

CHALLENGES OF DI COLLEGE STUDENT-ATHLETES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSITION PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

As the transition from high school to college athletics brings academic, social, psychological, and physical challenges, athletes must be prepared by their institution's athletic program to promote success. There are many factors in producing a successful transition program, but understanding barriers faced by student-athletes is the first step. These barriers may include negative stereotypes, mental health issues, physical burnout, and much more. Analyzing the sufficiency of current programs allows for future developments and improvements to be made while also acknowledging areas for improvement. Research on active programs is limited, but sufficient evidence exists to produce guidelines based on need. Recommendations are provided for coaches and support staff to assist student-athletes in their adjustment to college life, both in athletics and academics. The goal of these programs is not simply to elevate athletic performance during peak years of college, but to build skills in individuals which will translate to all areas of life, including careers after college.

Keywords: *transition program, NCAA student-athletes, athlete stigma, athletic academic support, holistic program*

BACKGROUND

The transition from high school to college athletics is a very demanding and difficult adjustment that requires student-athletes to balance academic, athletic, and social responsibilities, all while learning about their new environment and the expectations that come with a new role (Gayles & Baker, 2015). Therefore, understanding the weight of change, even in the form of an anticipated transition is crucial, especially when seeking to understand how significant it can change someone's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions (Schlossberg, 2011). It is the responsibility of college athletic programs to ensure that the difficulties of this transition are considered and that adequate initiatives are developed to assist in the process. The purpose of this literature review is to identify common challenges of college student-athletes and help identify essential pillars in future transition programs for high school students entering NCAA competition.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Social identity is defined as the thoughts and feelings individuals experience when thinking about groups they belong to (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019), such as through athletic programs. This concept was morphed into a theory by Henry Tajfel by combining group psychology with the psychology of the self (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). In the early 1970's, Tajfel started exploring the impact of minimal criteria for group formation and conditions for in-group favoritism (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Through his study, he found that people strive for a positive social identity as much as a positive personal identity (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). As such, athletes entering an athletic program strive to understand themselves and how they fit into a group, highlighting some of the social challenges they may face. This theory has been used in a variety of settings, both inside and outside of sports, including in the development and

understanding of leadership (Steffens et al., 2021), which is a highlighted aspect of holistic transition programs (Martin et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2021).

The social identity theory proposes that once individuals are categorized into a group, their membership in the group begins to define them, causing them to seek to improve self-confidence and awareness through ingroup experiences (Rees et al., 2015). This theory can be applied to athletes both at the high school and collegiate levels, as individuals take on the role of an athlete to fulfill their own self-esteem needs, take on responsibilities or leadership roles within their team, and value performance for their coaches, teammates, family, and community.

SOCIALLY PROMINENT SPACE

For high school female athletes, the percentage of individuals competing at the NCAA level ranges from 3.9% for volleyball to 26.2% for ice hockey, with all other identified sports ranking somewhere between them. However, the percentages drastically drop to 1.2% and 8.9% respectively when looking at NCAA Division I athletes (“Estimated probability,” 2020). It is also important to note that the turnover rate of high school to college athletics may be even lower if club sports were included in the study (“Estimated probability,” 2020). The male statistics show an even lower percentage, with only 3.5% of high school basketball players competing in the NCAA and only 1% at the Division I level (“Estimated probability,” 2020). Even on the higher end, only 12.8% of lacrosse players make it to the NCAA and 3.1% to DI (“Estimated probability,” 2020).

Due to the staggeringly low percentage of athletes making it to a high level of collegiate competition, student-athletes represent a small number of individuals on college campuses while simultaneously occupying a socially prominent space (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Influences on academic success alone include sport commitment, expectations for educational performance, campus climate issues, and academic engagement; however, the one-dimensional assumptions commonly made result in the perception of student-athletes through a deficit lens, only considering weaknesses instead of highlighting and emphasizing their strengths (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

ORGANIZATION

This literature review will identify common challenges of college student-athletes and help

identify essential pillars in future transition programs for high school students entering NCAA competition. It will primarily focus on Division I athletes but will consider other high-level athletes’ experiences. It will examine the efficacy of current programs and see how their foundation can improve the implementation in other collegiate athletic initiatives. It will look at studies implementing holistic programs and first-year seminars on which to base a curriculum. It will assess the impact of academic factors including eligibility regulations and difficult coursework. It will consider social difficulties including public and faculty stigma, the college experience, NIL pressures, and the need for advocacy. Athlete identity and mental health will be discussed as psychological factors in the transition for athletes. Finally, physical challenges including burnout and injury will be identified as impacting college athletes’ experiences. In addition, recommended action steps for athletes, coaches, and supporting staff will be made to aid this significant transition.

EFFICACY OF CURRENT PROGRAMS

One area of interest when designing a transition program is the efficacy of those already developed. The NCAA currently requires academic support services for all college athletic departments to highlight students’ academic commitment, above their athletic involvement (Woltring et al., 2021). However, the current approach often limits the athlete’s freedom to choose a fulfilling career path, as counselors are encouraged to advise against rigorous programs or conflict with the athletic schedule (Gerlach, 2018). This can lead to academic clustering, where most student-athletes on a team or in the same program end up in the same major simply out of convenience for advisors (Huml et al., 2019). Although there are serious concerns in the realm of athletic academic support, there is simultaneous value in emerging research focused on holistic transition programs combating social, psychological, physical, and academic challenges.

ATHLETIC ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Many college athletic departments have expressed concern about academic involvement; yet, the specialized academic support programs in place appear to focus solely on maintaining eligibility (Huml et al., 2019). From the student perspective, during the first few weeks of their first year,

many athletes have felt that the athletic academic services did not offer substantial advice during the transition, with problematic situations arising due to unclear expectations (Woltring et al., 2021). Students experienced ongoing problems with scheduling classes, knowing who to direct questions to, and navigating the hierarchical structure of the university (Woltring et al., 2021).

Conversely, coaches have reported that individuals in the roles of Assistant Athletic Director for Academic Success (AADAS) and Student-Athlete Development Coordinator (SADC) were significant supports for their athletes' academic success (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). At the colleges where coaches were interviewed, both the AADAS and SADC held active membership in the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A), which helps them network with other programs, stay up-to-date on current practices, and compare information about policies and procedures around the country, likely having a positive impact on program effectiveness (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017).

The leaders on many campuses rely heavily on outdated theoretical models based on the general student population to make decisions for student-athlete programs (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017), instead of looking to new research and valuing the effectiveness of AADASs and SADCs (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). In addition, these models fail to recognize that student-athletes have unique campus involvement patterns (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011), negative stereotypes and pressures from faculty and non-athlete students (Huml et al., 2019), and additional roles and responsibilities to balance academics, athletics, and social lives (Gayles & Baker, 2015). These areas of student-athletes' lives are not mutually exclusive, with significant overlap between them; therefore, academic support systems must consider all factors when implementing programs.

HOLISTIC PROGRAMS

In a study of student-athletes at Boise State University and Illinois State University, four workshops were implemented into the standard introduction to college class with the following goals: balance student identity, develop coping skills, cultivate positive relationships, and plan for future endeavors and challenges (Martin et al., 2019;

Pierce et al., 2021). This program was presented in an in-person and online format. Still, both versions showed similar positive results in stress and distress management, life satisfaction, athletic identity, and high levels of resilience (Martin et al., 2019). The athletes saw immediate positive results and were highly optimistic about the long-term benefits of their academic and athletic careers (Martin et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2021).

The program model identified stressors intending to turn them into positive responses through social support, balanced student-athlete identity, leadership skills and mindset, and coping resources and strategies; the ultimate goal was to develop and maintain optimal performance in both sport and academic spheres (Martin et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2021). Researchers hoped to teach athletes how to develop personal qualities, psychological skills, resilience, a challenge mindset, beneficial coping techniques, and the ability to transfer skills between athletics, academics, and social environments (Martin et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2021).

FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS

In addition, first-year seminars are considered a high-impact educational practice that engages with faculty and promotes active learning (Kuh, 2008). They typically give more opportunities for feedback from peers and faculty, put students in situations to apply what they are learning, and demand more time on task (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). They may focus on critical inquiry, frequent writing, collaborative learning, information literacy, and other skills to help develop first-year students and prepare them for the rest of their education (Kuh, 2008). According to the 2017 National Survey of the First-Year Experience, 73.5% of colleges offered a first-year seminar to students, yet only 33.4% of four-year universities required student-athletes to participate (Young, 2019).

Even with data showing that there are programs available at some universities, there is little information about the curriculum, design, and learning outcomes of athlete-specific transition programs (Grafnetterova et al., 2020). Even for non-athlete students, these programs show improvement in educational outcomes, personal and social development, and practical competence (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). Therefore, a properly designed program should help the athletic population com-

bat some of the unique challenges they face in their transition to college athletics.

FUTURE COURSE DESIGN

In the future, course design should intentionally apply high-impact practice principles and consider student-athletes' specific needs (Grafnetterova et al., 2020). Some of the assignments in the curriculum may include reflections, journal entries, community service hours, exams, summaries of book readings, presentations, and reports of attended on-campus events (Grafnetterova et al., 2020). Generally, programs should focus on seven categories: orientation to college, basic academic skills, reflection, wellness, career planning, prevention training, and general skills (Grafnetterova et al., 2020). Important lesson topics may include, but are not limited to, mental health, identity and purpose, stress management, strengths assessment, learning about campus resources, and career exploration (Grafnetterova et al., 2020). Allowing for a more diverse curriculum will likely reduce many unique problems student-athletes face. Those problems, along with intervention suggestions and solutions, will be discussed below.

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES & INTERVENTION

An important area of experience that new college students have is transitioning away from the structure of high school and into a more independent environment (Woltring et al., 2021), part of which includes a new structure to academics. Perry et al. (2001) agrees with the shift in responsibility regarding homework, reading, and studying, from a combined effort with teachers, parents, and peers in high school to solely the student in college. To be eligible for play, Division I student-athletes are expected to have a full academic schedule and progress toward their degree program, while maintaining a minimum grade point average (Gayles & Baker, 2015). This is especially difficult due to the additional demands student-athletes face, often taking away time from studying and completing coursework (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Because of the heavy load of responsibilities, some academic counselors will not support specific career pathways for student-athletes, often advising them to pursue something more manageable (Stokowski et al., 2020). This can lead to problems post-graduation if students' degree paths were something other than what they personally wanted to pursue.

Before students begin their college coursework, it may be valuable for their high school counselors to work with the athletic programs to develop the necessary skills to succeed (Gerlach, 2018). Teaching athletes how to develop a Homework Identification Plan (HIP) could be a great place to start (Juhnke et al., 2013). The goals of the HIP include helping students manage their limited hours for homework, understanding essential activities in their day (e.g., athletic practice, sleep, homework, leisure, social obligations, personal hygiene), changing leisure time to be more efficient, and identifying homework times early and often (Juhnke et al., 2013). The goal of college athletics cannot be to perform well only during the four years of competition; success after graduation should also be considered when helping first-year students make decisions.

SOCIAL FACTORS AND INTERVENTION

Athletes are in the public eye significantly more than non-athlete students (Paule & Gilson, 2010), subjecting them to more scrutiny. Student-athletes experiencing stereotyping reported most academic challenges, either with professors or peers (Paule & Gilson, 2010). A common misconception about student-athletes from non-athlete peers is that they are unqualified, unintelligent students who only care about doing the minimum work to stay eligible for their sport while receiving special treatment from professors and school staff (Simons et al., 2007); some programs even reinforce this stereotype (Huml et al., 2019). In addition, the "dumb jock" stereotype includes assumed behaviors like athletes driving expensive sports cars, receiving additional tutoring services, and being admitted to universities with lower test scores or inadequate application materials (Simons et al., 2007), showing their perceived privilege and unintelligence.

PUBLIC & FACULTY STIGMA

In a study that surveyed collegiate athletes, 33% reported professors negatively perceived them (Simons et al., 2007). Because of the athlete stigma, faculty are often more sensitized to careless academic behavior by athletes, like turning in assignments late, arriving late to class or leaving early, and inattentiveness (Simons et al., 2007). This puts additional pressure on athletes to perform well in the classroom to prove the stereotype wrong (Simons et al., 2007); however, it can also

cause athletes to act in a way that confirms their stereotype (Madon et al., 2018). This self-fulfilling prophecy, discussed by Merton (1948), begins as a false concept but becomes valid when a new behavior is evoked. In comparison, some athletes attempt to detach from their athletic identity in an academic setting. One participant in a study by Paule and Gilson (2010) reported trying to hide her identity as an athlete from professors by not wearing team apparel to class, just to reduce the negative perception placed on her before she could show her academic value. Simons et al. (2007) also found that concealing athletic identity was important to student-athletes, but asking for accommodations for athletic competitions or mere physical attributes made it more difficult.

When reviewing the impact of relationships on student-athlete academic success, Rankin et al. (2016) concluded that interactions with faculty show the most substantial influence, even above other athletic personnel. They also recognized the difficulty student-athletes face when a negative stigma is placed on them (Rankin et al., 2016). Positive interactions were found to increase not just GPA, Academic Progress Rate, and graduation rate, but also athletic success and identity (Rankin et al., 2016). Likewise, when measuring campus climate, interactions with faculty members are highlighted as one of only two variables impacting academic success, athletic success, and athletic identity (Rankin et al., 2016). In this same study, Division I participants showed fewer positive perceptions of climate, likely due to Division I and Division III student-athletes having higher faculty-student interaction (Rankin et al., 2016). The only other variable that impacted all three outcomes was interactions with athletic personnel, further supporting the importance of relationships for student-athlete success (Rankin et al., 2016).

Advocacy of student-athlete experiences should be prioritized during the transition to college athletics, giving a platform for individuals to educate non-athletes, community members, and faculty about the unique challenges they face (Rankin et al., 2016). Inviting diverse contributions from coaches and athletes may also help destigmatize athletes' academic endeavors and empower athletes to speak up (Rankin et al., 2016). Athletes should be encouraged to interact with their professors and build relationships with established sup-

port connections within the university's academic circle (Rankin et al., 2016). More consistent and open communication between the athletic department and academic advisors may also build relationships, especially before athletes experience major discrepancies (Woltring et al., 2021). Especially for programs with athletic academic advisors separate from academic advisors, communication about class schedules, recommended degree programs, and student progress may help break down barriers and negative perceptions of the student (Woltring et al., 2021).

COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Many student-athletes also experience social isolation and a feeling that they are missing out on a "normal" college experience (Huml et al., 2019). Some have even reported feeling like they "belong to the university," which limits the activities they are able to participate in outside of school and sports (Paule & Gilson, 2010). The average student-athlete will participate in at least 20 hours of practice each week, while also being responsible for weight-lifting programs, watching game films, and time spent traveling to competitions (Gayles & Baker, 2015). These demands give very little time for social engagement, especially when meeting new people often occurs at the extracurricular activities and events that athletes don't have time to attend (Gayles & Baker, 2015).

One essential part of fostering development during college is exposing individuals to challenging environments that interrupt equilibrium and stimulate higher or complex thinking that occurs when faced with complicated situations (Gayles & Baker, 2015). Not having opportunities to interact with nonathletes may reduce diversity in social circles, thus contributing to the equilibrium not being disrupted, resulting in complacency and isolation (Paule & Gilson, 2010). In addition, Huml et al. (2019) found that athletes' perception of their identity can lead them to focus on their sport more, building a cycle of social isolation.

PRESSURES OF NIL

Before 2021, college athletes did not have the ability to monetize their name, image, and likeness (Dees et al., 2021), even though the demands of college athletics are almost identical to professional sports (Perloff, 2022). Per the new policy, athletes can now accept sponsorships and endorse-

ments with brands paying them to associate with a product or service, using their platform and status as college athletes (Dees et al., 2021). Although this change has positive aspects, it may also add pressure on athletes already facing the challenges of the entirely new lifestyle of college athletics. The newness of this policy has limited the research available; however, as NIL agreements progress, there will be a need for understanding the social challenges.

Some programs already offer support to student-athletes and educate them on branding and marketing (Perloff, 2022). The University of Nebraska has started a campaign called #NILbraska, which is building a structured curriculum for all students to learn how to leverage their personal brand (Perloff, 2022). In previously established first-year seminar programs, lessons on social media and personal branding have also been included (Grafnetterova et al., 2020). As the use of NIL increases, it is important to continue to educate student-athletes and stay up to date with rules and regulations for athlete benefit and safety.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND INTERVENTION

Athlete Identity

First-year college students are at a unique age where the development of their sense of identity is occurring, and they are determining their sense of meaning and purpose in life (Van der Meer et al., 2023). When athletes experience negative stigma, they often disidentify with academics and increase their athletic identification (Simons et al., 2007). This leads to increased time and effort spent on their sport and restructuring of their personal identity to fit completely in the athletic domain, ignoring all other potential social circles and forming negative views of those outside the athletic space (Simons et al., 2007). When athletes have an isolated mindset moving onto campus, they may lose the ability to form social bonds with people outside athletics, feeding more into their very concentrated identity. In addition, role strain can occur when athletes have competing time and energy demands of their academic and athletic responsibilities (Simons & Van Rheenen, 2000).

One concern for developing an exclusive athletic identity is its correlation to career immaturity, or more specifically, the inability to make well-educated decisions regarding future careers (Houle

& Kluck, 2015). A sign of career immaturity may be depending on others to make decisions, which is often impressed upon athletes who feel that they don't have control over their decisions, either by means of their parents or by coaches (Houle & Kluck, 2015). Transition programs may encourage students to reflect on other pieces of their personality and explore interests outside of their sport.

Because academically successful student-athletes seem to respond well to added responsibilities in college and are able to transfer many qualities that aid their athletic success, programs should help build characteristics like hard work, perseverance, and discipline (Simons & Van Rheenen, 2000). In addition, programs for first-year students should focus on whole student development, which contributes to an individual's sense of identity, appreciates their diversity, and contributes to their intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual well-being (Van der Meer et al., 2023). It should focus on developing their entire personhood for their education, sport, future employment, physical and mental health, and more (Van der Meer et al., 2023).

MENTAL HEALTH

In the past couple of years, there has been an increased awareness of the importance of mental health, specifically among NCAA Division I student-athletes (Sudano & Miles, 2017); however, there is still a gap in the literature surrounding athlete mental health and ways to address this population's specific issues. Additionally, from athletic trainers' perspectives, 46% reported that they could provide better care for their athletes if a mental-health clinician was onsite (Sudano & Miles, 2017), demonstrating a lack of resources. They believed that it was crucial for student-athletes to have access to mental health care at all times, especially in the case of a crisis (Sudano & Miles, 2017). However, barely over half of the athletic trainers studied were satisfied with the care provided at their site, a dangerously low number when considering the severity of emotional distress (Sudano & Miles, 2017). According to a recent study, 48.6% of suicides within the NCAA occur at the Division I level (Rao et al., 2015). Something must change to protect student-athletes.

One risk factor for high-level athletes to develop generalized anxiety or depression is the pressure to

excel in their sport; this risk is especially high if there is a discrepancy between goals or expectations and actual performance (Schaal et al., 2011). Additionally, poor performance can lead to negative self-perceptions and evaluations, behavioral deactivation, feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, and lack of external reinforcement from coaches, parents, or fans; all of these symptoms are consistent with the onset of depression (Wolanin et al., 2015). The most important factor in moderating generalized anxiety disorder, depression, and other mental health issues is providing adequate social or professional support (Schaal et al., 2011). Transition programs should consider the risks for student-athletes, provide them with strategies to promote their own mental health, and connect them with mental health professionals that can offer support.

PHYSICAL CHALLENGES AND INTERVENTION

A study conducted at a Division I university in the southeastern United States placed athletes into focus groups and allowed them to share their experiences and perceptions of the athletic transition; many identified physical challenges that were previously unknown to them (Woltring et al., 2021). The physical demands of college athletics are significantly more intensive than high school athletics, with some programs depending on endurance coaches, strength coaches, position coaches, speed coaches, and more (Woltring et al., 2021). Some athletes enter their freshman year expecting to play immediately and quickly realize that the other athletes are of a much higher caliber than their former high school teammates (Woltring et al., 2021). Because the training is much more physically taxing, many athletes deal with injury or burnout if not eased into the program (Woltring et al., 2021).

As a precaution and for prevention of injury, many football programs gradually introduce athletes to contact, however this policy could positively impact many other sports (Hootman et al., 2007). To identify athletes at risk for injury, athletic programs should consider individuals' flexibility, biomechanical patterns, imbalances in strength, fitness levels, altered neuromuscular control, demographics, anthropometrics, and injury history (Gribble et al., 2013). Programs should also enforce competition policies at practices to reduce the disconnect between the two, allowing athletes

to avoid shock to their bodies (Hootman et al., 2007).

A transition program will not necessarily be able to intervene with specific athletes. Still, coordinators can identify discrepancies and refer athletes to training staff to better prepare them for competition and work on injury prevention strategies. Concussions and ACL tears are specific high-profile injuries that although less common, programs should encourage prevention strategies due to severity (Hootman et al., 2007); this may include learning proper form and strengthening muscles through weight or resistance training. In a study that tested student-athletes' burnout rates when gratitude practices were introduced, it was found to have a positive influence (Gabana et al., 2019); therefore, similar practices could be taught to athletes in hopes of avoiding physical and emotional exhaustion.

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there is a gap in the literature understanding the efficacy of current transition programs for new college athletes, understanding the foundational challenges student-athletes face will allow for more in-depth research in the future. NCAA Division I athletes are at a risk for additional academic, social, psychological, and physical challenges, all of which can impact their performance in their sport and the classroom, as well as their overall health and wellness. Identifying risks and developing a mandatory program to alleviate added pressure and educate students may benefit athletic programs nationwide

IMPLICATIONS

While this review of literature focused primarily on Division I athletes, it would be interesting to study other populations, including junior college athletes, club athletes, and athletes involved in individual sports. The results of this type of study could benefit several groups, including NCAA, NAIA, and high school coaches, academic counselors (Gerlach, 2018), college recruiters, parents, and most importantly, athletes at all levels. Educating both the academic and athletic departments at institutions is an important step in improvement. Involving high school personnel would also be valuable for an early transition and transferring positive relationships from high school to college.

Any population working directly or indirectly with athletes can positively impact development, especially early in the collegiate athletic career.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The above recommendations could help develop a curriculum for a transition program, specifically one implemented in the summer before athletes move onto campus. This program could be implemented at NCAA institutions and in partnership with high school programs to adequately prepare athletes to transition into collegiate sports. A future study could further explore the lived experiences of athletes, using phenomenological methods. Although most of the literature includes qualitative data, it would be insightful to use more quantitative scales to study actual impact.

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