less rigorous classes and majors with "professor-friendly" courses with the purpose of maintaining their academic eligibility while competing (Ridpath et al., 2007, pg. 62; see also Benford, 2007; Paskus, 2012; Paule & Gilson, 2011). Even further, there have been many instances of athletic departments blatantly covering up student-athletes' academic dishonesty and cheating with the assistance of faculty, tutors, and academic support, which can amount to publicized crimes (Benford, 2007). Many scholars share the common concern that these problems have only gotten worse through the commercialization of college sports, which has emphasized revenue generated by television contracts, product endorsements, and advertisements (Adamek, 2017; Benford, 2007; Upthegrove et al., 1999). Athletic departments have demonstrated they are willing to break the

rules and commit academic fraud when it comes to maximizing this revenue potential (Adamek, 2017). This is especially true when it comes to the college sports that bring in the most money, Division I men's basketball and football, which have become highly profitable enterprises (Benford, 2007) that institutions have learned to depend on for the generation of revenue (Upthegrove et al., 1999). Studies confirm that these revenue sports are more likely to engage in academic fraud, accounting for over 70% of cases; and that the more revenue a sport brings to a university, the greater the likelihood that academic misconduct will occur (Adamek, 2017). Overall, this has led to a distortion of the academic values of intercollegiate athletics as well as the undermining of the integrity and mission of higher education (Benford, 2007; Upthegrove et al., 1999). More importantly, "athletes are cheated out of the one thing they were promised in return for their athletic performance: a college education" (Benford, 2007, p. 15).

With the NCAA's goal of restoring the educational value of the student-athlete experience, there has been a plethora of research done to determine the effects that athletic participation has on the academic performance of Division I student-athletes. Research shows that the academic difficulties of athletes vary in revenue-generating and non-revenue-generating sports (Paskus, 2012; Paule & Gilson, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2007; Routon & Walker, 2015; Scott et al., 2008; Upthegrove et al., 1999), gender (Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; Ridpath et al., 2007; Routon & Walker, 2015), as well as the student-athletes self-identity and future goals regarding their athlete status (Paskus, 2012; Ridpath et al., 2007; Routon & Walker, 2015; Upthegrove et al., 1999; Vogel et al., 2019). The largest disparity in academic performance has been found in athletes participating in the traditional revenue sports of men's basketball and football, with research showing their academics are negatively impacted by their athletic endeavors (Ridpath et al., 2007; Routon & Walker, 2015; Upthegrove et al., 1999). The GPA of revenue student-

athletes are averaged at .19-.3 lower than that of their non-revenue student-athlete counterparts (Routon & Walker, 2015; Upthegrove et al., 1999), and they are twice as likely to have been placed on academic probation and have to repeat courses (Upthegrove et al., 1999). The heightened level of competitive intensity in revenue sports puts these athletes at a disadvantage academically (Upthegrove et al., 1999) due to the heavy time demands (Routon & Walker, 2015), as well as the pressures put on them to win games taking priority over academic work (Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; Ridpath et al., 2007). In contrast, non-revenue student-athletes revealed more positive than negative associations with academics while pursuing their athletic careers including increased goal-setting and discipline (Paule & Gilson, 2011).

Women's sports as a whole are generally included in the non-revenue category (Ridpath et al., 2007), and studies show that female student-athletes achieve significantly higher academic levels than male student-athletes (Eng, 2015; Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; Eng, 2015; Ridpath et al., 2007; Tudor & Ridpath, 2019). Male student-athletes often experience role conflict occurring between athletics and the monetary incentives of revenue sports, and their academic endeavors (Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; Eng, 2015), which arguably causes them to struggle academically and decrease their chances of graduating (Eng, 2015). On the other hand, female athletes are able to avoid this conflict, allowing them to adhere to the "ideal student-athlete model" (Eng, 2015, p. 186). They are more likely to put a larger emphasis on academics, have the ability to balance time better, and show an increased commitment to complete their degree (Eng, 2015; Tudor & Ridpath, 2019).

A common thread highlighted by many scholars in explaining the difference in academic achievement between male revenue student-athletes and their female and nonrevenue student-athlete counterparts is their self-identity and personal goals (Paskus, 2012; Ridpath et al., 2007;

Routon & Walker, 2015; Tudor & Ridpath, 2019; Upthegrove et al., 1999; Vogel et al., 2019). Male student-athletes in high-profile revenue sports are prone to have a higher athletic identity than academic identity (Paskus, 2012; Vogel et al., 2019), and many have indicated that they would not have attended college had they not been an athlete (Upthegrove et al., 1999; Vogel et al., 2019). They often come to college solely to advance their athletic careers (Ridpath et al., 2007), rendering many unprepared for and uninterested in obtaining a degree, causing them to struggle academically and have lower GPAs (Upthegrove et al., 1999; Vogel et al., 2019). In contrast, studies show that female nonrevenue student-athletes have higher academic motivation and lower sport motivation than their male counterparts (Tudor & Ridpath, 2019), and were more willing to sacrifice athletics participation for academics (Vogel et al., 2019). This can largely be attributed to it being more likely for male revenue student-athletes to believe they will play their sport professionally (Paskus, 2012; Upthegrove et al., 1999; Vogel et al., 2019), as research indicates a student-athlete's prospect of having a career in their sport after college is positively correlated with athlete identity (Beron & Piquero, 2016). Over 75% of Division I men's basketball players have expectations of a professional career, with a large number of women's basketball, football, and baseball players also having such expectations (Paskus, 2012). With the likelihood of continuing as a professional athlete after college ranging from 1-9% (NCAA), unfortunately, the vast majority of these athletes will not fulfill these aspirations (Routon & Walker, 2015) and their education will be sacrificed in the process (Upthegrove et al., 1999).

Many scholars argue that it is the university's obligation to provide the academic services and support that the student-athletes need to succeed academically (Adamek, 2017; Benford, 2007; Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; Paskus, 2012; Paule & Gilson, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2008; Upthegrove et al., 1999; Vogel et al., 2019). Most colleges have implemented these

academic support services; however, they are often designed merely to maintain the eligibility of the student-athletes (Adamek, 2017; Benford, 2007) rather than to provide them with the tools they need to succeed academically (Benford, 2007). It has been argued that this not only deprives them of a quality educational experience, but it also hinders their ability to succeed in the adult world (Benford, 2007; Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010). However, it must be taken into account that the disparity in academics between various student-athletes could stem from background demographics such as ethnoracial and/or socioeconomic status that may result in inequalities on an individual basis. Therefore, academic support programs are not "one size fits all" (Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010, para. 21), and schools need to recognize the magnitude of risk for certain sports and student-athletes (Paskus, 2012).

Research Question and Hypothesis

This research proposal builds on existing research and takes on a new perspective by investigating the question: Does a Division I student-athletes prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college affect their academic performance? The two groups for comparison will be student-athletes who participated in a sport that gives them the prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college, and student-athletes who participated in a sport that does not give them that prospect. By comparing the academic performance of these two groups, this study will test the hypothesis that: If a Division I student-athlete has the prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college, then it will negatively affect their academic performance because their athletic career will take priority over their academic success.

Proposed Methods and Data

This section discusses the proposed methods of data collection and analysis for this

research project in order to examine whether Division I student-athletes' prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college has an effect on their academic performance. This proposed study would entail a quantitative analysis of GPA data of collegiate student-athletes and will utilize a comparative research design.

Due to the large amount of Division I athletes across the United States, this proposed study will purely focus on a sample of student-athletes at a small mid-major Division I institution in the Northeast Conference (NEC). The participants in this study will include the 21 NCAA Division I sports teams offered by this institution, comprised of eight men's teams and 13 women's teams, for the 2017-2019 and 2021-2023 school years pictured in Table 1. Due to the overlap of student-athletes in track and field and cross country, these sports will be counted as one men's sport and one women's sport for logistics purposes.

Table 1

Overview of sports to be included in the study

Men's Sports	Women's Sports
Baseball	Basketball
Basketball	Bowling
Cross Country/Track & Field	Cross Country/Track & Field
Football	Fencing
Golf	Field Hockey
Lacrosse	Golf
Tennis	Lacrosse
Water Polo	Soccer
	Softball
	Swimming & Diving
	Tennis
	Triathlon
	Water Polo

The eligibility rosters of each team will be obtained from the University's athletic department which will be used to determine which student-athletes were eligible and ineligible for competition during the 2017-2019 and 2021-2023 school years. Additionally, the participation statistics for each sport will be acquired from the athletic department to determine which student-athletes competed in games or matches for both school years. Only student-athletes who were eligible, and competed in at least one game or match will be included in the study; all other participants will be excluded. The GPA data for each student-athlete will be obtained in an anonymized list from the registrar's office at the institution, along with each student-athlete's race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, scholarship amount, country of origin, major, and if they are a transfer student. Data will then be separated into two groups for comparison: student-athletes who participated in a sport that gives them the prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college, and student-athletes who participated in a sport that does not give them that prospect. For the purposes of this study, this differentiation, shown in Table 2 is based on the major professional sports leagues in the United States that provide the ability to make a living.

Table 2

Separation of sports teams for comparison

Sports that provide the prospect of having a professional career after college	Sports that do not provide the prospect of having a professional career after college
Football	Men's and Women's Cross Country/Track & Field
Men's and Women's Basketball	Men's and Women's Lacrosse
Baseball	Men's and Women's Water Polo
Men's Golf	Women's Bowling
Men's and Women's Tennis	Women's Fencing
	Women's Field Hockey
	Women's Golf
	Women's Soccer
	Softball
	Women's Swimming & Diving
	Women's Triathlon

The cumulative GPA of each student-athlete at the end of the 2017-2019 and 2021-2023 academic years will be used in order to determine the academic performance of the teams in each respective group. GPA is an optimal dependent variable because it is the most common measure of academic performance in higher education. The independent variable in question is the type of sport played by the student-athletes. As this study is intended to examine whether Division I student-athletes' prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college has an effect on their academic performance; GPAs of the sports teams designated to have a prospect of having a professional career will be compared with the sports teams that do not have that designation. A comparative design is ideal because the variables in question are unable to be manipulated, and this study aims to examine the difference between the dependent variable of the two preexisting groups. Analysis of this data will be done through an independent t-test. However, it must be taken into account that preexisting differences among student-athletes could

potentially impact their GPA alongside athletic participation. Therefore, race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, scholarship amount, country of origin, major, and transfer status will be considered as control variables for the purpose of this study and will be analyzed using regression models. These variables were chosen because they potentially play a role in what sport the student-athletes tend to gravitate towards, and have a resulting impact on their academic performance. Additional models will be run to complement the above-mentioned analysis.

The first step in conducting the quantitative analysis of this study will be to clean the data and prepare it to run various tests and models using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The statistical technique used for analysis will be an independent t-test in order to compare the means of the GPA of the respective groups. This proposed study will be concerned with determining whether or not there is a statistically significant difference between the mean GPAs of the two groups for the 2017-2019 and 2021-2023 school years. The extent of this difference will give insight into the effect that playing a Division I sport that provides the prospect of having a professional career has on the academic performance of student-athletes. As an independent t-test is a parametric test, assumptions must be met to ensure accurate analysis. This includes normal distribution of data, homogeneity of variance, a continuous dependent variable, and independence of each group. Next, a multiple regression will be performed using dummy variables of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, scholarship amount, country of origin, major, and if the student-athlete transferred to the institution. Multiple regression assumptions, such as linearity, homoskedasticity, independence of errors, normality, and independence of independent variables will also be examined. This regression analysis is suitable because it provides insight into how multiple demographic and institutional factors contribute to variability

in the dependent variable (GPA). Additional tests and correlations will be conducted to ensure that all factors are considered.

Expected Findings

The expected findings for this proposed study are that Division I student-athletes who have the prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college will have a significantly lower cumulative GPA than student-athletes who do not have that prospect. As stated in the literature review, a majority of the student-athletes who have the potential to play professionally have aspirations and expectations to do so (Paskus, 2012; Upthegrove et al., 1999; Vogel et al., 2019). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that their main focus will be on enhancing their athletic career, and take priority over their studies; leading their academic performance to decline in the process. It is also plausible that demographic factors can impacts student-athletes' academic underperformance. For example, earlier research showed that Black American men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were overrepresented in both football and men's basketball (Upthegrove et al., 1999). Given continued residential segregation and systemic racism, many of these student-athletes likely did not have access to quality K-12 schooling with the resources to prepare them to succeed in college. Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect that these preexisting inequalities will persist into college alongside athletic participation and contribute to lower levels of academic achievement. At the same time, scholarship has documented wide-spread discrimination against Black male students in the college classroom; both by their peers and non-Black faculty (Griffith et al., 2019) which could lead these students to look for other areas where they feel respected and where success is within reach. On the other hand, student-athletes who are not afforded the opportunity of a professional career in their sport are expected to have an increased GPA. It is likely they will place a larger

commitment on academics and obtaining a degree that will prepare them for a career in the workforce. In addition, the study would also uncover whether student-athletes who tend to gravitate towards these sports are more likely to come from middle and upper-class backgrounds that afford them access to a high-quality education or not.

This data has the potential to provide important insight and allow for a better understanding of risk factors associated with the academic performance of student-athletes. In acknowledging problem areas, this study can aid athletic administrators, coaches, and academic staff in making informed decisions about providing student-athletes with the necessary support needed to ensure their long-term success, both in the classroom and in their future endeavors. As previously mentioned, a substantial amount of Division I student-athletes have the expectation of continuing their sport professionally; however, only an estimated two percent of them will fulfill those expectations (NCAA). Given this reality, it is of utmost importance that the education of these student-athletes is not sacrificed for their collegiate athletic career, and they are provided with the tools necessary to succeed in the workforce. It has been argued by many that it is the job of the institution to provide these tools through academic services and support (Adamek, 2017; Benford, 2007; Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010; Paskus, 2012; Paule & Gilson, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2008; Upthegrove et al., 1999; Vogel et al., 2019). The information provided by this proposed study can assist institutions in identifying the student-athletes that are shown to struggle, allowing them to be more proactive about what forms of academic support need to be implemented, and the specialization of these programs. This will ultimately be essential in facilitating and enhancing their ability to promote overall academic success among student-athletes.

Conclusion

Overall, this proposed study aims to provide important insight and extend the current research on a recent major concern in collegiate athletics: the academic performance of student-athletes. The proposed analysis of GPA data of Division I collegiate student-athletes seeks to answer the question of whether a Division I student-athletes prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college affects their academic performance as well as the significance other factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. have. Following a comparative design, the expected findings of this proposed study are that Division I student-athletes who have the prospect of having a professional career in their sport after college will have a significantly lower cumulative GPA than student-athletes that do not have that prospect. Given the reality that it is statistically unlikely that student-athletes will go on to pursue a professional career in their sport after college, it is of utmost importance that these athletes gain a meaningful and valuable education that prepares them to be successful in the workforce. This proposed study can aid institutions in enhancing their academic support services offered, thus facilitating their ability to ensure academic success among their student-athletes and provide them with a valuable educational experience, and address any biases and forms of discrimination that affect student-athletes.

The findings of this proposed study have limitations, which are related to the sample to be used. As the intended sample consists of Division I athletes at a relatively small mid-major institution in the NEC conference, it slightly reduces the generalizability of the results of the study. More specifically, student-athletes at larger universities in more competitive conferences may differ in the extent to which their academic performance is affected. In addition, the overall ethnoracial make-up of the student population could also influence student-athletes experiences,

especially since the proposed sample is from a Predominantly White Institution. Upon completion of this proposed study, it may be beneficial to extend the research to include data from a wide variety of colleges and universities. Nonetheless, this proposed study can be used to enhance the student-athlete educational experience and promote success, while also shedding light on the factors that cause student-athletes to gravitate toward certain sports and the resulting impacts on their academics.

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