

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT ATHLETES: REGULAR STUDENTS OR PRO-ATHLETES IN TRAINING?

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With the rise in prominence of intercollegiate athletics, there has been an increase in interest in the success of student athletes. This interest has become common across all levels of intercollegiate athletic competition, and has increased dramatically in recent years to focus on the 75,000 community college student athletes who participate in approximately 500 community and junior college athletic programs. Although research has focused on the role of athletics in these colleges, few efforts have been undertaken to explore the student athlete in these two year colleges. Drawing upon a sample of over 200 student athletes at two Midwestern community colleges, this study both profiled who they were and where they came from, and also how they viewed themselves while enrolled. Although respondents did not classify themselves as predominantly athletes first, many of their self-reported perceptions were consistent with the literature that they believed strongly in the power of athletic participation to shape their lives. Respondents also viewed themselves as stopping-in to the community college before continuing their athletic careers at a four-year university. These findings led to the recommendations for community college leaders to define specifically what they envision for the purpose of athletics in their colleges.

Intercollegiate athletics is a large financial business with millions of dollars paid to individual institutions and conferences for the rights to broadcast competitions, to wear certain clothing, and to advertise in sports venues. The majority of academic research into athletics has focused on the sports and areas with the largest revenue, NCAA Division I programs. These institutions are typically large, research-intensive, institutions that devote considerable attention to their athletic offerings and rely on them to build community among students and alumni.

A less prominent field of intercollegiate athletic competition exists within the community college structure of US higher education. This division of athletic offerings range from scholarship athletes who are provided campus housing and are awaiting transfer to Division I, to local high school students who simply want to continue playing the sports that they love. Some institutions use athletics as a major marketing tool (Morris, Modica, & Miller, 2010), while others rely on them solely as a form of campus recreation. Regardless of

purpose, community college athletic programs have received little scholarly attention and are in need of greater study (Bush, Castaneda, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2009). As Kissinger and Watson (2009) noted, however, the need for exploration in intercollegiate athletics is particularly important in the psychology surrounding student athletes and their mental health welfare.

College student athletes at any level of competition are a unique subpopulation of the college student body. These individuals often enter higher education with a thinking that they will become professional athletes and identify most strongly with feelings and self-perceptions that they are first and foremost athletes, and this is true among community college athletes as well as those in NCAA Division I (Kissinger & Miller, 2007). The difficulty these college students face is when there is the realization that an athletic career must end, and primary identification must be placed with some alternative life-defining purpose. In student development theory this discussion of foreclosure is critical in identity development, yet the process is experienced differently among student athletes who often place an extreme value on a single activity.

As intercollegiate athletics have been studied widely from the perspective of organizational structures and dynamics, relatively little has been done to identify the challenges facing these student athletes in community colleges. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences in the athletic, academic, and social realms that community college student athletes face (Kissinger & Miller, 2007).

Background of the Study

College student athletes face an array of challenges, ranging from the typical stressors of competing at a high level in a sport to finding healthy social support networks that encourage a balanced life (Kissinger &

Watson, 2009). The range of these challenges can contribute to feelings of depression, a common result of the isolation and personal identity views that student-athletes encounter, as well as extreme personal identity anxiety (Wolanin, Hong, Marks, Panchoo, & Gross, 2016; Kissinger, Newman, Miller, & Nadler, 2011; Storch, Storch, Killany, & Robarti, 2005). Participation has also been linked to struggles in the classroom, retention, and even unhealthy physical behaviors (Hood, Craig, & Ferguson, 1992; Richards & Aries, 1999; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004).

Literature specifically addressing the issues and concerns of community college student-athletes is somewhat infrequent (Castaneda, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2006), yet there are a number of studies that detail the experience from recruitment through graduation. Research on community college student athlete recruitment, for example, notes the importance of faculty interaction on the community college campus (Horton, 2009) and the personal interest in just continuing to play sports (Boulard, 2008; London, 2001). The experiential involvement in community college athletics is also critical for personal development, perhaps differentiating the experience from other divisions of athletic competition (Horton, 2009). Dougherty (1994) noted that with open-access to community colleges, many of the student athletes do not face the same challenges and misconceptions about focusing on academics over athletics, and that the open-entry adds to the student's ability to focus on athletics.

Horton (2009) interviewed a number of community college student athletes and identified that the experiential aspects of involvement with sport at their respective colleges was the primary value they drew from participating. Such engagement could be a factor in the Palomar College (2002) finding that community college student athletes were

five times more likely to earn their associates degree by their fifth semester as compared to non-athletes. With nearly 75,000 community college student athletes participating in over 500 colleges, each institution offers an average of 4 men's sports and approximately the same number of women's sports teams, and these sports span the spectrum of traditional teams such as football and basketball, but also range to less common sports such as rodeo teams (Castaneda, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2009).

Institutions also rely on athletics for a variety of reasons, including their role in student recruitment. Morris, Modica, and Miller (2010) noted, for example, that private two-year colleges particularly look to add a cultural element to the campus, and use athletics to illustrate a sense of community and comrade among students and the community. Private two-year colleges in particular find it helpful to demonstrate an inclusive environment through common activities for students to participate in, such as basketball game attendance and the collateral elements that can be attached to athletics, such as dances, parades, pep rallies, common apparel, and spirit days.

The idea of community building has been strongly noted among rural community colleges, where institutions use athletics to not only build community on campus, but within the institutions' host communities (Miller & Tuttle, 2006; 2007). In community colleges that sponsor athletic teams, Miller and Tuttle (2006) found that these sporting events could be strong unifying activities for a community. This unification was found to be particularly strong in rural communities or towns that did not have a local high school to support (often as the result of school consolidation). One unintended consequence of such activity has been the racial integration of students at some community colleges that recruit students to participate in athletics, and these individuals would otherwise not have enrolled at that particular institution.

As Kissinger and Watson (2009) noted, the role of the student athlete is complex and is often driven by an institution's reinforcement of individual identity roles. If institutions place pressure on winning and performance, then the self-identified student-athlete places greater emphasis on this personal role and may have a more difficult time moving beyond a world of athletics in a post-collegiate life. If, however, a college has a more balanced approach to student-life that is beyond athletics, the individual has a much better chance of adapting to a life that might include recreational sports as part of a balanced, healthy life.

Kissinger and Miller (2007) noted that community college student athletes, despite a reduced emphasis and segregation of student athletes from the campus population, do still primarily identify with their roles as athletes. This finding is somewhat inconsistent with other research that suggests that athletes are more balanced in their personal identity, however, such inconsistencies further adds to Castaneda, Katsinas, and Hardy's (2006) contention that most research on community college sports has been case study specific and that there is a dearth of national literature and understanding of this student subpopulation.

Gohn and Albin (2006) specifically noted the need to explore and understand college student subpopulations, such as student athletes, for many reasons, most notably, to understand how institutions can best support them. With varied understandings of completion, academic performance, and student mental health, the current study was designed to specifically explore the perceptions of student athletes, how they view themselves, and how they view the institution's support of them in their roles as both students and as athletes.

Research Methods

To develop an understanding of the student-athlete experience in the community college, Potuto and O'Hanlon's (2006) survey of student athletes was adapted for the current study. Potuto and O'Hanlon originally developed their instrument to profile NCAA Division I student athletes, and subsequently, the instrument was modified to reflect the community college environment and use of appropriate terminology. The instrument was reviewed to ensure face validity, and ultimately, the instrument contained 65 questions, of which 39 were used in this analysis. The remaining 26 questions related to non-student athlete issues and were excluded from the analysis.

Data were collected at two separate Midwestern public community colleges, each with a headcount enrollment in excess of 24,000 students. These colleges were selected due to meeting several criteria: offer a full range of athletic programs for both men and women, participate as a member in good standing of the National Junior College Athletic Association, a willingness to distribute paper-and-pencil surveys to athletes during a specific period of time, and a significant history of student athlete enrollment (meaning program offerings were not new to the institution). The selection of the two institutions does limit the generalizable nature of the study, but it also adds to the growing number of case studies reporting the activities of community college athletics, an important step in future research advocated by Casteneda, Katsinas, and Hardy (2006).

All student athletes were included in the survey, although one institution, after agreeing to participate in the study, extracted the basketball team and removed them from participation, decreasing the total number of possible surveys to be completed. The instrumentation, data collection process and locations were all approved by the Institutional Review Board at the author's institution. A total of 239 student athletes were surveyed.

Findings

Data were collected over a two-week period, with 141 of 143 student athletes completing the survey at one institution (a 99% participation rate) and 76 of 96 student athletes at the second institution (79%), for a total usable response rate of 217 out of 239 (91%). As a descriptive study, this response rate was deemed to be accepted for analysis.

The first section of the survey included 11 questions designed to identify survey participants, including demographic data. As shown in Table 1, the sample was evenly divided between men and women (49% and 50%) and in terms of class standing (53% freshmen and 46% sophomores). The majority of participating student athletes were White (87%), and half (50%) had a hometown 100 or more miles from the college. Additionally, nearly all of the student athletes indicated that the experience at the community college met or exceeded their expectations (93%).

Male student athletes were involved primarily in baseball ($n=65$; 30%) and women were most commonly involved in softball ($n=38$; 17%), and the majority of student athletes indicated that they enrolled at their respective community colleges due to the offering of a scholarship ($n=123$; 57%). Nearly all of the student athletes intended to transfer to a four-year institution (97.2%), and these respondents also indicated that they intended to transfer as athletes (81.1%).

Student-athletes were asked to respond to a number of questions related to their experiences while enrolled at their community colleges. Included in these questions were 12 items anchored on a Likert-type scale of 1-6, with 1=strongly disagree progressing to 6=strongly agree, all focused on the collegiate experience. From the 217 respondents, the strongest level of group agreement was on the item that the athletic experience added to the student athletes personal development ($\bar{x}=5.12$; SD .979) and that athletics added

Table 1. Demographic Responses of Community College Student Athletes Participating in the Survey

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Male	108	49%
Female	109	50
Class Standing		
Freshman	114	53
Sophomore	100	46
Primary Racial Identification		
African American	20	10
White	174	87
Multi-racial	7	3
Hispanic	29	13
Distance from hometown to your college		
5 miles or less	19	9
6-10 miles	15	7
11-50 miles	46	21
51-100 miles	28	13
101-500 miles	78	36
Over 500 miles	30	14
College Satisfaction		
This community college has:		
Not met my expectations	15	7
Met my expectations	147	68
Exceeded my expectations	53	25

to the student's life (\bar{x} =5.10; SD 819) and job (\bar{x} =5.00; SD .931) preparation (see Table 4). Neutral responses were recorded for the two differential treatment questions, suggesting that student athletes were neither discriminated against (\bar{x} =2.84; SD 1.346) nor favored (\bar{x} =3.54; SD 1.339) for their participation as athletes.

Student athletes tended to agree that they would attend the same community college again (\bar{x} =4.52; SD 1.276) and generally

Table 2. Athletic Identifiers of Community College Student Athletes

Characteristic	N	%
Primary Sport		
Baseball	65	30%
Men's basketball	15	7
Men's golf	8	
Men's soccer	18	
Women's soccer	20	
Softball	38	17
Volleyball	26	12
Women's basketball	27	12
Intent to transfer to 4-year institution		
Yes	211	97
No	6	3
Intent to be an athlete when transfer		
Yes	172	81
No	40	9
Athletic scholarship		
Yes	180	84
No	35	16
Reason for enrolling in this college		
Offering a scholarship	123	57
Academic reputation	3	1
Head coach	4	2
Availability of major	6	3
Players on team	3	1
School location	17	8
Opportunity to play	58	27
Academic support options	1	>1

agreed that they were satisfied with the community college ($\bar{x}=4.90$; SD .760). However, these same respondents tended to have a somewhat negative (rating of 3 on the 6 point scale; $\bar{x}=3.24$; SD 1.718) agreement level that they would attend a community college if they were not athletes, meaning that they were enrolled in the community college to participate in athletics. These were somewhat conflicting data points; however, the 50% of respondents who participated in the study who were from 100+ miles away suggests that they were specifically athletes attending a college to participate in sports, as they were not native to the college's community.

Responding student athletes were also asked to identify the amount of time they spent both in their sports seasons and out of season practicing and playing. Nearly two-thirds (67% and 63%) spent over ten hours a week practicing and under 10 hours per week playing their sports during their sport's seasons. The same number of respondents (67%) practiced under 10 hours per week when their sports were not in competitive seasons, and over 80% (86%) played their sports less than 10 hours per week during their non-competitive seasons (see Table 3).

Two demographic characteristics, class standing and gender, were both then used as independent variables to examine potential differences with the collegiate experience. Using one-way ANOVAs, neither demographic variable was found to produce significant differences between genders, or based on freshman or sophomore class standing ($F=3.129$ and 4.633 respectively, $p < .05$).

Table 3. Student Athlete Collegiate Experience

Characteristic			Frequency	%	
Support for success from	Coaches (37)	Positive	213	98%	
		Negative	4	1	
	Athl Advisors (38)	Positive	206	95	
		Negative	11	5	
	Acad Advisors (39)	Positive	203	93	
		Negative	14	7	
	Professors (40)	Positive	199	92	
		Negative	16	7	
	Time demands	In season sports	Practice		
			Under 10 hrs/wk	71	33
Over 10 hrs/wk			144	67	
Playing					
Under 10 hrs/wk			135	63	
Over 10 hrs/wk			77	35	
Off season		Practice			
		Under 10 hrs/wk	147	67	
		Over 10 hrs/wk	67	31	
		Playing			
Under 10 hrs/wk	180	86			
Over 10 hrs/wk	29	14			

Table 4. Student Athlete Collegiate Experience

Characteristic	Mean	Range	SD
Athletics adds to personal development	5.12	5	.979
Athletics aided me in life preparation	5.10	5	.819
Athletics will help me in finding a job	5.00	5	.931
Overall satisfaction	4.90	4	.760
Satisfied with education	4.86	4	.797
Education has prepared me for later life	4.62	5	.853
Would attend again	4.52	5	1.276
Community college provided help to succeed	3.93	4	.891
View myself as more of athlete than student	3.81	5	1.540
Professors favor me as an athlete	3.54	5	1.339
Would attend cc if not an athlete	3.24	5	1.718
Professors discriminate against me as an athlete	2.84	5	1.346

Discussion

Despite the lack of significant differences, the exploratory nature of the study yielded several important findings that can impact future research and the practice of sponsoring athletics in community colleges. First and foremost, despite the relatively low self-reported mean to the question about identifying primarily as an athlete (3.81), the three highest mean survey items were related to positive beliefs and reports about participating in athletics (adding to personal development, preparing for life, and finding a job). So although the respondents did not openly acknowledge their self-identification as an athlete, they clearly identified being an athlete as a positive experience, despite their own self-reports of large amounts of time being devoted to participating in some aspect of athletics, whether it be preparation to compete or the actual competition.

Second, student athletes were clearly engaged and enrolled because of their ability to participate on athletic teams. The student athletes came from locations that were not within their colleges' service areas, and nearly 15% of the student athletes traveled over 500 miles to attend the college and compete on a sports team. These athletes were offered scholarships, and generally would not be attending that particular college if they were not participating in athletics ($\bar{x}=3.24$).

Third, the student athletes at the institutions who participated in the study were consistent with other community college students who have indicated that they intend to transfer to a four-year institution. Research has consistently shown that despite these claims, few community college students actually go on to earn bachelor's degrees. What is particularly interesting is that over 80% of these students perceive themselves to be athletes at the four-year institutions that they transfer to. This could be a suggestion that community college athletes are improving their grades to move into a four-year institution, or that they are physically improving themselves to be more competitive at a higher level of sport, or it could be that these student athletes really do see themselves as athletes first, but have learned that such self-designation is somehow inappropriate, and therefore, they verbalize that they are not really athletes first, yet they are in practice and belief.

From the community college's perspective, study findings suggest that they can use athletics as a form of student recruitment and that financial aid packages for athletics can be a key factor in enrolling students. Additionally, athletes found coaches, athletic advisors, academic advisors, and even professors to be of great assistance in navigating their academic experience, and as such, college leaders may wish to find programs and training opportunities to further enhance these experiences.

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