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*Enhanced academic success and social integration may be a product for students who are sports fans.*

## Students as Spectators: Their Academic and Social Integration

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There is extensive research literature addressing the impact that the college experience has on students (Astin, 1977; Chickering, 1969), linking the campus environment to their persistence and graduation (Tinto, 1975, 1993), satisfaction (Bean and Bradley, 1986), sense of community (Lounsbury and DeNeui, 1995), academic and social integration (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980), and academic performance (Bean and Bradley, 1986). Researchers have yet to fully address the connection between students identifying as spectators of athletics and their academic and social integration. Wann and Robinson (2002) found that those students who are fans are more integrated into the university and had more positive perceptions. Further, Schurr, Witgg, Ruble, and Henriksen (1993) found a connection with increased academic success, although both studies are limited. There are connections, often tenuous, between spectator sports and institutional prestige, including academic prestige (Lovaglia and Lucas, 2005), alumni donations (Baade and Sundberg, 1996), admissions applications (Toma and Cross, 1998), and graduation rate (Mangold, Bean, and Adams, 2003). For instance, even though admission applications might be connected to athletics success, the academic quality of those applications remains contested (Mixon, Trevino, and Minto, 2004). Studies also assess the relationship between athletic participation and cognitive outcomes (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, and Terenzini,

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1995), adjustment to college (Melendez, 2006), and degree completion, but evidence here remains tentative.

Can we justify athletics on the basis of its positive influence on the academic and social integration of students, as well as on their grades? Doing so would attribute greater congruence than we presently do between athletics and the academic ends of the university (Sperber, 2000). My interest here is in considering the challenge that Toma (1999) poses: "If we are to understand our largest and most prominent universities, we must ask ourselves how on-campus sports . . . coincide with the identities that institutions construct for themselves and the identities that individuals derive from their institutional affiliations" (p. 83).

### **Involvement Theory**

Several aspects of spectator sports seem to connect with increases in student involvement. Involvement refers to how students invest physical and psychological energy in various objects within campus environments. These objects may be generalized (the overall student experience) or specific (preparing for a final examination or spectator sports; Astin, 1984, 1999). Those with increased positive interactions are more likely to integrate into a campus community and persist toward graduation (Rendon, 1994). Marginal integration, conversely, is more likely to lead to early withdrawal (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Involvement also has both quantitative features, such as number of games attended, and qualitative ones, which consider how the student expressed his or her support while at the game (Astin, 1984). The idea here is that involvement connects with integration, both academic and social. The more one interacts with others in college, the better one is able to develop strategies for handling various situations (Attinasi, 1989). Furthermore, in fostering identification and commitment, nonacademic or extracurricular activities when connected with academic values can have beneficial academic outcomes (Marsh and Kleitman, 2002). With athletics, the questions are the extent to which identification as a fan encourages integration (Tinto, 1993) and whether such connections are related to institutional values, especially within academics (Toma, 2003).

### **Fan Identification**

Research on fan identification suggests a societal benefit when the social cohesion from group interaction strengthens various social values (Smith, 1988). Whether such logic extends to the academic and social experiences of students is unclear. Successful teams do contribute to the overall sense of community on campus (Toma, 2003), something that significantly enhances the academic experience (Lounsbury and DeNeui, 1995). Among individuals, Branscombe and Wann (1991) conclude that spectators can maintain unity in a group or family with the most intense fans having a strong sense

of bonding with other fans of a given team, along with a greater sense of satisfaction from watching their team win (Wann and Schrader, 1997). In addition, Branscombe and Wann (1991) find that strong identification with a specific sports team provides a buffer from feelings of depression and alienation, while fostering feelings of belongingness and self-worth.

In higher education, doing just this is the main function of student affairs: developing programs to increase the satisfaction and engagement of students. The same is true of membership esteem, on which fans rate highly (Murrell and Dietz, 1992; Wann and Robinson, 2002); those who attend games are more likely to have high esteem for the institution. There is also the idea of institutional identification: people want to strengthen and announce their associations with institutions that they value and they know that others esteem (Toma, 2003). Notions such as membership esteem and institutional identification, through the experience of students as spectators, are important in building campus community. With stronger community, it follows, comes increased integration, and thus higher academic achievement and improved persistence (Lounsbury and DeNeui, 1995). In this way, athletics can serve to bring together a diverse campus, affording a medium for expression, furnishing meaning and context, and instilling a collective sense of purpose and fellowship (Bergquist, 1992; Toma, 2003). As our campuses become even more diverse, such means to connect people and groups are all the more valuable. Athletics energizes community, strengthens morale, instills pride, and deepens campus spirit.

There remains too little research on connections between spectator sports and outcomes in higher education such as academic and social integration. But being a spectator would seem to lead to broader campus integration (Branscombe and Wann, 1991; Clopton, 2008; Wann and Robinson, 2002) and connect diverse populations of students (Clopton, 2007). In my own work, I am interested in whether fan identification can predict academic and social integration generally, and such matters as grade point average more specifically, at institutions with prominent athletics programs.<sup>1</sup> I consider being a spectator part of the campus environment. Given what we know from involvement theory and fan identification, one would think that more involved fans would have higher academic achievement—a benefit of having a stronger attachment to an institution. The current research did find that fan identification is associated with grade point average, but those students more interested in spectator sports have *lower* grades. In addition, there is some connection between identifying as a fan and academic and social integration, with more involved fans having somewhat more integration, especially among white students<sup>2</sup> (Clopton, 2007).

Examining how students having both a strong sense of community and identifying as a fan have an impact on academic and social integration was another aim of this research. Findings produced mixed results and left the study questioning whether those students who identify strongly with teams do so because of strong identification with their institution, or vice versa

(Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992). Here, the notion of identity salience is useful. Identity salience suggests that individuals construct multiple identities and weigh them differently given their respective importance (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Students thus might differ in outcomes such as academic performance or social satisfaction because they arrange their various identities (as student, as sports fan, as member of the broader university community) differently, allocating resources such as energy, time, and money accordingly.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Given its significance, institutions must continually assess the broad impact of athletics (Sperber, 2000; Toma, 2003). Fan identification does seem to enhance integration, improving student connections and persistence (Clopton, 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1997; Wann and Robinson, 2002). However, there is a concern that white students experience effects to a greater degree (Melendez, 2006). Another concern is that the type of integration and community that spectator sports engender may not align with educational values (Clopton, 2007; Toma, 2003). For instance, the most intense fans have been found to be most likely to consider assisting an athlete in cheating—academic, performance, or within competition (Wann, Hunter, Ryan, and Wright, 2001). Also, fan association may negatively influence studying and academic attendance, because of the social pulls of actively engaging with the sport. Sperber (2000) argues that social integration through spectator sports comes at the expense of academic integration. However, research also suggests that strong social integration can compensate for lower academic performance (Bean and Bradley, 1986).

Campus community may be the key concept here, as opposed to fan identification. Elliott (2002) found that campus life, which would include spectator sports, did not predict student satisfaction, but campus climate did. Similarly, this study found that the overall sense of community—analogueous to campus climate—outweighed the power of fan identification, a single aspect of campus life. Further research measuring involvement by students not only in attending games but also watching their team compete on television is needed to ascertain a complete picture of fan integration, community development, and the effect of athletic importance at individual institutions.

In the end, measuring the value of athletics on academic and social integration presents a daunting challenge. Given the justifications for spectator sports—for instance, that athletics build campus community—these questions need to be asked. This is especially true of whether social integration gains are offset by a decline in academic integration, the theory postulated by Sperber (2000). Growth in “nontraditional” televised football and basketball games, as well as saturation coverage on weekends, suggests that fans, including students, are asked to become even more committed. All this leads to questioning what dangers, as well as the benefits, are associated

with fan identification in student involvement. The answer is connection to the response to another question: How important is it to enhance campus culture and climate for students to have a strong sense of campus community as one variable in their overall satisfaction and engagement (Strange and Banning, 2001; Elliott, 2003)?

## Notes

1. I surveyed 1,790 students, with more than one-quarter responding, at four institutions competing in a Bowl Championship Series (BCS) conference, using the academic and social integration scale (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980), the sports spectatorship identification scale (Wann and Branscombe, 1993), and the campus atmosphere scale (Lounsbury and DeNeui, 1995). Other studies have used a single institution and not the integration scale (Branscombe and Wann, 1991; Wann and Robinson, 2002).

2. Rankin and Reason (2005) have found that students of color perceive campus climate differently than white students do, so the last finding is not unexpected.

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