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## College athletes must spend an unreasonable amount of time on their sports (essay)

Submitted by Allen Sack and Gerald Gurney on March 22, 2016 - 3:00am

Since 2006, the National Collegiate Athletic Association has been carefully studying the time commitments of college athletes. The findings indicate that those participating in revenue-producing sports at the most competitive levels exceed the 40-hour-per-week limit set for actual workers by the Fair Labor Standards Act. A [2015 study](#) <sup>[1]</sup> revealed that college athletes were spending more time at their sport than the previous 2010 study found. In fact, from an educational perspective, there is probably no more significant roadblock for college athletes seeking a meaningful education than the unreasonable amount of time they are required to engage in practice and other athletics-related activities.

Yet despite the overwhelming evidence of the need for dramatic and immediate action to scale back athletic time demands, the NCAA has determined that more study and deliberation is necessary, thus suggesting a lack of commitment to the educational primacy it espouses. Instead of taking forceful action to prevent coaches from treating athletes like hired hands, the NCAA seems more concerned that increased free time for athletes may lead to a lower-quality entertainment product.

The NCAA acts with urgency primarily when it is facing litigation, scrutiny from Congress or political activism by athletes themselves. For instance, lawyers from the antitrust division of the U. S. Department of Justice met with the NCAA Division I board of directors in 2010 to discuss the 37-year-old, one-year renewable scholarship rule and its antitrust implications. The NCAA dealt with the antitrust concerns by swiftly reviving multiyear scholarships, an action previously viewed as quixotic when reformers proposed it.

The revival of multiyear scholarships was a win for athletes whose institutions honor multiyear commitments even if these athletes are injured or turn out to be "recruiting mistakes." However, the rule change does not protect athletes from the often unreasonable time demands of sports. At this year's NCAA national convention, the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee's proposals for reducing the time demands for

athletes were tabled for the second year in a row.

Meanwhile, [a recent study](#) <sup>[2]</sup> found that student-athletes in the Pac-12 conference are spending on average 50 hours a week on athletics during the season. Of the 409 athletes in the conference interviewed by Penn Schoen Berland, a strategic consulting firm, 71 percent said that sleeping is the main thing that athletic commitments prevent them from doing. It is not reaching too far to connect poorly prepared athletes and unreasonable time demands with the recent rash of academic fraud and cheating scandals like those at Florida State University, Syracuse University, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and the University of North Carolina. An army of academic counselors and learning specialists cannot be expected to turn sleep-deprived athletes with limited academic skills into good students. It is not surprising that some academic counseling programs breed academic fraud.

Other studies have found that coaches expect college athletes to engage in athletic activities that far exceed the four hours per day and 20 hours per week of countable athletically related activities allowed by NCAA rules during the playing season. [The NCAA 2010 GOALS study](#) <sup>[3]</sup> found that athletes in Division I football spent 43.3 hours per week in athletics-related activities.

A countable athletically related activity is any activity with an athletics purpose that occurs at the direction of or is supervised by one or more institutional coaching staff members. Activities supervised by strength and conditioning coaches are also included. A major problem with this system is that coaches heavily manage the lives of college athletes, and time demands do not include many “voluntary” hours athletes are expected to give to their sport.

Some of the athletes in the Pac-12 study reported that coaches had threatened to kick them off the team for missing voluntary activities. Other athletes said they felt under duress to participate in voluntary activities for fear of moving down the depth chart. Athletes alleged that coaches have punished an entire team because an athlete missed a nonmandatory practice or workout. Not surprisingly, more than 60 percent of Pac-12 athletes said they would have much more time to study or to engage in internships if the activities that coaches say are voluntary were truly voluntary. Travel, training for rehabilitation and dressing for practice sessions or competitions also demand significant uncounted time.

The rules regarding out-of-season mandatory athletic activities are also routinely violated in the Pac-12 conference, as well as by teams in other conferences, giving college sports the look and feel of a full-time job. According to [a detailed description](#) <sup>[4]</sup> compiled by the National Labor Relations Board in Illinois, football players at Northwestern University begin their season the first week of August with a monthlong training camp that requires 50 to 60 hours of football-related activities a week. Once the actual season begins, players devote 40 to 50 hours a week to football-related activities.

When Northwestern qualifies for a bowl game, practices continue as usual for the month of December. Immediately following the bowl game, the players begin daily strength and conditioning workouts supervised by staff members. Players begin winter workouts in mid-January to ramp up for spring football, which begins in late February and ends in mid-April after the annual spring game. When the academic year ends, players are given a couple weeks to visit their families before returning to campus for summer workouts.

As we stated at the outset of this article, it is highly unlikely the NCAA will take serious action on this issue or any other meaningful academic reform, unless some sort of litigation, a rekindled college athlete unionization movement or an action by Congress slams it up against the wall. The Pac-12 has assembled a task force to deal with these problems. This action is to be applauded, but it is simply not enough to solve a problem of this magnitude.

There is no need to delay rectifying glaring abuse of the NCAA's four-hour-a-day and 20-hour-a-week schedule during the season, and time demands during the spring and summer must be radically rethought. To do otherwise blurs the distinction between college athletes and employees. An athletic scholarship that supposedly pays for room, board, tuition, fees and other costs of attendance but denies athletes an opportunity to have the same educational opportunities as other students is fraudulent, and highly exploitative. In fact, it should be against the law.

*Allen Sack, a professor emeritus at the University of New Haven, played football on the University of Notre Dame's 1966 national championship football team. Gerald Gurney is an assistant professor at the Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. He is president of the Drake Group and a former president of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics.*

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[1] [http://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/GOALS\\_2015\\_summary\\_jan2016\\_final.pdf](http://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/GOALS_2015_summary_jan2016_final.pdf)

[2] <http://www.cbssports.com/images/Pac-12-Student-Athlete-Time-Demands-Obtained-by-CBS-Sports.pdf>

[3] <http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/NCAANewsArchive/2011/january/second%2bgoals%2bstudy%2bemphasizes%2bcoach%2binfluencedf30.html>

[4] [http://espn.go.com/pdf/2014/0326/espn\\_uniondecision.PDF](http://espn.go.com/pdf/2014/0326/espn_uniondecision.PDF)

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