



Perceptions of College Student-Athletes

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Abstract Although intercollegiate athletics provides positive exposure and potential revenue for universities, student-athletes may be perceived by their fellow students as getting special treatment. This study explores perceptions that students may have about student-athletes. Undergraduate students ($N=380$) at a public Division I university in the Southeast were surveyed. Students overwhelmingly agreed that student-athletes should be paid. A majority of student-athletes agreed that they are graded fairly and equitably compared with non-athletes. However, non-athletes did not share this view. Females, in particular express ambivalence about whether or not student-athletes are graded fairly. The implication is that females more than males perceive that student-athletes receive leniency in grading. Half of non-athletes disagreed with the statement that student-athletes give their academic work the same attention as their athletics. Roughly same proportion of athletes agreed as disagreed with the statement. Juniors and seniors perceive student-athletes as giving more attention to athletics than academics. This is despite the fact that more than half of the juniors and seniors were athletes.

Index Terms— student-athletes, perceptions, accommodation, college

INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of College Student-Athletes and send messages to their friends and family. Social media are also used to develop a professional network to establish and strengthen relationships in the business world.

While student-athletes have a unique college experience, they are faced with special challenges. The biggest challenge for student-athletes is balancing athletics and academics so that they can be successful in both. Sedlack and Adams-Gatson (1992) claimed that student-athletes should be considered nontraditional students with their own culture and problems relating to the university.

In this culture, special burdens are put on these “nontraditional students” from the university they attend. Some who come in contact with student-athletes view them more as athletes than as students (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). They are expected to be both academically and athletically successful and are required to meet the same academic demands as non-athletes.

Some of the conditions that often give rise to perceptions of special treatment for student-athletes include how much time student-athletes must dedicate to their sport, revenue that sports generate for the university, the number and amount of athletic versus academic scholarships, and a variety of accommodations student-athletes may be provided. Relevant research related to these and other conditions will be presented. The methods

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used to collect data for this research will be described. The results will then be presented along with suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Time Commitment to Sports

College student-athletes tend to dedicate more time to their particular sport or sports rather than their academics (Gutting, 2012). Although student-athletes value their overall college experience and express a belief that athletic participation contributes in important ways to their personal and academic development, they may be shortchanged academically because of their time commitment to sports (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). Athletic culture, time demands of their sport, and the often uneasy marriage between athletics and academics in the university setting all contribute to the difficulties that student-athletes face in “making it” academically (Jolly, 2008). A majority of athletes (82%) reported that, during the season, that they spend more than 10 hours a week practicing and 40% reported that they spend more than 10 hours a week participating in competition (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) found that 53% of student-athletes reported feeling as though they did not spend as much time on all aspects of their academics as they wished due to athletic participation. Eleven percent stated that athletics prevented them from majoring in what they really wanted to pursue. The majority of student-athletes reported that the demands of intercollegiate athletic competition prevented them from devoting as much time to the student side of their lives as they would like (Jolly, 2008). Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) found that 70% of student-athletes stated that there were educational opportunities (internships, research projects, study abroad, etc.) that they could not participate in because of athletic participation. Additionally, 60% stated that there were campus events (speakers, plays, concerts, etc.) that they were interested in but were unable to attend because of their athletic time demands.

Students may develop a negative attitude or perception about student-athletes because student-athletes tend to spend most of their time with fellow student-athletes (Comeax, 2011). Time and scheduling demands can contribute to difficulties in student-athletes integrating into campus academic life (Jolly, 2008). Compared to non-athletes, intercollegiate athletes tend to be somewhat segregated from the general student population because they spend more time with other athletes during practice, tend to have similar experiences as other athletes, and have access to special athletic facilities. This separation creates a

form of social categorization on college campuses—a division between non-athletes and student-athletes that could be strong enough to elicit both in-group favoritism and out-group effects when presented with a variety of scenarios describing either a deviant athlete or non-athlete student (Hawley, Hosch & Bovaird, 2014).

Student-athletes and Money

College student-athletes are money makers. For example, the NCAA’s men’s basketball tournament takes place every spring. The broadcast of the tournament generates over \$1 billion annually for the CBS and TBS networks (Smith, 2013). The NCAA will earn about six \$6 billion annually through their partner schools’ participation in popular sports events such the March Madness Tournament (Brill, 2013). Each athletic conference receives a large payout when their teams advance in the tournament. It is noteworthy that schools in this discussion mainly compete at the NCAA’s Division I level. This is because prior studies have shown that athletic programs that compete at the Division II and Division III levels are more likely to have lower expectations from participating schools (Cockley & Roswal, 1994; Lawrence, 2009).

College athletes can also fall victim to short-term and long-term injuries that potentially jeopardize an athletes’ potential to turn professional in his or her respective sport. Because of this, and the fact that college athletics generates a tremendous amount of money, the question of whether or not student-athletes should be paid has become a controversial debate (Brill, 2013). Some express a belief that athletes are entitled to monetary payment, but many also state a belief that an athlete’s education is his or her compensation and that they should be grateful for that.

Perceptions and Expectations

A less recognized but still influential burden faced by athletes is the negative perceptions and expectations by faculty and other students. In a 2007 study, Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, and Jenson concluded that athletes are stigmatized in higher education based on the “dumb jock” stereotype and media portrayals. A stigmatized individual is one who possess an attribute that is “deeply discrediting” and is seen by others as “tainted” and “discounted” (Goffman, 1963). A stigma involves two parts: (1) the recognition of difference based on some distinguishing characteristic or ‘mark’; and (2) a consequent devaluation of a person (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). Intercollegiate athletes are usually not thought to be stigmatized because they are seen as privileged and unlike



most other stigmas they choose to be athletes whereas most stigmatized individuals have little choice of their stigma, however, in spite of this somewhat voluntary nature and belief that they are privileged, athletes meet the essential definition of a stigma: a devalued social identity in a specific context, the academic domain (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita & Jenson, 2007).

The student-athlete population is unique in their college experience. Many non-athletes express their belief that student-athletes should not be treated as regular students because of their secondary role as entertainers at their respective college or university (Hamilton & Stone, 1990). To assist student-athletes with their unique demands, many institutions have set up special support structures to increase their chances of both academic and athletic success. Some claim that this is right-minded for the university to do, but others argue that it is unfair to non-athletes who do not receive the same support (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Unfortunately, tensions between athletics and academics often give rise to negative perceptions about student-athletes among both students and faculty (Jolly, 2008).

Stereotypical views of athletes may exist leading to misconceptions about their academic ability and motivation (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Cotton & Wilson, 2006). The perception is that student-athletes are unqualified illegitimate students whose only interest is in athletics and who expect to receive special treatment from professors and others around them (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita & Jenson, 2007). Some non-athletes have negative attitudes toward student-athletes particularly in areas related to academic performance. Non-athletes are sometimes suspicious and less trusting of student-athletes who earn an A in a class. The suggestion is that non-athletes simply do not believe student-athletes have the academic capabilities to earn an A (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991). However, when student-athletes were asked if they had ever received a grade higher than they deserved, 89% reported never having this happen (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita & Jenson, 2007). Knapp, Rasmussen and Barnhart (2001) found that only 70% of non-athletes said they agree that faculty give student-athletes special treatment and only 44% agreed that student-athletes are legitimate students.

Another problematic perception pertains to requests for accommodations for athletic competitions. These special accommodations include requests to come late or leave class early on a regular basis, missing classes or exams, being allowed to make up exams, taking exams supervised by athletic academic advisors while away from campus for athletic competitions, and turning in assignments late. When asked whether they had ever received special treatment such as extended deadlines,

credit for a missed assignment and the like, 74% of student-athletes reported they had rarely or never had (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita & Jenson, 2007). When asked how they were treated by faculty and non-athletes, only 15% of athletes cited positive perceptions and 62% reported that they were refused or given a hard time when requesting accommodations for athletic competitions (Williams, Colles & Allen, 2010).

Faculty members are most likely to be the least critical of student-athletes (Lawrence 2009). In fact, faculty members are the ones most likely to have no opinion about student athletics (Lawrence, 2009). Student-athletes admit that faculty members go above and beyond the call of duty to help them. By definition these acts are not illegal, but some may have the potential to be considered unethical (Williams, Colles & Allen, 2010). Regardless, non-athletes may see faculty willingness to accommodate as special treatment reserved for student-athletes.

Student-athletes may also face scrutiny for their performance on the field and their actions off the field (Comeax, 2013). This may come in the form of criticism from schoolmates for a lackluster performance on the field. The criticism may come from the media which tends to accentuate an athlete's actions off the field that may represent the university in an unflattering way. Regardless of the source of the scrutiny or criticism, both may contribute to the formulation of attitudes toward student athletes who otherwise may be a complete stranger.

Perceptions of student-athletes almost always emphasize advantages that athletes get that non-athletes do not. Universities can choose to ignore these perceptions or they can learn about them and address them in constructive ways. The first step is to understand what those perceptions may be. The present study seeks to explore perceptions of student-athletes. The research question is: What are the perceptions of student-athletes on our campus?

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedures

This study was conducted at a Division I public university in the southeastern United States. Respondents ($N=380$) included undergraduate student-athletes and non-athletes. A convenience sample was obtained with an equal number of male and female respondents and an almost equal number of student-athletes ($n_1=198$) versus non-athletes ($n_2=182$). Freshmen comprised 26% of the sample; sophomores, 30%; juniors, 26%; and seniors, 18%. All 100 of the freshmen and all 68 of the seniors were athletes. Ninety-three percent of the sophomores and 77% of the juniors were non-athletes (See Table 1).



Table 1. Student sample of athletes and non-athletes by gender and year in school

| Athletes | Athletes | | | Non-Athletes | Non-Athletes | | |
|----------|----------|------|-------|--------------|--------------|------|-------|
| | Female | Male | Total | | Female | Male | Total |
| Fr | 56 | 44 | 100 | Fr | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| So | 4 | 4 | 8 | So | 57 | 50 | 107 |
| Jr | 8 | 14 | 22 | Jr | 34 | 41 | 75 |
| Sr | 31 | 37 | 68 | Sr | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 99 | 99 | 198 | Total | 91 | 91 | 182 |

Materials

With Institutional Review Board approval, data were collected via paper-and-pencil surveys. A set of eight statements was provided to which respondents identified their level of agreement. The statement “student-athletes should be paid” had two response options – agree or disagree. The statement “student-athletes receive special treatment or privileges from teachers, staff, and administration” used a five-point Likert scale – agree, somewhat agree, no opinion, somewhat disagree, and disagree. The other six statements provided five-point Likert-type (1932) response options from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” with a “no opinion” middle option. These statements are:

- Teachers, staff, and administration have higher expectations of student-athletes versus non-athletes.
- Student-athletes are graded fairly and equitably compared with non-athletes.
- Student-athletes are important to a school’s public image and appeal.
- I often follow collegiate sports through various media (television, radio, print media, social media, and the Internet).
- I feel as though more money is provided for athletic scholarships than for academic scholarships.
- I think student-athletes give their academic work the same attention as their athletics.

Respondents were also asked their age, year in school, gender and whether or not they are student-athletes.

RESULTS

Responses to the statements above are presented in Tables 2 through 12; please refer to those for all figures and comparisons. Results represent responses from all those surveyed as well as results comparing responses of student-athlete versus non-athlete status, by year in school, and gender.

Overall

Overall, respondents unanimously agreed that student-athletes should be paid. A modest majority (61%) agreed that student-athletes receive special treatment or privileges from teachers, staff, and administration and that those same school employees have higher expectations of student-athletes versus non-athletes (60%). An overwhelming majority (88%) agreed that student-athletes are important to a school’s public image and appeal, and they often follow collegiate sports through various media (70%). About half (52%) of the respondents agreed that more money is provided for athletic scholarships than for academic scholarships (See Tables).

Table 2. Agreement with the statement, “Student-athletes Should Be Paid”

| | Agree | Disagree |
|--------------|-------|----------|
| Overall | 100 | 0 |
| Athletes | 100 | 0 |
| Non-athletes | 99 | 1 |
| Male | 100 | 0 |
| Female | 99 | 1 |
| Fr/So | 100 | 0 |
| Jr/Sr | 100 | 0 |

All numbers are percents.

Table 3. Agreement with the statement, “Student-athletes Do Receive Special Treatment or Privileges from Teachers, Staff, and Administration”

| | Somewhat/ Agree | No Opinion | Somewhat/ Disagree |
|--------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Overall | 62 | 14 | 24 |
| Athletes | 63 | 13 | 24 |
| Non-athletes | 59 | 16 | 25 |
| Male | 58 | 18 | 24 |
| Female | 64 | 11 | 25 |
| Fr/So | 63 | 14 | 23 |
| Jr/Sr | 59 | 15 | 26 |

All numbers are percents.

Table 4. Agreement with the statement, “Teachers, Staff, and Administration Have Higher Expectations of Student-athletes versus Non-athletes”

| | Strongly/ Agree | No Opinion | Strongly/ Disagree |
|--------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Overall | 60 | 23 | 17 |
| Athletes | 68 | 22 | 10 |
| Non-athletes | 51 | 24 | 25 |
| Male | 62 | 21 | 17 |
| Female | 58 | 25 | 17 |
| Fr/So | 60 | 24 | 16 |
| Jr/Sr | 60 | 21 | 19 |

All numbers are percents.

Table 5. Agreement with the statement, “Student-athletes are Graded Fairly and Equitably Compared with Non-athletes”

| | Strongly/ Agree | No Opinion | Strongly/ Disagree |
|--------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Overall | 45 | 25 | 30 |
| Athletes | 52 | 19 | 29 |
| Non-athletes | 38 | 31 | 31 |
| Male | 50 | 28 | 22 |
| Female | 40 | 22 | 38 |
| Fr/So | 42 | 29 | 29 |
| Jr/Sr | 48 | 20 | 32 |

All numbers are percents.

Student-athletes vs. non-athletes

A higher proportion of student-athletes (68%) versus non-athletes (51%) agreed that teachers, staff, and



administration have higher expectations of them than non-athletes. This difference in scores for athletes ($M=2.11$, $SD=1.07$) versus non-athletes ($M=2.70$, $SD=1.28$) was statistically significant; $t(181)=4.86$, $p<.00001$. About half (52%) of student-athletes agreed that they are graded fairly and equitably compared with non-athletes whereas only 37% of non-athletes agreed with this notion, 31% disagreed, and 31% had no opinion on the matter. This difference in scores for athletes ($M=2.67$, $SD=1.31$) versus non-athletes ($M=2.88$, $SD=1.15$) was statistically significant; $t(181)=1.68$, $p<.05$. Half of non-athletes (51%) disagreed with the statement that student-athletes give their academic work the same attention as their athletics. Roughly same proportion of student-athletes agreed (42%) as disagreed (41%) with the statement. This difference in scores for athletes ($M=3.02$, $SD=1.41$) versus non-athletes ($M=3.28$, $SD=1.35$) was statistically significant; $t(181)=1.87$, $p<.05$.

Year in school

There were only subtle differences students' perceptions as a function of year-in-school. Students at each classification were mixed in their responses to the notion that student-athletes are graded fairly and equitably compared with non-athletes. Only half of freshmen and senior respondents agreed with the statement. A plurality of sophomore and junior respondents agreed. The only statistically significant difference between upper-class ($M=3.30$, $SD=1.40$) and under-class ($M=3.02$, $SD=1.36$) students is on the statement: "I think student-athletes give their academic work the same attention as their athletics; $t(164)=1.69$, $p<.05$. About an equal proportion of under-class students agreed as disagreed (42% and 41% respectively) whereas one-third of upper-class students agreed but 52% disagreed.

Table 6. Agreement with the statement, "Student-athletes are Important to a School's Public Image and Appeal"

| | Strongly/ Agree | No Opinion | Strongly/ Disagree |
|--------------|-----------------|------------|--------------------|
| Overall | 89 | 7 | 4 |
| Athletes | 89 | 8 | 3 |
| Non-athletes | 87 | 7 | 6 |
| Male | 88 | 7 | 5 |
| Female | 88 | 8 | 4 |
| Fr/So | 86 | 8 | 6 |
| Jr/Sr | 91 | 6 | 3 |

All numbers are percents.

Table 7. Agreement with the statement, "I Often Follow Collegiate Sports Through Various Media (television, radio, print media, social media, and the Internet)"

| | Strongly/ Agree | No Opinion | Strongly/ Disagree |
|--------------|-----------------|------------|--------------------|
| Overall | 70 | 10 | 20 |
| Athletes | 74 | 7 | 19 |
| Non-athletes | 65 | 14 | 21 |
| Male | 79 | 6 | 15 |
| Female | 60 | 15 | 25 |
| Fr/So | 69 | 12 | 19 |
| Jr/Sr | 71 | 7 | 22 |

All numbers are percents.

Table 8. Agreement with the statement, "More Money is Provided for Athletic Scholarships than for Academic Scholarships"

| | Strongly/ Agree | No Opinion | Strongly/ Disagree |
|--------------|-----------------|------------|--------------------|
| Overall | 52 | 25 | 23 |
| Athletes | 51 | 25 | 24 |
| Non-athletes | 53 | 26 | 21 |
| Male | 46 | 31 | 23 |
| Female | 57 | 21 | 22 |
| Fr/So | 50 | 30 | 20 |
| Jr/Sr | 54 | 19 | 27 |

All numbers are percents.

Table 9. Agreement with the statement, "Student-athletes Give Their Academic Work the Same Attention as their Athletics"

| | Strongly/ Agree | No Opinion | Strongly/ Disagree |
|--------------|-----------------|------------|--------------------|
| Overall | 38 | 16 | 46 |
| Athletes | 42 | 17 | 41 |
| Non-athletes | 34 | 15 | 51 |
| Male | 41 | 15 | 44 |
| Female | 35 | 18 | 47 |
| Fr/So | 42 | 17 | 41 |
| Jr/Sr | 33 | 15 | 52 |

All numbers are percents.

Gender differences

About half (51%) of the male respondents agreed that student-athletes are graded fairly and equitably compared with non-athletes. Females were split on the issue, 39% agreed and 38% disagreed (See Table 10). Males and females agreed that more money is provided for athletic scholarships than for academic scholarships. However, a smaller proportion of males (46%) than females (57%) agreed with the statement. Regardless of gender, about as many respondents agreed (males, 41%; females, 35%) as disagreed (males, 44%; females, 47%) with the statement that student-athletes give their academic work the same attention as their athletics. The other two statistically significant gender differences had to do with following collegiate sports through various media (See Table 11) and perceptions about money provided for athletic scholarships versus academic scholarships (See Table 12).



Table 10. Agreement with the statement, "Student-athletes are graded fairly and equitably compared with non-athletes"

| | N | Agree | No opinion | Disagree | M | SD | t value | p |
|--------|-----|-------|------------|----------|------|------|---------|-------|
| Female | 190 | 39% | 22% | 38% | 2.98 | 1.29 | 3.36 | <.001 |
| Male | 190 | 51% | 28% | 22% | 2.56 | 1.14 | | |

N: sample size; M: Mean; SD: standard deviation

Table 11. Agreement with the statement, "I often follow collegiate sports through various media"

| | N | Agree | No opinion | Disagree | M | SD | t value | p |
|--------|-----|-------|------------|----------|------|------|---------|---------|
| Female | 190 | 60% | 15% | 25% | 2.56 | 1.35 | 5.02 | <.00001 |
| Male | 190 | 79% | 5% | 15% | 1.88 | 1.27 | | |

N: sample size; M: Mean; SD: standard deviation

Table 12. Agreement with the statement, "I feel as though more money is provided for athletic scholarships than for academic scholarships"

| | N | Agree | No opinion | Disagree | M | SD | t value | p |
|--------|-----|-------|------------|----------|------|------|---------|------|
| Female | 190 | 57% | 21% | 22% | 2.37 | 1.33 | 1.85 | <.05 |
| Male | 190 | 46% | 31% | 33% | 2.62 | 1.33 | | |

N: sample size; M: Mean; SD: standard deviation

DISCUSSION

Respondents clearly value student-athletes. They agreed that student-athletes should be paid and that they are important to a school's public image and appeal. Respondents also follow collegiate sports through various media. However, those same respondents agreed that student-athletes receive special treatment or privileges. More than half of student-athletes agreed that they receive special treatment relative to grading but that teachers, staff, and administrators have higher expectations of them. Females, in particular expressed ambivalence about whether or not student-athletes are graded fairly. The implication is that females more than males perceive that student-athletes receive leniency in grading. Freshmen and seniors agreed that student-athletes are graded fairly and equitably. Juniors and seniors disagreed that student-athletes give their academic work the same attention as their athletics. That is, juniors and seniors perceive student-athletes as giving more attention to athletics than academics. This is despite the fact that more than half (55%) of the juniors and seniors were athletes. This may mean that juniors and seniors have had enough time and experience at college to observe the amount of time student-athletes seem to devote to athletics versus academics. However, it is important to remember that *all* freshmen and senior respondents were athletes. This exposes one of the limitations of this study.

Limitations and Future Research

Non-athletes are not represented in the freshman and senior subsamples. Future studies should strive to capture a more representative sample of student-athletes and non-athletes from all classifications, freshmen to

seniors. This study did not address the commonly held perception that student-athletes receive special accommodations for turning in late work. Many universities provide such accommodation because student-athletes are engaged in athletic competition away from campus. Future studies may explore perceived differences between this and accommodations provided to non-athletes for non-athletic university-approved functions. Future studies should also address possible strategies that university faculty, staff, and administrators can employ to address unfounded perceptions and explain accurate perceptions of student-athletes. Respondents could be presented with a list of scenarios to which they could respond on a ten-point scale from "treated like me" to "receives special treatment." Another scale could measure respondents' acceptance of accommodations provided to student-athletes. For example, "provided personal tutors" or "allowed to turn in late work" or "given preferential housing" could be evaluated on a ten-point scale from "acceptable" to "unacceptable." This would assess areas of accommodation that non-athletes are accepting of and those they are not. Accommodations the university does not provide to student-athletes could also be included. This would provide a measure of students' perception versus an assessment of actual accommodation being provided to student-athletes.

CONCLUSION

Perceptions are our reality; they are how people make sense of their world. False, unfounded, and unrealistic expectations by non-athletes of student-athletes have the potential to manufacture divisions between the two. Universities must be intentional about the kind and amount of attention student-athletes receive. Most universities seek ways to integrate the student body, not to segregate it. It is a special challenge to balance appropriate accommodations for student-athletes while maintaining adequate services for non-athletes. Clear and reasoned policies and procedures that are clearly communicated to faculty, staff, and students will go a long way toward reducing false or unfounded perceptions about student-athletes.

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