

Academic Achievement in Student Athletes

Hilary Chubb and Linzy Martinelli

The Pennsylvania State University

“Different divisions have different academic requirements, but the Association’s belief in student-athletes as students first is paramount. NCAA student-athletes annually outperform their student-body counterparts in graduation rates, and in almost all demographic categories” (NCAA, 2013)

The main goal for a university is to promote learning and development in students in various capacities. More specifically, one goal of universities is the academic achievement of its students for three reasons. There is a sense of obligation to students to prepare them for the future, there exists a financial impact on both the institution and student if students are not successful, and finally success in school provides public and economic benefits such as employment, salary and personal development. Colleges can affect academic success and retention by offering services, programs, and selecting students who have the characteristics to succeed. The Pennsylvania State University works towards achieving this goal of academic success for a specific group of students, student-athletes, through the efforts of the Morgan Academic Support Center for Student-Athletes.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Student-Athlete Ethnicity Report (2010) mentions there are 420,000 NCAA student-athletes in all three divisions combined, in a total of 1,000 member institutions. The report further explains that the vast majority of these athletes are white/non-Hispanic (71.4% of men and 77.8% of women), followed by African-Americans (18.4% of men and 11.4% of women). Student athletes can be found at many types of institutions from research, to private, to technical/vocational schools, to Religious- affiliated and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Due to both size and prestige, large public universities hold the most student-athletes. It may seem that the differences between student

athletes and students at large is insignificant, but this is not the reality. Not only do both student athletes and students at large face issues such as social adjustment, career exploration, and intellectual growth, student- athletes also constantly cope with other added stressors. These can include dealing with balancing the roles of student and athlete as these individuals also have obligations to the coach, the team, and the rules and regulations of the NCAA. Furthermore, student athletes experiences can differ based on NCAA Division level. Division I student athletes might have fewer opportunities to be a part of the traditional college experience because of the demands of athletic participation at that level. Such unique experiences and demands can often have significant effects on these individuals ability to succeed academically.

Penn State University currently fields 31 varsity athletic teams and has over 650 student-athletes (Meyer, 2012; Penn State Athletics, 2012). The Morgan Academic Support Center for Student Athletes (Morgan Center) was designed to provide Penn State's student athletes with the support it needs to accomplish academic goals. Through the provision of advising, mentoring, tutoring, study enrichment, and counseling services, the Morgan Center has aided the student athletes of Penn State's thirty one varsity teams in succeeding academically.

Academic achievement is difficult to define but both the NCAA and the university have requirements to remain in school and in addition, for student-athletes to remain eligible for play. In 1996, the NCAA enacted Proposition XVI which increased the number of core high school classes, such as mathematics, science, and history, that a student athlete must complete to be included in GPA calculation as well as implemented a scale allowing for students with lower standardized test scores to still be eligible if they had higher GPAs. Finally, in 2005, the NCAA adopted a full sliding scale that eliminated partial qualifier status. This sliding scale expands on Proposition XVI and allows for students having as low as a 400 SAT score, which is the lowest

possible score, to be eligible under NCAA standards if they have a 3.55 high school GPA. On the opposite side of the scale, a student who has only a 2.0 high school GPA will be eligible with an SAT score of 1010, which is in approximately the 48th percentile (Phillips, 2009). In addition to these, what some may describe as low requirements, each university also imposes its own minimum eligibility requirements which are more often than not higher than those posed by the NCAA. As a result, it is difficult to define academic achievement because of the variability and the fact that every student defines personal success differently.

According to Purdy et al. (1982) student athletes receive positive and negative reinforcement from their surroundings. These reinforcements can facilitate development of an identity as student *and* athlete or can encourage the student athlete to focus on one element of that identity to the detriment of the other. For many student athletes, the identity as *student* takes a backseat to the identity as an *athlete*. Consequently, this could encourage the athlete to neglect activities and responsibilities necessary to be a successful student. An emphasis on the athlete identity also can lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes in which student athletes are portrayed as academically unqualified, un-intelligent, and socially impotent (Purdy, 1982).

This can be seen through the data which shows that athletes score lower than non-athletes on the various measures of educational attainment in higher education. Male athletes scored lower on all indicators of academic achievement than their male counterparts from the population. Similar, though somewhat smaller, differences were also discovered between female athletes and females from the general school population on most indices of educational success. However, female athletes had a slightly higher GPA. Among the athletes, women scored significantly higher than men on all measures of educational achievement except for the ACT score, where men scored one-tenth of a point higher (Purdy, 1982).

The Morgan Academic Center

The mission of the Morgan Academic Center describes two main objectives, to provide academic support services to student-athletes in order to assist them in achieving academic goals, and to supply them with academic eligibility information. Due to the many constraints that student-athletes possess in addition to the normal student these individuals also must maintain a certain level of academic achievement to remain eligible to play a sport which is reflected in the mission. However, the Center is primarily concerned with academic success which is not only a method to enhance student-athletes ability to meet their eligibility requirements but also, an endeavor to encourage student-athletes to achieve both on and off the field. For student athletes at Penn State, achievement includes students' ability to navigate the university system, work to their greatest potential, and remain active within the Center. One beneficial strategy is the Center's attempt to play on the inherent competitive nature of student-athletes to also push them to succeed in the classroom and strive for excellence.

Services for Student Athletes at Penn State University

The Morgan Center's core group of staff is comprised of fifteen individuals. In addition, several mentors and tutors are involved in the Center's operations. All of these people work to further the Center's mission of helping students to succeed academically. The Morgan Center offers student-athletes several support services in order to achieve this goal.

Advising

Academic advising, via an academic counselor, is provided to all athletes through the Morgan Center. The Center's counselors are unique in that they have a thorough understanding of the athletes' competition schedules and the particular demands of each sport. Because student-athletes have busy practice and competition schedules, they are given the privilege to register for

classes earlier than other students. This enables them to choose classes that will fit into their schedule before all spots in the course are taken. Scheduling classes that conflict with the athlete's schedule can create a barrier to academic success, as it may cause him or her to miss classes and assignments. Counselors also assess individual students' academic abilities (based on previous grades and scores) to help them schedule classes which are appropriate for their academic ability.

Mentoring

The Morgan Center also provides a mentoring program for student-athletes. Each student is paired with a graduate student mentor, who aids her in developing skills essential to achieving academic goals. These skills include time management, note taking, organization, reading comprehension, test preparation, and self-advocacy. Students and mentors meet weekly. At the conclusion of each session, the mentor submits a report on the student-athlete's progress, which is sent to the student's academic counselor and coach (Anderson, 2012). Though the mentor program is voluntary, Cheryl Anderson, the Center's learning specialist and director of the program, estimates that about 60% of athletes choose to participate. College is much different than high school and student-athletes do not have much time to assimilate. Therefore students must realize the need to succeed in classes early or risk losing eligibility. The program helps to foster academic achievement, as it provides student-athletes with a solid foundation of skills they can employ to successfully navigate college courses.

Tutoring

While the mentoring program focuses on developing general skills that can be applied across all of the student's classes, the Center's tutoring program provides course-specific content assistance. The tutors are graduate or undergraduate students, and must have received an A- or

better in order to tutor in a particular course. Athletes can choose to engage in individual, small group, or walk-in tutoring. Over one hundred tutors are employed by the Center, and it fields approximately five hundred tutoring requests per semester. By providing tutors, the Center helps students to understand course material in order to perform well on tests and other assignments.

Study Enrichment

Two types of study enrichment are available to student-athletes through the Morgan Center: study halls and first year experience courses. Study halls are mandatory for all freshmen athletes, who must spend a minimum of seven hours per week in them, and attendance is monitored by an ID card swiping system. Each team sets its own requirements for participation in beyond the freshman year, but most teams require students at all levels to attend. The Morgan Center provides four facilities for study hall across campus. Each facility includes a room with individual study carrels, a computer lab, and a group meeting room for tutoring and mentoring sessions. Drop-in math and writing tutors are also available (Anderson & Lundy, 2012). The study hall program ensures that student-athletes are dedicating an adequate amount of time to their studies, so that they may perform well in their classes.

For student-athletes at Penn State, there is an emphasis on the importance of first year courses, another study enrichment service offered by the center. All freshmen student athletes are required to enroll in the Bio-Behavioral Health (BBH) 148S and 48 courses. The goals of these courses are to help student athletes in becoming successful in their studies, to aid them in assuming responsibility for their academic success, and to assist them in managing the rigorous and novel demands of college life. This course attempts to focus on acclimating new students to the campus and helping them to adjust to college life. The BBH048 course focuses on developing important life skills. Essentially, the first year enrichment courses help students to

make a smooth transition from high school to college, which enables them to achieve in the classroom.

Sports Psychology

Anderson indicates that a student-athlete's academic problems do not always stem from a misunderstanding of course material. Rather, personal issues might affect their academic performance. Anderson explains that, sometimes, students encounter problems in the classroom because of the personal issues they are dealing with. These issues can be the result of strained personal relationships, stress created by the student's participation in the sport, and the difficult process of adjusting to college life. To help students cope with such problems, the Morgan Center has a sports psychologist on staff, David Yukelson. He regularly meets individually with about thirty student-athletes to help them set goals and provide an outlet to discuss problems they may be facing. Yukelson often visits team practices to check up on students. With these services, Yukelson helps student-athletes remove some distractions that may be keeping them from performing successfully in the classroom.

Assessment of Success

In terms of formal review, the Center compares Penn State student athlete graduation rates against the NCAA Graduation Success Rate and the Federal Graduation Rate to determine academic achievement. The most recent results placed Penn State against other Big Ten Conference schools in third place (88% graduation rate), and second place (79% graduation rate) respectively. These reports are released covering a period of five years, so their most recent figures reflect that of the incoming class of 2004. Finally, the Center assesses academic achievement in terms of eligibility requirements, in considering whether or not students are qualified academically to participate in their sports.

In addition to formal assessment, the Center also does individual assessment on a case-by-case basis. Because student success can mean different things for different students, assessment of student-athletes is based on ability and progress. This can be determined by considering high school grades and SAT scores, as well as past grade point averages.

Theoretical Framework

Vincent Tinto's framework of student persistence and retention is not outright applied by the Morgan Academic Center at Penn State University. However, the principles behind Tinto's model are clearly used in the design for services provided for student athletes during the student's institutional experiences. Tinto's model of institutional departure takes into account the social systems at work during a student's experience with higher education. Social systems play a large role in that experience for student athletes, and often because of that these students require added support in the academic systems. In figure 1 you will see Tinto's model, and figure 2 illustrates which aspects of this model are addressed by each of the services provided by the Morgan Academic Center to student athletes.

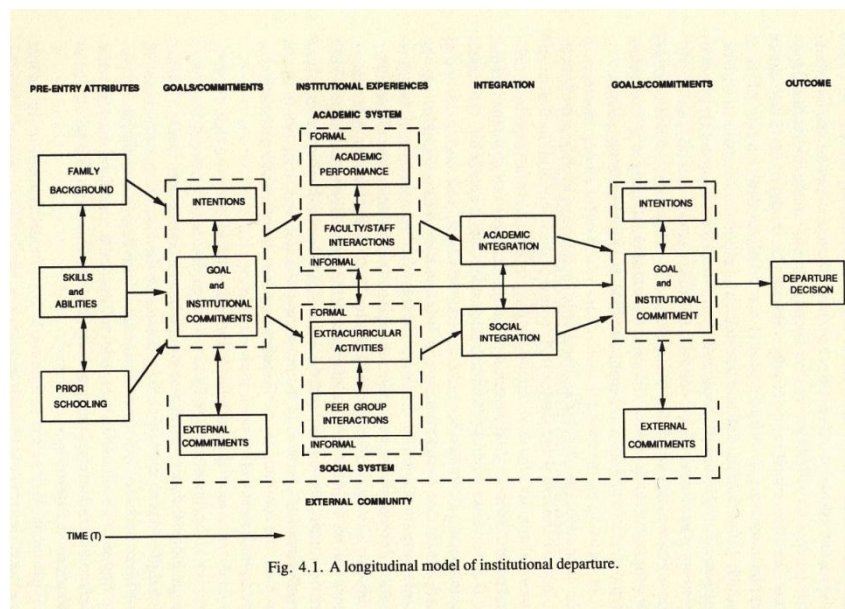


Fig. 4.1. A longitudinal model of institutional departure.

Figure 1; Tinto's Framework

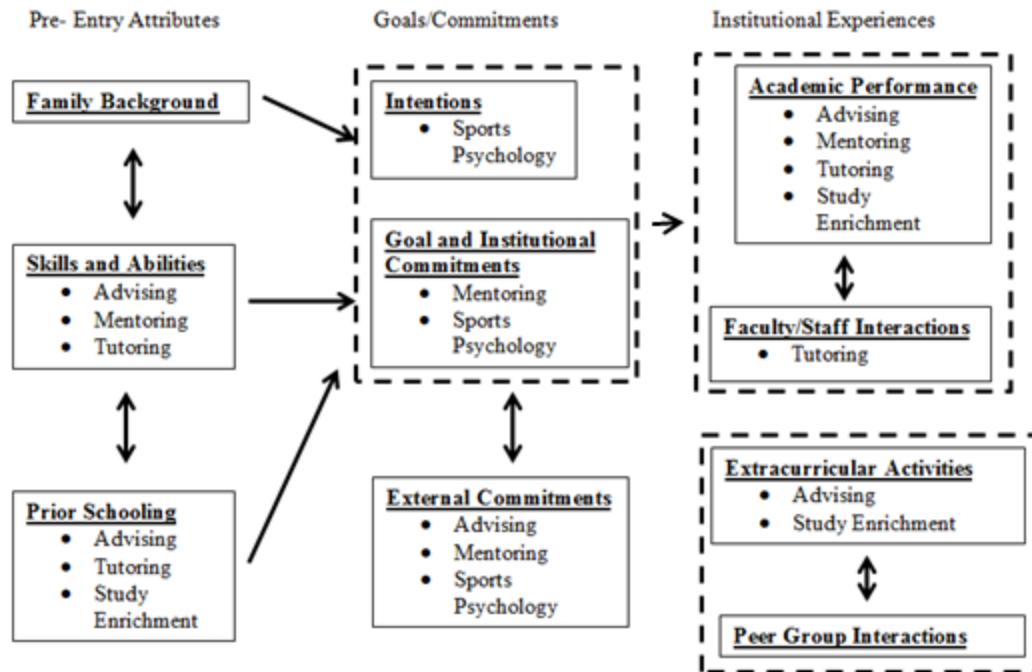


Figure 2: Tinto's Framework, adapted to illustrate Morgan Academic Center Services

Conclusion

Academic success is a difficult outcome to measure for any student population. For student athletes it is defined by the rules and regulations for eligibility of the NCAA. The Morgan Academic Center at Penn State University provides multiple programs and resources which aim to help student athlete's achieve academic success, but not only in order for them to meet eligibility requirements of the NCAA. One of the greatest strengths of the Center is their acknowledgment that success means different things to different students.

Due to the inability to directly define academic success, it can be difficult to evaluate it successfully. As a result, assessment is an area that can be improved upon as the Center relies mainly on national data and simplistic qualitative measures. Due to articles and unsophisticated evidence suggesting that Penn State's athletes achieve academically, the Center should consider expansion on research practices that directly measure their success. Additionally, the Center

should aim to provide more specific learning outcomes for students in terms of academic success and what that means for the Center.

By instating specific learning outcomes for the center, and helping student establish their own specific learning outcomes the Center will be able to assist students in intentionally achieving academic success in the ways which are most cohesive for that student. This could be productively accomplished through the already established mentoring program.

Although Penn State student athletes have the third highest graduation rate out of the big ten schools, there is still room for improvement in terms of graduation rate but overall academic success as well. Three ways to do this will be suggested as adaptations from Hobneck. Hobneck suggested completion of educational development plans, enrollment of student athletes in a life skills course, and examination of progress reports (2003). Educational development plans should be integrated with learning outcomes, both institution wide and student specific goals. Part of this intentionality should encompass the BBH courses in which student athletes must enroll. Through discussion of why the students are taking these courses and explanation of the intentionality, the students are more apt to absorb more from the courses and therefore experience greater benefits from them. This combines the learning outcome/educational development goals as well as the life skills course recommendation by Hobneck. Finally, another addition to Morgan Academic Center should be examination of progress reports. This could be accomplished in a number of ways. One way would be to include grade tracking in the first year seminar courses for student athletes. Additionally student athletes could be required to meet with their Center advisor to discuss mid semester progress each semester or with their mentor if they have chosen to enroll in that particular program.

Penn State has a well-established academic center for student athletes. However, by including more research and a theoretical framework in their support plans they will be able to greater serve the students and help those students achieve greater academic success, whatever that means to each student.

References

- Hobneck, C., Mudge, L., Turchi, M. (2003). Improving student athlete academic success and retention. (Doctoral theses). Retrieved from ERIC. (ED478782)
- National College Athletic Association. Zgonc, E (Assistant Director of Research). (2010). Student-athlete ethnicity report. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/SAEREP11.pdf>
- NCAA Public Home Page - NCAA.org. (n.d.). *NCAA Public Home Page - NCAA.org*. Retrieved February 13, 2013, from <http://www.ncaa.org/>
- Penn State Athletics. (2012). Nearly 400 penn state student-athletes earn 3.0 GPA during superb spring semester. Retrieved from: <http://www.gopsusports.com/genrel/071712aaa.html>.
- Phillips, T. M. (2009). Un-equal protection: Preferential admissions treatment for student athletes. *Alabama Law Review*, 60, 3, 751-782. Retrieved from: <http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/bamalr60&collection=journals&page=751>
- Purdy, D. A., Eitzen, D. S., Hufnagel, R. (1982). Are athletes also students: The educational attainment of college athletes. *Social Problems*, 29 (4), 439-448. doi: 10.2307/800032. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/800032>
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.