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**Division II Football Players' Perceptions of
NCAA and Finding Balance Between Athletics
and Education**

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Abstract

Mandates and regulations from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have caused extreme reforms to take effect in the NCAA's education system. However, little is known about how these reforms have impacted student-athletes. The purpose of this study was to explore how Division II football players from public colleges and universities view their ability to balance their education and athletics. Findings revealed participants' limited understanding of NCAA rules and a need for more clearly defined and standard policies. Findings may help create legislation to involve the federal government in overseeing NCAA policies to support the educational needs of student-athletes.

Doctoral Capstone

Problem

More than 460,000 student-athletes participate in NCAA sports (NCAA, n.d.a). The NCAA (n.d.b) reported that 80% of student-athletes will earn their bachelor's degree and 35% will obtain a postgraduate degree. The NCAA (n.d.b) claimed “to truly benefit from college, student-athletes have to succeed in more places than on the field. The NCAA provides opportunities to learn, compete and grow” (para. 1).

As the debate surrounding college athletics continues, the NCAA's responsibility is to increase its efforts to guarantee that student-athletes receive a proper education while playing college athletics. Doing so will not only impact the student-athletes' lives for the better, but will also influence the communities in which former student-athletes live. This will make former student-athletes more likely to create social change because they will feel connected to where they live and will want to engage civically in their communities

Former student-athletes giving back to their communities will help create a positive cycle for students and their colleges. The colleges and community taxpayers will provide student-athletes with an education while giving them the chance to play sports, and the student-athletes will strengthen those communities through civic engagement after graduation.

Purpose

In this qualitative, phenomenological study, I used questionnaires to ask Division II football players about their lived experiences trying to balance their education and athletic pursuits.

I wanted to combine my love of athletics and education to help ensure future student-athletes have a well-rounded educational experience—now and in the future.

Significance

While recent studies have addressed student-athletes' abilities to balance athletics and academics, Divisions other than Division I are overlooked because they are not large moneymakers for the NCAA. All student-athletes should be recognized as the organization formulates future policies; that is the only way to truly impact the educational standards the NCAA puts forth.

Theory

Astin's (1984) **theory of involvement** suggests that students involved in campus activities (i.e., student government associations, resident life, and athletics) are more likely to find satisfaction in college life, and therefore graduate from college.

Involvement is a multidisciplinary approach to higher education that includes principles of psychology, sociology, and classic learning

Relevant Scholarship

Most student-athletes felt they experienced a negative stereotype (“dumb jock”) because of their participation in athletics, which echoes a study performed by Winiger and White (2008). Many also agreed with the study performed by Simons, Derek, & Covington (1999) which posited student-athletes should not have easier academic standards than their peers.

Research has emphasized the need to investigate NCAA Divisions beyond Division I (DI), which student-athletes felt would create fairness across the Divisions (Goodson, 2015; Kirby, 2017; Wyatt, 2016).

Weight and Huml (2016) believed athletic programs should be created to help student-athletes earn credit towards their degrees. Student-athletes believed doing so would help ensure they graduate from their program while playing athletics.

Student-athletes interviewed recognized they lacked knowledge about NCAA mandates. Silver (2015) pointed out it is nearly impossible for NCAA rules not to be broken, unintentionally, because of the volume of the rules student-athletes must abide by. The manual needs to be mainstreamed to make it more accessible to all involved.

Advisors, and other educators, who are trying to help student-athletes on campus also struggle with the NCAA mandates, which has been studied by Cooper, 2016; Rubin & Moses, 2017; Vaughn & Smith, 2018.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players regarding NCAA education mandates?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players regarding their ability to balance athletic and educational success?

Participants

12 Division II football players from public universities across the United States. (Schools were purposefully selected from Division II universities, and participants were those willing to participate.)

Variety of positions on team.

Variety of eligibility both in NCAA regulations and academics.

Procedures

Participants were emailed a link to the anonymous questionnaire (10 open-ended questions, which I created), which they could answer at their will, and how they wished.

Analysis

Narrative and etic approach—based on my interpretation of the data. I manually coded the participants' responses and created suggestions for the NCAA based on the data I received.

Themes

Many participants struggled with their ability to balance academics with the athletics, as well as other outside activities.

- *“I don’t have a college life because I am either working on homework/studying, in class, or practicing.”* (example)

Some athletes thought their peers had easier time with academics.

They reported a lack of awareness with resources available to them for achieving academically.

- They *“didn’t know”* what resources were available.
- If they did know, they stated they *“wouldn’t remember.”*

Most felt the NCAA could do better to help them achieve academically.

Some athletes wished for equality in mandates across all Divisions and teams and increased accountability for NCAA and selves.

The majority of participants knew the accountability to earn a quality education was theirs before anyone else’s.

- *“If a student athlete wants to be successful, it's their responsibility to make it happen.”* (example)

Interpretation

Understood perspectives of Division II student-athletes, who had previously been overlooked.

Nothing majorly different from studies which were conducted before.

The current system is flawed in its ability to truly help student-athletes balance their academic and athletic pursuits. The NCAA needs to do more.

Need for Federal involvement to create an education-focused athletic experience for all student-athletes.

The implementation of standard sport policy across Divisions would help create a balanced and fulfilling college environment for student-athletes throughout the United States, while reducing potential influences from sport stakeholders in the decision-making processes relating to college athletes receiving a quality education.

Limitations

Research bias: etic approach, interpretive framework, and previous experiences with student-athletes.

Small sample size (one Division, one sport, public universities)—dependability and transferability to other, similar situations.

Recommendations

From Student-Athletes (to create more balanced college experience):

- 1) National education policies and procedures—more equality in student athletics;
- 2) the need for a third-party overseer;
- 3) refined focus on regulating and monitoring college education.
- 4) Create a healthy dialogue to create and reform policies to enrich academic integrity of college athletics, and to ensure a more well-rounded educational experience for athletic participants.
- 5) Create and strengthen student-athletes' support systems.
- 6) Student-athletes made more aware of NCAA mandates.

Social Change Implications

- 1) Foster a positive image of sport in the community
 - Students
 - Schools
 - NCAA
- 2) Taxpayers will feel they received a return on their investment—scholarship money and other funding—if students receive a quality education. This will strengthen the college and athletic program, which will invite more students to attend college.
- 3) Will create a sense of unity and support for the players and the university while ensuring educated, productive members of society.

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