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### Individual and institutional challenges facing student athletes on U.S. college campuses

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## Review

# Individual and institutional challenges facing student athletes on U.S. college campuses

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**Student athletes face challenges of individual nature including their personal involvement in academic oriented activities, time constraints, class attendance, personal goal setting and career choices, physical and emotional fatigue, transition to college environment and academic grades, as well as external ones such as coach demands, institutional policies, discrimination; marginalization from college mainstream activities; college mission and learning environment, and eligibility demands from National Collegiate Athletic Association and National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. It is prudent for college administrators to purposely create an accommodating learning environment as well as striving to integrate the student athletes into college wide activities.**

**Key words:** Student athlete, faculty, racism, stereotype, gender inequality, student involvement theory, intercollegiate athletics/sports, graduation rate.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between intercollegiate sports and academic pursuits in U.S. Colleges and Universities continues to arouse simultaneous yet passionate approval and disapproval by scholars (Comeaux and Jayakumar, 2007; Lumpkin, 2008; Ridpath, 2008; Suggs, 2006). Those who do not appreciate the educational value of athletics find it a peculiar institution within the context of American Higher Education (Thelin, 1994). Others like Simon (2008:41) argue that “academic values and athletic ones can be mutually reinforcing” and hence intercollegiate athletics should be utilized to teach fundamental human values rather than disparaged. In the middle of the debate is the fate of college students that join campus in pursuit of an education via an athletic scholarship due to their athletic ability. However, the demands on the individual athlete predispose one to potential failure in achieving both academic and athletic success. According to Astin’s student involvement theory (SIT) (1984), the individual plays a central role in determining the extent and nature of growth according to the quality of effort or involvement with the resources provided by the institution (Kuh, 2001, 2003; Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). SIT holds that for a student to learn, s/he must invest time and energy into the pursuit of learning. This demands effort, time and commitment on the part of an individual student

(Internal/personal) factor as well as an enabling learning environment that is provided by an institution (external factor). This educational learning involvement entails attending classes, interacting with faculty, doing research, engaging in group discussions, library usage, and participation in student activities such as co-curricular, government and societies within an institution. SIT further shows that academic success is tied to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that a student invests in the overall college experience. This article therefore examines some of the individual and environmental challenges that student athletes face while pursuing a dual objective of excelling in athletics and academics.

Recent data show that graduation rates for student athletes are on the increase (Franklin, 2006; Hosick, 2008; Sander, 2008; USA Today, 2008; Wolverton, 2006). The NCAA data for 2008 show that Graduation Success Rate (GSR) for Division 1 players reached 78% (Sander, 2008) for the 1998 to 2001 academic years. The same GSR improved to 79% for student athletes who joined college in 2001. The GSR however varies widely by sport, race and gender (Fountain and Finley, 2009). Basketball men graduated at 62%; football 66%; lacrosse 88%; water polo 87%; fencing and gymnastics each 86%. On average, women athletes graduated 87%

compared to men's 71%. For women's sports, ski graduated 96%; gymnastics 95%; field hockey and lacrosse 94% for each; basketball 82%; and bowling came last at 68% (Sander, 2008). Overall, one can justifiably argue that intercollegiate athletics is having a positive impact on student athletes as well as on college education considering that the average graduation rate within six years is 53% for the whole student body (Marklein, 2009).

The drive to have improved graduation rates for student athletes should be sustained both at the sporting associations (NCAA, NAIA) as well as the individual educational institution levels. The focus for institutions is to create a campus atmosphere that deliberately incorporates the student athletes in the institutional academic culture with a view of producing a graduate who would make a positive impact on society after matriculation (Hyland, 2008; Simon, 2008). As college administrators and faculty members work to enhance persistence and graduation rates of their respective institutions (Hyatt, 2003), the student athletes need to be addressed given their unique role on campus. Literature on student athletes and their academic performance is contradictory. According to Bowen and Levin (2003), the athletics program is a distracter in higher education. According to the authors, the ills characterizing athletics include college athletes receiving preferential treatment during admission as they appear to be less academically prepared than their peers; they earn lower grades in college; have their own subculture that flourishes, isolated and insulated from the larger campus culture. The isolationist approach by student athletes is counterproductive to their academic pursuits (Bowen and Levin, 2003). Such isolation may diminish opportunities for personal development through interactions with non-athletes and participation in other types of extracurricular groups which may lead to detrimental behaviors (Aries et al., 2004). Some of the behaviors which athletes engage in to their own detriment include heavy drinking. On a positive note, a study by Aries et al. (2004), found no evidence of college athletes being less ambitious, grade conscious and that they did not devote lesser time to studying. Other studies (Umbach et al., 2006; Kuh et al., 2007) have shown that student athletes actually engage in effective educational practices at the same level or even better than the non-athlete peers. Therefore, the college environment encompasses all that is critical in influencing the course of a student's educational program, which impacts the intellectual desired outcome leading to timely matriculation (Astin, 1999; Comeaux and Harrison, 2007; Hyatt, 2003).

### **SPORT/ACADEMIC TOP PERFORMANCE FACTORS**

Umbach et al., (2006) have argued that student engagement, which is critical for academic success "is a

function of both the individual effort of each student and institutional practices and policies that encourage students to participate in purposeful activities" (712). For an institution to produce sport as well as academic champions it should have the necessary administrative, socio-cultural, human, infrastructural and institutional frameworks that provide an environment in which individual athletes and teams can excel in preparation and competition. The performance of individual student athletes and teams in training and competitions can be conceptualized in terms of the factors that influence performance outcome (Njororai, 2000, 2003; Singh, 1982). Like Umbach et al., (2006), factors affecting sports performance can be grouped into two, namely internal (individual/personal) and external (institutional) ones. The internal or inner factors are individual based and include one's disposition in terms of physical abilities, technique, physique, tactics and psychological orientation for sports performance (Njororai, 2000; Singh, 1982) and for academic success they include standard scores (reading, writing, mathematical skills), grade point average (GPA), grades, and other cognitive abilities related to motivation, effort, study skills and strategies. According to Kuh et al. (2007) the amount of time and effort a student invests in the learning process is vital in enhancing their engagement. They list the key student based factors as study habits, peer involvement, interaction with faculty, time on task, and motivation among others. These factors, both sports and academic wise, are amenable to training and preparation (Kuh et al., 2007; Singh, 1982; Umbach et al., 2006). Coaches, just like faculty, strive to improve or modify individual based factors so that they can produce better outcomes. Thus in essence, both the coach and faculty focus on influencing and modifying the individual student athlete so that they can yield positive results on the field of play and in the classroom (Umbach et al., 2006).

In addition to the internal or individual based factors, there are the external ones (Institutional/environmental) which include funding (finances), facilities, equipment, incentives, technical and administrative personnel, policies, officials, institutional structure, among others (Njororai, 2000, 2003; Singh, 1982). Kunath in Singh (1982) argued that "sports performance in international competitions and tournaments not only denotes the high level of efficiency of an individual sports person but also gives expression to the overall efficiency of a nation, "society and culture" (p.4). Thus countries and therefore institutions that produce champion teams also have administrative, social cultural, financial and infrastructural conditions which are indispensable for producing champions (Singh, 1982). Regarding academics, Kuh et al. (2007) identifies the key institutional factors as resources, curriculum, student support services, organization, first year experience, academic support, campus environment, peer support, teaching and learning approaches. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) the "impact

of college is largely determined by individual effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal and extracurricular offerings on a campus... (602)".

## **Internal factors**

### ***Time constraints***

A student athlete's physical and mental application towards achievement is critical to successful matriculation in college. According to Student involvement theory (Astin, 1984, 1993, 1999; Kuh et al., 2007; Morgan, 2001; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991), student involvement on college campuses may be one of the most important factors influencing their academic success. SIT posits that for a student to learn, they must invest time and energy into the pursuit of learning. This demands effort, time and commitment. This educational learning involvement entails attending classes, interacting with faculty, doing research, engaging in group discussions, library research, and participation in student activities such as government and societies (Astin, 1984, 1993, 1999; Kuh et al., 2007; Morgan, 2001; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Morgan (2001) cites other useful forms of involvement as that of academic involvement, involvement with faculty and student peer groups. Out of these activities, a major predictor of student athlete academic success is student-faculty interaction. A study by Comeaux and Harrison (2007) established that both Black and White student athletes in the revenue-producing sports of men's basketball and football academic success is to some extent dependent on the nature of interaction with faculty. One challenge that student athletes face is time spent away from faculty and devoted to sports training and competition. Their extreme devotion to sport can potentially eat into the time meant for academics (Fletcher et al., 2003; Thomas, 2008). Time is indeed one of the major obstacles between student athletes and academic success. The major student athlete time demands include games, travelling, film/video sessions, weight training, injury/recovery treatment, media responsibilities, and alumni/community related duties (Thomas, 2008). Additional time is needed to travel to the gym, warm up, cool down, shower, dress, and engage in locker room pep talk. If it is on a trip, there is the question of packing and unpacking, dealing with delays, occasional vehicle breakdowns and other logistical issues. Cumulatively, these issues can potentially overwhelm a student with average ability leave alone bright ones (Scott et al., 2008). Basing on the student involvement theory (SIT), the extent to which students can achieve particular developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce gains. The student athlete is therefore left in a precarious position unless efforts are mounted to help him or her remain focused on academic

work. Student athlete involvement in academic pursuits positively affects a student's overall satisfaction with the college experience, fosters the continuing pursuit of academics, and facilitates personal growth and development (Morgan, 2001). The more academically involved, the more likely they are to benefit intellectually and personally. Class attendance suffers when the student athletes invests time and energy in athletics, family, friends, and other outside activities which represent a reduction in the time and energy the student has to devote to class attendance and the related assignments. Indeed from Astin's (1999:525) study, he observed that 'athletic involvement, like academic involvement, tends to isolate students from the peer group effects that normally accompany college attendance'. Students who are intensely committed to academic work isolate themselves as most time and effort are directed to studying. Similarly, for student athletes, the isolation may be a result of spending a lot of time around the athletic facilities and activities. Student athletes at times focus totally on their next game. Their concentration is so encompassing that academics, assignments and class attendance become secondary (Fletcher et al, 2003). This shortcoming among student athletes is rampant even in most selective liberal arts institutions that claim to integrate athletics and academics. According to Shulman and Bowen (2001) and Bowen and Levin (2003), a significant proportion of student athletes have not internalized academic values and do subordinate academic achievement to achievement of athletic goals. One of the questions posed by Astin's (1999) study was "Does one form of involvement (example, in extra-curricular activities) enhance or diminish the effects of another form (example, in academic work)? It appears that student athletes who devote a disproportionately high percentage of their time on athletic pursuits at the expense of academic priorities fair poorly in terms of their class attendance and thereby compromise their progression towards graduation. Student athletes should therefore be guided to balance their athletic and academic commitments. According to Kuh et al. (2007) the best predictor of college grades is the combination of an individual student's academic preparation, high school grades, aspirations and motivation. Additionally student athletes should be equipped to take charge of his or her academic responsibilities if they are to succeed.

### ***Career goals***

Student athletes need guidance in choosing their academic majors and their career options as well as setting goals (Hyatt, 2009). This is important as one can only mobilize all the resources needed to move in a direction and target that is clear in one's mind. Some student athletes join college with a bloated anticipation of joining professional ranks. Hyatt (2003) cites a study by

the Center for the Study of Athletics which collected data from forty-two Division 1 colleges. The data revealed that education was not a student athletes' primary reason for attending college. Instead, 44% of African Americans and 20% non-African American football players expected to become professional athletes whereas in basketball, the figures were 7% of the African American and 3% of the non-African American. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of student athletes in college end up being drafted into professional leagues. For instance, NFL and NBA, two of the leading professional leagues in the U.S.A. recruit only 2.3 and 2.5% respectively (Bolig, 1994; Le Crom, 2009). These figures also fluctuate from year to year as in 2003 - 2004, the numbers were below the averages with 0.8% of college basketball players, 1.3% of college football players and 6.9% of college baseball players drafted (Le Crom, 2009). Thus the college entry goal for a student athlete is critical in shaping his or her academic priorities and responsibilities. Those students who join college with a clear goal to graduate with a degree look at their athletic ability as a medium to earn scholarship so as to get an education. Such students require support to be able to accomplish their goal of succeeding both in academics and athletics.

Setting of academic goals contributes heavily to ones success. A study by Comeaux and Harrison (2007) using the Student Involvement Theory came up with two important findings that shed light on the student athlete and academic success in colleges. The findings were that:

a. Both white and black student athletes who were encouraged to attend graduate school by faculty tend to get higher grade point averages (GPA). This calls for faculty student athlete interaction. Athletes left to the devices of only coaches may not be academically challenged beyond the playing field. Thus there has to be deliberate effort to help student athletes evaluate their athletic ability and set realistic goals including those that transcend the playing field.

b. Those that are provided assistance in achieving professional goals by their instructors tend to perform better academically in college. Most students reach college when they are not quite sure what they want to pursue in terms of majors and careers. Thus an early exposure of student athletes to faculty members of different academic orientations can help in exposing the student.

### ***College grades and freshman experience***

It is generally acknowledged that freshman year of college is a stressful time of social and academic that they are integrated in campus academic culture so adjustment (Lubker and Etzel, 2007; Martin et al., 1999).

It is a time that can be filled with emotional disturbances such as loneliness, homesickness, and grief. This could trigger risk behaviors such as substance abuse and thereby compromise a student athlete's college grades. According to Martin et al. (1999), there are three variables that may impact first year emotional distress including social (parental influences, social adjustment); personal-emotional (emotional adjustment, coping style) and attachment to the institution. These factors may be influenced by participation in sports both at the high school level where the social experiences and emotional connections made might influence the level of adjustment in new situations (Lubker and Etzel, 2007). It is apparent that most student athletes are big stars on their high school campuses by the time they reach their senior year. They therefore have over the years earned recognition, positive feedback by peers, faculty and the whole high school community (Hyatt, 2003). However, once they enter college, they have to start from scratch academically, socially and even on the athletics team. At recruitment time, the coach makes the athlete to feel important but once in college, the priority for the coach shifts from individual athletes to the team formation, the upcoming season and the next class of recruits (Hyatt, 2003). The loss of recognition, favors and personalized attention predisposes the student athlete to the feeling of abandonment and erosion of the sense of importance that one is used to (Person and Le Noir, 1997). This initial transition dilemma for student athletes can set them up on a slippery path through college. It does not help matters that a number of high school recruits come to college when inadequately prepared academically. According to Wolff and Keteyian (1991), students ill prepared in high school, and then thrown into the breach of the biggest of big-time programs, had little chance of earning a degree.

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), student college grades are probably the best predictor of student persistence, degree completion, and graduate school enrollment. Good grades in first year impact heavily on subsequent academic success and degree completion. A strong academic achievement early in college life seems to reduce the chances of a student stopping and increases probability of timely degree completion (Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). It is apparent that students in the top percentile of the class have higher chances of completing their degree programs. Additionally, a student's GPA is associated with time spent preparing for class, asking questions in class, tutoring other students, receiving prompt feedback from faculty, maintaining high quality relationship with faculty, and having a favorable evaluation of overall educational experiences in college (Kuh et al., 2007). It would be instructive for the Academic affairs division in colleges to pay particular attention to incoming student athletes so as to set high targets for academic success (Hyatt, 2003; Hyland, 2008; Simon, 2008).

### ***Physical and emotional strain***

The cumulative physical toll throughout the academic year can potentially wreak havoc on a student athlete's ability to concentrate on studies (Thomas, 2008). The physical conditioning program is characterized by intense daily afternoon pick-up games, weight training sessions, cardiovascular conditioning, timed trials and fitness tests, and individual skill development. Apart from the physical demands, the emotional highs and lows associated with competition outcomes can leave an individual athlete in a state of burn out. According to Fletcher et al. (2003), "athletes experience significant disappointments and fears when their team has key losses or when they perform poorly". Athlete's fears include losing the opportunity to compete because of injury or being cut from the team or being forced to retire from the sport one loves (Fletcher et al., 2003). The physical and emotional strains leave the student athlete tired all the time. This fatigue translates to failure to do assignments, dose off in class, miss class to recuperate in bed, poor concentration and mental lapses (Thomas, 2008). Added to the sport related demands are personal social habits and peer pressures associated with young men and women which may compromise academic pursuits during the competition season. Research findings show that student athletes' classroom performance is lower compared to the out of season performance (Scott et al., 2008).

## **EXTERNAL FACTORS**

### **Coach demands**

Coaches tend to have a firm grip on student athletes as they determine the student scholarship as well as team roles (Coakley, 2009). The coach is also under pressure to have a winning season and thereby retain the job. Student athletes are therefore given mixed signals when team priorities are set and academic studies are put second to practices and competitions (Fletcher et al., 2003). This lack of clarity arises from the publicly proclaimed institutional priorities of academics coming first and athletics second. The vicarious need for coaches to retain their jobs leaves the player at the mercy of faculty members, on one hand, and coaches on the other. Torn between meeting the academic obligations to faculty and the coach, the latter comes out on top (Coakley, 2009). This is because the coach arranges aspects of the life of the student athlete such as meals, housing, schedules, time usage, and team bonding activities and to some extent study times. Schedules by coaches on student athlete time creates an environment of athlete to athlete intensive interaction and thereby could negate any faculty efforts to academically impact the student athletes effectively (Fletcher et al., 2003). Despite pressure being exerted on student athletes, they have the potential to apply themselves successfully to

both athletic and academic excellence. Indeed one educational value of athletics is the self sacrifice and dedication to succeed when under pressure (Simon, 2008). Those who are totally focused on professional sport may not have much to do academically. However, these are not the majority.

### ***Institutional policies***

Student athletes frequently miss classes in order to travel to scheduled sports events and institutional policies require that they make up for missed material, assignments and examinations (Fletcher et al., 2003). Since sport participation may necessitate missing class, institutions have formulated policies to govern athletes' travel to competitions. However, faculty members who have little understanding or empathy for the special needs and requirements of student athletes react negatively. Indeed faculty and staff are known to have stereotypes towards athletes such as "dumb jokes who are over privileged, pampered, lazy and out of control" (Fletcher et al., 2003:37). However, the constant absences of athletes also genuinely tend to hurt their image as serious students. Some faculty members therefore genuinely run out of patience and understanding or empathy for the special needs and requirements of student athletes. The lack of understanding creates and fosters stereotypes of student athletes as dumb jocks who are rewarded with good grades for athletic excellence rather than academic ability (Fletcher et al., 2003). Of course, some of the student athletes are not academically inclined, hence deserving of the stereotype. However, the fact that the overall graduation rates of the student athletes within six years is slightly higher than the regular student is encouraging (Le Crom et al., 2009; Simon, 2008). Indeed, whether a student athlete is a student first or an athlete first has long been a controversial issue in collegiate athletics (Ferrante et al., 1996). Even when institutions declare that the student role precedes the athletic one, the impact of the time demands for attending to each may negatively affect the student and even the team (Ferrante et al., 1996; Fletcher et al., 2003). Thus finding a working balance is an issue that student athletes, academic advisors and coaches have to deliberately strategize on if the student athlete is to excel in both and still graduate with a decent degree.

### **Racism and gender inequality**

Racism and gender inequality permeate institutions of higher learning despite the policy declarations banning them (Comeaux and Jayakumar, 2007; Fletcher et al., 2003; Harrison, 2000). The perceived or real feeling of marginalization by minority athletes creates a poor climate for successful academic pursuits by the student

athletes (Comeaux and Jayakumar, 2007; Fletcher et al., 2003; Harrison, 2000; Simon, 2008). It is easier to become involved when one can identify with the institution's environment. Such an environment produces happier, better adjusted student athletes that are more likely to achieve personal and educational goals (Astin, 1999). There is need to integrate and adjust to the social environment. This calls for time and interest from the athletes as well as available opportunities on college campuses. In the absence of campus wide opportunities, the athlete finds adequate sense of belonging, support and friendship within the athletics team (Comeaux and Harrison, 2007; Fletcher et al., 2003; Hyatt, 2003). Indeed lack of identification with the academic processes in college reduces the likelihood of persistence among athletes. Student athletes who fail to bond with the rest of the student population find it easier to step out of college (Hyatt, 2003; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). The college administration, faculty and staff are responsible for providing a stimulating academic environment that encompasses all students including athletes. According to Schwitzer et al. (1999) minority students lack the knowledge and the experience of interacting with students and faculty different from themselves. This creates a considerable social distance and therefore alienation of minority student athletes which compromises the learning environment.

One of the biggest criticisms of college sport is the fact that it is a replica of the plantation system. Harrison (2000) contends that the modern academe is characterized by the bizarre phenomenon of the majority of the big sport athletes being drawn from the African American ethnic group. Sack and Staurowsky (1998) argued that although the dominance of blacks in college sport may initially appear to reflect success, a closer examination reveals that universities have been far more concerned with exploiting the athletic talent of the black community to produce winning teams than with nurturing its academic potential to produce black lawyers, doctors and corporate executives (Harrison, 2000; Sack and Staurowsky, 1998).

Apart from race, gender bias is real not only in college athletics but in the whole American society (Fletcher et al., 2003). Women who engage in college sport have been shown consistently perform better academically and graduate at higher rates than regular students and even much better than their male counterparts (Wolverthon, 2006). However, women in college sport still face challenges such as fewer scholarships, less media exposure, and societal bias (Fletcher et al., 2003). Other issues that college administrators should be cognizant of include role conflict, negative stereotypes towards female sports participants, limited career opportunities in sport and minimal support on campus for women athletes and their sports programs (Fletcher et al., 2003). Some evident discrimination practices in athletics departments include inequalities in travel budgets, pay for coaches,

size of coaching staff, quality of facilities and equipment, and the number of available athletics slots. Although Title IX, which is a 1972 federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in educational institutions and provides a legal basis for women athletes to challenge discrimination through formal civil rights complaints and lawsuits, was meant to promote equity, many colleges are yet to fully comply (Fletcher et al., 2003; Sharp, 1994; Suggs, 2000).

Apart from structurally embedded discrimination, there is also the social stereotyping that subjects female athletes to conflict between social norms for femininity such as submissiveness, grace, beauty and attributes needed for athletic success such as strength, aggressiveness and achievement (Fletcher et al., 2003). Snyder and Spreitzer (1983) argue that conflict is a possibility when women athletes confront negative stereotypes such as being viewed as "unfeminine" or having their sexual orientation questioned. Such issues, if not well managed at personal and institutional levels, leave the women athletes distracted and therefore compromise their potential to excel in both academics and their chosen sport.

### ***Campus learning environment***

The central mission of every institution of higher learning is to provide an education to students by hiring competent faculty and staff who actively attend to the needs of the students. When student needs are adequately met, a student is likely to identify with the institutions and therefore desire to play an important role within it (Astin, 1984; 1999; Morgan, 2001). Morgan posits that when there is congruence between an individual and the campus environment that student will be happier, better adjusted, and more likely to achieve personal and educational goals. The university also provides an environment that is conducive for student learning via provision of support personnel, learning resources, and a well structured and market relevant curriculum. All students who join college are expected to aspire towards attaining a diploma in at least four years. However, the history of American higher education reveals that not all students who join college end up with a diploma.

One cadre of students that have come under the spot light for low graduation rates, especially in football and basketball men, are student athletes. Research on student athletes in college has yielded contradictory findings. Whereas scholars such as Shulman and Bowen (2001) and Bowen and Levin (2003) dismiss student Athletes for receiving preferential treatment in the admission as well as college experience, others such as Kuh et al. (2007), Umbach et al. (2006), and Franklin (2006) argue that student athletes are above average compared to the normal student population. According to Umbach et al. (2006) the student athletes reported that they perceived their campus environment to be more

supportive of their academic and social needs. This could explain the slightly higher graduation rates than non athletes. On the other hand, some researchers argue that it is not the student athlete to blame for their perceived indifference towards academic work despite their higher graduation rate than the non athletes. The argument is that the odds in the whole learning environment are stacked up against them (Bailey and Littleton, 1991; Comeaux and Harrison, 2007; Hyatt, 2003). Wolniak et al., (2001) argued that competing in intercollegiate sports appears to have little influence on such college outcomes as learning for self-understanding, higher-order cognitive activities and motivation to succeed academically. Indeed Richards and Aries (1999) found no significant difference in GPA between athletes and non- athletes despite the fact that athletes entered college with significantly lower SAT scores. However, the over-all graduation rates for Student Athletes are supposedly better than the average for regular students. This offers huge ammunition to the advocates of athletics as a major academic component of institutions of higher learning. Given that the bulk of the criticism is directed at division 1 football and basketball (Men) programs, Hyland (2008) and Simon (2008) assert that intercollegiate sports occur at a wide variety of institutions ranging over different divisions, associations and different educational missions. They argue that the problems of division 1 high visibility programs should not be generalized to all college athletics across the country. Basing on that rationale, Simon (2008) argues that in some contexts, college athletics and academics can be mutually reinforcing and that much of the criticism is based on wrong premises which ignore the educational value of the sporting experience itself.

According to Franklin (2006), student athletes graduate at higher rates than the general student body. In Division 1, student athletes' overall graduate two percentage points above the general student body and eight percentage points for Division 2. Some of the reasons that could explain student athletes' superior graduation rates than regular students include the intense student enrichment programs tailored for them.

Thus the impact of college is largely determined by the degree to which students involve (Astin, 1984, 1993, 1999) or engage (Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005) in various activities in and out of class activities. Student engagement or involvement is a function of both the individual student effort and the institutional practices and policies that encourage students to participate in educationally purposeful activities (Astin, 1999; Comeaux and Harrison, 2007; Kuh, 2001, 2003; Hyatt, 2003; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Ryan, 1989; Umbach et al., 2006).

The types of involvement that institutions of learning can encourage and provide for include interaction with faculty and staff, interaction with peers outside athletics, joining student organizations, honor societies, or student government associations, and doing community service

(Morgan, 2001). Kuh et al. (2007) cites Gerken and Volkman who argued that institutions where faculty members interact with students, provide prompt feedback, encourage active learning, focus on learning tasks, set high expectations and use other effective educational practices enhance student engagement and better learning. For first year students, the nature and quality of classroom experience with faculty and peers are better predictors of desired educational outcomes associated with college attendance than pre-college characteristics. Additionally, important to student learning are institutional environments that are perceived by students to be inclusive and affirming where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels (Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). And when institutions of higher learning, through their athletic coaches and directors, push student athletes to reach their highest possible level of athletic achievement without considering the time and energy needed by the student to also devote to academic success, is to demonstrate a lack of regard for the student as well as abdication from the centrality of education in its mission (Bailey and Littleton, 1991; Murray, 2000).

According to Morgan (2001), it is important to determine when a student's involvement in organizations can be too demanding and to start to negatively impact other areas of their lives. A disequilibrium and disproportionate amount of time given to one form of involvement such as athletics leaves the other areas including academics to suffer hence need for prudent planning at institutional level so as to facilitate student athlete success both on the field and in class.

### ***Student athlete eligibility demands***

Most colleges and universities are affiliated to the NCAA and NAIA. These Intercollegiate Sports Associations impose very strict eligibility criteria that impacts the student athletes heavily while on campus. For example, athletes must maintain full time student status, earn minimum grade point averages, and take a minimum number of course hours each semester (Fletcher et al., 2003). The eligibility requirements force institutions to keep students with marginal academic ability and low degree commitment to degree attainment in school until their eligibility expires and then dropped (Hyatt, 2003). Hyatt also cites the related habit of enrolling student athletes in easy or basic courses which are easy to pass to maintain eligibility but do not count towards a degree major. In addition, student athletes on scholarship are prohibited from seeking outside employment to assist with their college expenses (Fletcher et al., 2003). These requirements subject athletes to a life of pressure with limited out of pocket resources to meet their personal financial obligations unless on a stipend or have a



financially well endowed family. The lack of personal finances does not auger well for individuals who otherwise are perceived to lead an outgoing and high profile lifestyle given their star status on college teams especially in football and basketball. Despite the shortcomings of the strict eligibility criteria, adherence by athletic departments is critical in getting student athletes to keep academics in their sights. According to Le Crom et al. (2009), student athletes who take part in team sports such as football and basketball feel a lot more pressure and are characterized by a high attrition rate of students in college. The athletic pressure often has potential to distract a student's academic focus thus leading to retention and eligibility issues. It is therefore not surprising that basket ball and football register the lowest graduation rates especially in division one schools (Le Crom et al., 2009).

## CONCLUSION

The fact that student athletes are graduating at higher rates than non athletes and based on the success rate of students highly involved in college life, it appears safe to conclude that athletics can be streamlined to enhance student learning (Hyland, 2008; Simon, 2008). There should be specific initiatives focusing on the individual student athlete (personal/internal factors) and the external (institutional/environmental factors) that may impact student athletes' dual mission on campus (Le Crom et al., 2009). Some of the specific programs recommended include academic monitoring, personal counseling, career guidance, life skills training, peer mentoring, and assignment of compatible academic advisors, inculcation of study skills, intensified study hall and tutoring sessions, among others (Ferrante et al., 1996; Fletcher et al., 2003; Le Crom, 2009). That way a student athlete will be able to excel academically as well as athletically. Institutions should also strive to learn more about the experiences of their student athletes and determine whether they are taking part in educationally sound activities and benefiting in desired ways compared to their student peers. According to Umbach et al. (2006), we know a good deal about how student-athletes perform on the playing field. We should also keep score as to the quality of their educational activities elsewhere on campus. Additionally, the institution owes it to student athletes to provide a learning environment devoid of discrimination, marginalization, and one that promotes balanced emphasis on academics and athletics, quality faculty with healthy student and faculty interaction, among others. Deliberate efforts to initiate or enhance student athlete and faculty interaction are needed in colleges. Simon (2008) advocates for forums, both formal and informal, to encourage communication and perhaps better understanding between coaches and other faculty. He argues that greater contact between coaches and faculty may not only promote better understanding of

differing perspectives between both groups but also reduce stereotyping of each group by the other. Such interaction facilitates coaches to internalize academic values and vice versa for faculty regarding athletics. Such a close collaboration will open channels for faculty to be proactive in mentoring student athletes especially with regard to balancing athletics and academic achievement.

Student athletes also need to be sensitized so that they go out of their way to initiate dialogue with faculty, as well as actively taking part in activities lined up on campus for all the students. Studies also show that student engagement is related to positive outcomes such as persistence, better grades and college satisfaction. Administrators should therefore create a learning environment that maximizes student athlete involvement away from the playing field.

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