Beyond the Headlines: Examining the College Experiences of Division I High-Profile Athletes

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Today’s Critics Claim

- “Big-Man on Campus” continues
- Academic preparation deficiencies
- Waived admissions standards
- Sub-par classroom performance
- Commercialization and financial rewards
- NCAA violations and scandals
- Constant media coverage

Notable recent critics

- Shulman and Bowen, 2001; Bowen and Levin, 2003
- Elite and selective DIII institutions
- Academic deficiencies as compared to non-athlete peers
- Receive lower grades
- However graduate at consistent rates
- Acknowledge challenges faced by DI or big-time sports programs may differ

Cognitive development

- Pascarella, 1995; Pascarella, 1999
  - More diverse institutions
  - Males in revenue sports showed fewer gains in writing, reading, critical thinking skills
  - Males in non-revenue sports similar cognitive development to non-athletes
  - Females on average have similar cognitive development

Student engagement

- Umbach, 2005; Umbach, in press;
  - Male/female athletes similar to non-athletes
    - Academic challenge
    - Faculty interaction
    - Active and collaborative learning
    - Support from campus environment
  - Differences across NCAA division
    - DI males less active and collaborative learning than DIII, DI females less than DII and DIII
    - DIII athletes report more campus support

Purpose for Study

- Address gaps and further previous research efforts
- Extend previous research through
  - Use of a national sample
  - Identification of individual sports of participants
  - Inclusion of female athletes
High-Profile Student-Athletes

- "Revenue-Generating" vs. "High-Profile"
- Qualifying as "High-Profile"
  - Degree of broadcast media coverage
  - Nature of recruitment process
  - Existence of lucrative professional opportunities
- Football and men’s and women’s basketball student-athletes exist in a "fish-bowl" more than any other intercollegiate sport

Research Question

- Do high-profile student-athletes differ from their non-athlete peers across the following three areas?
  - Engagement in activities (e.g., interactions with faculty) associated with positive educational outcomes
  - Positive perceptions of the campus environment
  - Self-reported gains with learning and intellectual development

Data Source & Sample

- 2004 and 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
- 67,000 randomly-sampled first-year respondents from 195 NCAA Division I institutions
- Characteristics: 64% female; 12% minority; 97% full-time
- 6% compete in an NCAA championship sport
- 540 and 119 high-profile male and female student-athletes

Measures: Dependent Variables

- Engagement Scales
  - Level of Academic Challenge (a=.73)
  - Active & Collaborative Learning (a=.63)
  - Student-Faculty Interaction (a=.71)
- Perceptions of the Campus Environment Scales
  - Supportive Campus Environment (a=.73)
  - Satisfaction with College Experience (a=.74)
- Self-reported Gains Scales
  - Personal and Social Development (a=.86)
  - General Education (a=.82)
  - Practical Competence (a=.76)

Measures: Control Variables

- Ethnicity
- First-generation college student
- Non-traditional aged student (>24 years)
- Full-time enrollment
- Greek (social fraternity or sorority)
- Living on or near campus
- Transfer
- Expected (or declared) academic major

Analytical Approach

- OLS regression models for males and females (before & after controls)
- Dummy variables for high-profile and non-high-profile athletes created; non-athletes used as reference group
- Standardized dependent variables
  - Unstandardized regression coefficients equal effect size: help estimate the standard deviation difference between high-profile athletes and non-athletes
Effect sizes comparing first-year high-profile student-athletes to non-athletes (with controls)

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*p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Limitations

- Small “N” for female high-profile athletes
- Limited number of statistical controls
  - Academic motivation
  - Pre-college ability
- Multi-level model not used

Discussion and Implications

- Support that the experiences of high-profile student athletes on-average are comparable to non-athletes
- Evidence supports multi-faceted nature of the student-athlete experience
  - Grades, graduation rates, cognitive gains, activities and effort expended
- Timely research given rising media coverage and critic calls for athletic reform

Questions & Discussion

- Increased assessment efforts needed to ensure experiences of all athletes are considered
- Male high-profile athlete satisfaction warrants further consideration
- Results suggest benefits/challenges of athletic participation not same for men and women
- Further research on the benefits and success stories that come from athletic participation