Academic Support for NCAA Division II Student-Athletes at a Private, Faith-based Institution

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Abstract

The current study aims to increase knowledge on the experiences and challenges college student-athletes in NCAA Division II face at a faith-based institution, specifically in the area of academics. The qualitative study is unique because it focuses on college student-athletes from diverse backgrounds who are attending a NCAA Division II faith-based institution. Six themes emerged from the focus group and individual interviews including: time management, stereotyping, independence, support, accountability, and improved support. Limitations included time restrictions; which included only partial expert review, time spent interviewing students, and ability to recruit a variety of different sports. Further research should be done comparing male and female athlete perceived academic support, and further research to see how coaches and student affairs professionals can do to prepare athletes for future careers.

Keywords: college student-athletes, academic support, student athlete experience
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**Academic Support for NCAA Division II Student-Athletes at a Private, Faith-based Institution**

The current study aims to increase knowledge on the experiences and challenges college student-athletes in NCAA Division II face at a faith-based institution, specifically in the area of academics. The qualitative study is unique because it focuses on college student-athletes from diverse backgrounds who are attending a NCAA Division II faith-based institution. Research found marginalization, engagement, background characteristics, and the unique challenge of the dual role of being both a student and a collegiate athlete are all factors which influence the academic experience. The researchers are interested in finding ways to better support student-athletes who must abide by the regulations put forth by the NCAA Division II and by the faith-based, private institution the student-athlete attends.

**Literature Review**

Because student-athletes make up a large population on college campuses, it is essential researchers spend time and energy investing in the lives of these athletes and discovering how the student-athlete can be best supported throughout their collegiate journey, especially in terms of their academics. Athletes spend countless hours training for, and traveling to competition often at the expense of their academic learning. Research on student-athletes has looked primarily at marginalization and has confirmed this is an expected part of the athlete experience in college (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2013; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Ting, 2009; Watson, 2007). However, additional studies which have looked at the engagement of student-athletes found mixed results particularly in regards to background characteristics. The NCAA Division II, faith-based institution looks different than institutions past researchers chose. The
current study hopes to add insight on what academic support looks like for students involved in athletics and how this particular student group can be better supported.

**Marginalization**

Researchers study student athletes because of the exceptional challenges, pressure and demands they face in balancing their academics with athletic involvement (Fletcher, Benshoff, & Richburg, 2003; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Ting, 2009; Watson, 2007). Research found it is typical for athletes to experience feelings of isolation or loneliness due to their experience with negative perceptions from faculty, staff and students, and the little time they have for social activities (Burns et al., 2013; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Ting, 2009; Watson, 2007). Students often have to choose between their sport, their academics and their social life. Many college students experience loneliness and isolation, however, it is quite common for athletes to experience this because of their travel demands and lengthy practice times (Fletcher et al., 2003; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Ting, 2009; Watson, 2007).

The student-athlete engagement is influenced by the negative and positive reactions, stereotypes, comments and perceptions from encounters with peers, faculty and staff (Fletcher et al., 2003; Horton, 2011; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007; Ting, 2009). Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen (2007) supports the impact of stigmas on the student-athlete experience while discussing results of the “dumb jock” stereotype, the perception of little academic motivation, the idea athletes receive undeserved benefits and privileges, the claim they take easy courses to meet the minimum requirements, and the different treatment they receive from faculty (Horton, 2011; Simons et al., 2007). Fletcher, Benshoff, & Richburg (2003) recommend implementing a university policy to protect athletes who need to make up exams due to the demands for travel, even though this contributes to the negative perceptions they get from
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faculty who might not want to accommodate a student-athlete for missing their class. Moreover, non-athlete classmates who witness their professors’ flexibility with athletes may feel they are receiving special treatment because of the athletes unique status on campus.

Although research identifies the negative factors influencing college student-athletes, few examine the positive aspects of being a college student-athlete (Burns et al., 2013; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Potuto & O'Hanlon (2007) asked students to evaluate their experience as an athlete; the results confirmed many athletes do indeed have a positive college experience. Many student-athletes saw their involvement with athletics as a tool which could lead to their desired career and stated they were not any less likely to participate in educational practices because of their athletic involvement (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Similarly, Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher (2013) found that student-athletes who reported positive evaluations of their academic support services were more motivated and able to make career decisions. Previous research calls for future studies to find what factors influence the positive experience of college athletes as a means to show which support outlets contribute to the optimistic outlook. These factors could include engagement with encouraging coaches or the personal mission to make the collegiate experience positive.

Engagement

Several studies mention the NCAA regulations as reasons for increased academic support services for student-athletes such as academic advising, tutoring services, academic mentors, and learning specialists (Ferris, Finster & McDonald, 2004; Gayles & Hu, 2009a). Ting (2009) looked at the academic performance and persistence of first-year student-athletes at NCAA Division I institutions and confirmed a large amount of social support and high motivation were two key factors which contribute to academic success, which ultimately contributes to an
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athlete’s self confidence. These findings demonstrate the powerful outcomes which arise from student-athlete engagement with academic performance and success. Gayles and Hu (2009a) looked at engagement and found it was vital for student-athletes to have more connections with faculty and peers, and even suggested athletes have non-athlete roommates. Athletes who have roommates who are not on their team can be a healthy way for athletes to interact with other students on campus apart from athletics and help them to get involved in other extracurricular activities.

This is an interesting factor of engagement for student affairs professionals today because there is a growing public interest in and demand on accountability for higher education institutions (Lake, 2011). Student affairs professionals are being asked to demonstrate that the college experience is securing jobs for its graduates. While the media attention put on this topic is not the same as that for college sports, it seems pertinent to study this dynamic to ensure the student-athlete population is receiving the academic support they need to thrive in college and beyond.

**Background Characteristics**

There are mixed findings when it comes to the demographic influence on student-athlete academic success (Ferris et al., 2004; Gayles & Hu, 2009b; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Gayles & Hu (2009b) suggest, “[…] regardless of race or ethnicity, academic major, and profile level of sport participation, student-athletes are equally as likely to engage in educationally purposeful activities” (pp. 105). Gayles and Hu (2009a) report compared to males, females better balance the student-athlete role. However, females are just as uncomfortable as males when asking for additional help from campus resources like writing and tutoring centers (Watson, 2007). Research shows African-American athletes report more negative experiences than Caucasian
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student-athletes (Simons et al., 2007). Simons et al. (2007) state African-American student
athletes report more negative statements made by peers, faculty and staff. Additionally, these
students feel more pressure to perform well because of the added stigma placed on them by being
student-athletes who are also African-American. Lastly, student-athletes who were in team
sports made negative comments about those involved in individual sports and vice versa (Simons
et al., 2007). The variance in findings presents the need for further research with this population
of students, specifically in terms of their demographic backgrounds and how it impacts their
academic experience at the college level.

Regardless of background characteristics, however, most student-athletes face the similar
challenges of time-management, fear of injury, and the desire to please their coaches (Fletcher et
al., 2003). Researchers encourage college counselors to be cognizant of these struggles and to be
intentional about assisting student-athletes via advocacy, support and intervention. Often
responsibility falls to the coaches to counsel their student-athletes through these unique
challenges though most have had no formal training in how to do so effectively. The overall
wellness of student-athletes has been studied and implications made about how the college
community as a whole should better understand the challenges of a student-athlete in order to
help with the student-athlete’s engagement (Gayles & Hu, 2009b; Watson, 2007).

This study aims to get the perspective of the athletes and to learn how members of their
respective institution are supporting them academically. Additionally, because faith-based
institutions are driven by their mission to foster the spiritual development of students, the
researchers will be looking to see if the experiences of student-athletes at the faith-based
university will look similar or different than the previous research findings in regards to
engagement, feelings of marginalization and impact of background characteristics on the athletes
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academic experience. For all of these reasons, the researchers of this study intentionally chose student-athletes at a faith-based NCAA Division II institution in order to discover ways in which student affairs professionals can more effectively support, advocate for, assist and intervene to foster the academic development of student-athletes.

**Method**

The purpose of the study is to better understand the academic support for student athletes at a NCAA division II private faith based institution. The researchers used both a focus group and individual interviews to collect qualitative data for the study.

**Participants**

The focus group and the interviews were both done on the faith-based campus where the athletes play their sports. The focus group was started in the athletic directors office, but due to the heat in the small office space the focus group moved to the athletic office conference table. The interviews were conducted in a private classroom with only the participant and the moderator. The participants were offered one hour of study hall credit for their participation in the interviews and the focus group, and the focus group participants were also given pizza. The student athletes were picked from connections the researchers had with the graduate student working in the athletic department and the connection to the director of athletics. The researchers used maximum variation to ensure a diverse sample among the student-athletes.

The researchers chose ten student athletes from a NCAA division II, private, faith based institution on the west coast. Of the ten student-athletes who participated five were men and five were women. The ages ranged from 19-22. The ethnicities of the participants were four Caucasian, two African American, one Asian, one Hispanic, and two biracial African American/Hispanic students. Three participants were in track and field, there was one student in
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all other sports including: baseball, football, softball, acrobatics and tumbling, soccer, and basketball. The students were all in different majors except for two were psychology majors, two applied exercise science, and other majors included accounting, sociology, physical education, marketing, English, and physical education. Five of the students lived on campus and five of the students commuted to campus. Two of the participants were first-year students, three were seniors, two were sophomores, and three were juniors.

Measures

The researchers utilized a focus groups and individual interviews to look at academic success, student engagement, and marginalization of student athletes at a faith based institution. The focus group utilized dual moderators and one note taker, while the interviews used only a single moderator. Both the focus group and interview were a semi-structured interview, in which the moderators had set questions, but were flexible to ask more questions and delve deeper into certain areas. From the literature review the researchers decided to focus the interview questions in three general areas: student engagement, marginalization, and academic success (Gayles & Hu, 2009a; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Ferris, Finster & McDonald, 2004)

The current study used the student engagement measure as defined by Gayles & Hu (2009a). Similar to Gayles & Hu (2009a), the researchers examined the following areas of student engagement: (a) interaction with faculty, (b) interaction with students that are and are not teammates, (c) participation in student groups, organizations, and other service activities, (d) participation in academic related activities. The researchers agree with the operational definition of engagement by Gayles & Hu (2009a), which suggest students learn by becoming involved and develop personally (p.316).
Horton (2011) uses multiple definitions of marginalization and the current study utilized the same definitions. Marginalized groups or individuals can experience multiple layers of marginalization based on their involvement with a group who is perceived negatively, stigmatized, given less status in society, and this can shift where there may have been a higher social status at one point but the opposite happens when change occurs (Horton, 2011, p.29). After reading the section on student athletes the researchers looked at the following academic success areas: (a) academic motivation, (b) participation and engagement in class, (c) grades, (d) meeting with faculty, (e) assignment completion, (f) rigorousness of academic major, (g) seeking academic support, (h) time-management balance with dual role (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Utilizing these definitions the researchers formulated questions in order to see how the student athletes were impacted in these three areas. The researchers focused the majority of the questions around how the student athletes felt they were impacted academically by being a student athlete. One important question was: How has being an athlete impacted you academically? This question was important because the researchers wanted to get the athletes perspective on the perceived impact being an athlete had on them academically. Another question was: What role have your coaches played in your academics? The researchers felt this question was needed since every athletic team has a coach and each coach has an opportunity to impact the athlete’s experience. This question worked well with the next question which was: With the demands put on you as a student-athlete, where do you feel you get the most academic support from? The researchers used this question to find out if the athletes looked for support, were offered support, or if there was support at all for athletes. See appendix A for complete set of questions.
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Research Design

Before the interviews and the focus group started the moderators promised the participants confidentiality to the best of the researchers ability. The moderators who lead the focus group and the interviews informed the participants of the research question prior to the beginning of the initial questioning. The moderators also informed the participants all answers would be kept confidential and names would be changed for to protect the privacy of the athletes. Participants were told if at anytime they felt uncomfortable they did not have to answer the question or they could choose to exit the room and not continue the interview.

The researchers looked at how different areas in the university impacted the students academically. This included the faculty, coaches, peer, and other extra-curricular involvement the athletes may have been involved in.

Data analysis. The moderators of the focus group and interview utilized recording devices including: I-pad, I-phone 4, Samsung Galaxy s4, and a Coby tape recorder to record data, and then the researchers transcribed the recordings. The researchers then used grounded theory method in which extensive reading and re-reading of material was done. This also included coding, axial coding, and theme emersion from the transcriptions. Data was triangulated by using different methods to collect data, including focus group and individual interviews, a team of researchers read the transcripts and coded the data, and finally the researchers used partial expert review to confirm theme emersion. The coding of the transcripts lead to the emersion of six themes related to the experience of student athletes, which could potentially affect the student-athletes academic success.

Results
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Six main themes emerged from data analysis: time management, stereotypes, independence, support, accountability, and improved support. Table 1 highlights the demographics of the participants including the sport each individual plays. All participant names were changed for confidential purposes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Residential Status</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
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<td>Tennis</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>African American/Hispanic</td>
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<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Track and Field</td>
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<td>Resident</td>
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<td>Commuter</td>
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<td>Acro and Tumbling</td>
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<td>Resident</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>Commuter</td>
<td>African American</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td>Commuter</td>
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<td>African American</td>
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<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Applied Exercise Science</td>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Name changed to maintain confidentiality

Table 1: Athlete Demographics

**Time Management**

Many of the student-athlete participants spoke about how being in college athletics impacts the amount of time the student-athlete gets to spend on activities outside of academics and their respective sport. A majority of the athletes interviewed were involved in activities outside of their sport, including coaching commitments, on/off campus jobs, and extracurricular activities. Due to all of the busy schedules each student had, time management became a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Arnold stated:

Time is like a rare thing I guess and being able to use it like well sparingly. Balancing [sports] with studies is like really, uh it’s intense and like I have to literally focus on getting my school stuff done when like in between these hours of soccer and gym, working out, eating, sleeping, well, attempting to sleep.

A sub-theme of time management is the lack of social time available for these student-athletes. Many discussed how little time they have for socializing and spending time with their
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peers due to the amount of time they spend practicing, competing, going to class and studying.

Cecilia discussed how her social life suffers because of the demands on her time:

I think it’s hard to balance...um..like your social life with your academic life and...your sport because like when you have time to your...to do your homework is when your friends are hanging out or like your friends want to do something and you either have to decide whether to go hang out with them and stay up later...or just get it done and not hang out with them so I would say that is a hard like..sacrifice and challenge.

Another sub-theme related to time management was the academic impact. During the interviews the restrictions on the athlete’s time were seen as both positive and negative. The athletes were split on how busyness affected them academically. A few stated being an athlete really kept them motivated to succeed in their academics. Others expressed their academics would improve if they did not have to compete in college sports. Those who felt their grades would improve without athletics simply suggested how time was the primary factor for their academic performance- the less time they had to practice and compete, the more time they would have to focus on their studies. A few also stated how during season grades suffered, but during the off season grades improved.

Stereotypes

Stereotyping was another predominate theme the researchers found. The athletes shared different situations in which they were the target of various stereotypes from their peers, campus staff and faculty. Although there were a few positive stereotypes discussed, the majority of stereotypes mentioned during the focus group and interviews had a negative connotation. Males experienced more negative stereotypes than female participants. Also, men’s basketball and football players had more negative experiences with stereotypes than players from others sports.
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The most common stereotypes focused on the assumption of laziness and the special treatment of student-athletes on campus. When asked about difficult interactions with faculty, Denzel stated:

...being a...a student athlete you’re already stereotyped to slacking off due to your time management skills...having practice so you’re already behind with some professors you know. You’re playing catch up not in a sense of like homework but in their opinion of you. [...] I feel like, um, that could be in..if for if you play basketball they have that..you know that a what’s the word..oh a...image that a you’re already gonna be lazy

Another stereotype mentioned frequently was the perception about how student-athletes are treated better than other students. Barney spoke on this perception stating “Kids who don’t necessarily know the ins and outs of being a student athlete think that we’re just treated like royalty...which we are treated great here..but nothing out of the ordinary.” Related to the idea of special treatment, many participants spoke about how they have faced others in the community having negative perceptions and assumptions about athletic scholarships. Even within the athlete group the concept of scholarships was debated, due to size of teams and the amount of money distributed to the different teams.

Accountability

The third theme the researchers found was accountability. All of the student-athletes discussed the responsibility of being on a team, and how this impacted them. Most of the participants explained how their actions and behavior were a reflection of not only themselves but also of the team, including their academic performance. Arthur comments on this stating “[academics] has impacted me a lot because if I do something wrong in my academic career then that doesn’t only affect me but it also affects my team.” This was a common sentiment among
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the athletes who were interviewed, many of them agreed about how their actions reflected either positively or negatively on the rest of the team.

The researchers asked how students’ perceived their coaches’ priorities of academic, athletic, and spiritual development. Most of the athletes commented about how their sports have team GPA goals and how their academics are a main priority for their coaches. Several students agreed with accountability comes pressure. Barney stated:

I think there’s just like a bigger lens on you...where you’re held to higher standards…so um..with that higher standards comes higher...bigger responsibility […] a student athlete is representing something bigger than yourself which is this university [...] When you make a mistake or when you fall it’s not just you it’s your team.

For some, this type of pressure was a burden on their academics, while others found this pressure as motivation to succeed inside the classroom.

Independence

When asked about academic support systems utilized on the campus, the majority of the athletes stated that they had not utilized any academic support services on campus before; however, the few who had sought out tutors found their time in the tutoring centers to be helpful. Many athletes voiced their preference for turning to teammates for academic help. Eileen shared about her reservation with tutors on campus:

I don’t like getting help...I like to do things on my own so if I do need help I’ll just ask somebody on my team...I’d rather meet with somebody I know then a complete stranger that I don’t want to listen to.
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Some athletes voiced that they simply did not know how to use the academic support services available on campus and were more comfortable doing tasks on their own and solving their own problems. Eileen also stated:

I’ve never been [to any academic support services] but it’s, I think it’s completely my fault...I’m super awkward I like just don’t know how to go up to someone and just ask for help. I’ve always just been like, well I’m going to do it myself...I’ll figure it out myself.

Support

Another theme discovered was the support the athletes felt from various people in their lives. Athletes felt most supported developmentally by coaches, teammates, faculty, and tutors (for those who utilized them). Coach support focused on how coaches prioritized academics, athletics, and faith. Cecilia described her experience of support from her coach:

I would say my coach is supportive [...] She’s always willing to like sit down and talk with you one on one [...] I wouldn’t say that her like main goal is for like our academics here [...] She’s really into like asking us about like our spiritual lives and um like how we are doing personally which helps the academics.”

Barney also mentions the support he has received from his coach and how this has impacted his development stating:

I came here and I’d never been to church before in my life. I didn’t know anything about the Bible and uh, I just had a bunch of personal adversity going on freshman year and my coach, uh, had a very similar background to me and a very similar path to me [...] he, uh, just took me under his wing and encouraged me beyond belief [...] He preaches you know being a great baseball player is one thing...being a great student is another thing..but you gotta be a great man. There are things in life that are bigger than baseball and things in
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life that are bigger than school and I think that’s where your priorities ultimately come from.

Support was also heavily found amongst teammates. Many athletes reported their gratitude with having teammates what are going through similar experiences as them. A few students even mentioned how effective it was to have some of the same classes as their teammates so they can study together and keep one another accountable. Other teammates shared how they could turn to teammates for tutoring if needed. Several athletes mentioned a team Bible study they were a part of which provided a sense of spiritual support as well as overall support from teammates.

Also, most of the athletes depicted study hall as a positive experience in which they could get their studying done. This semester is the first time the university has implemented the study hall and tutoring requirements to help students succeed academically.

Improved support

The final theme which emerged from the interviews and focus group was the athletes’ desire for more personal interactions with staff, faculty, and/or coaches. All the students noted how impacting it is to have someone reach out to them and personally invest in their lives apart from athletics. Barney described this desire well:

I think the more personal you can get with an individual the better...a relationship you can build and trust. When you have that kinda relationship that person can go to you for anything and that’s how, um, eventually you find out what’s going on in people’s lives.

Ethel echoed similar ideas about how taking the time to connect with the athletes can impact them as students. She stated:” So, I think once you connect with them on that level, then you can
start openings doors to have them be motivated in other things and you know, have more confidence to do other things as well.”

**Discussion**

These findings affirm the research of Fletcher, Benshoff, & Richburg (2003), Potuto & O'Hanlon (2007), Ting (2009) and Watson (2007) which state student-athletes face exceptional challenges and pressure in balancing the roles of being both a student and an athlete. The advantage of an athlete’s time being largely blocked out for them with practices, class, travel, meals, etc, is it can provide a structure for them to work within. Often, when a student knows they only have a set amount of time to work on something, motivation increases to focus and get it done so they can move on to the next thing without falling behind. Student-athletes who struggle to work within this timeframe may lack overall academic motivation or could be in need of greater academic support services for learning.

The theme of stereotypes could couple with accountability or pressure for student-athletes to prove people either wrong or right, depending on the stereotype. For instance, Arthur felt that being a member of the track and field team put him in good standing in the eyes of certain faculty and students across campus. Consequently, he felt a responsibility to uphold the stereotype both inside and outside the classroom. The impact of a positive stereotype for Arthur, Barney and other participants is increased academic engagement. These findings correlate with those of multiple researchers (Fletcher et al., 2003; Horton, 2011; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007; Ting, 2009).

The reticence to ask for help is common in college students and not unique to athletes nor distinguished between males or females (Watson, 2007). However, it is possible the mentality of an athlete for personal success and hard work contributes to the mentality of ‘do it yourself.’
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However, support can come in many forms and from many places. The people who invest in a college student’s life can enhance their experience but more importantly their development academically, personally, spiritually and in the case of these students, athletically. While an institution seeks to hire coaches who strongly support their university mission, the degree to which they all do that will inevitably vary; much like faculty and staff. In addition, some coaches are simply more developmentally minded than others inclining them to take a more holistic approach to their athletes’ experience.

In terms of team support, the familial structure lends itself well to providing a support system of people who truly understand the challenges an athlete faces in their sport and can adequately celebrate the victories as they come. “Team think” can be a positive thing or a negative thing depending on the tone set by each team’s coach. For example, Eileen mentioned her coach did not seem to prioritize academics at all. Consequently, her team as a whole did not prioritize it giving them the lowest team GPA for this university.

A required study hall is something many universities put in place to help their athletes. As previously mentioned, this helps with time management in distinguishing homework time for athletes who may struggle to set aside the time on their own. The addition of providing tutors during study hall is a strength of this university and a reportedly helpful service for those who participate.

Much research has been done showing how holistic support for students enhances academic performance. Students need the confidence which comes from feeling seen, heard, valued and supported in order to remain in college and thrive. Student athletes are no exception to these findings. They enter college with many of the same challenges non-athletes do. The exception lies in the additional set of challenges they face as athletes. Many of the participants
noted how student affairs professionals can increase their support for student-athletes by simply getting to know them and their sport in order to more adequately understand their challenges, which supports what Gayles & Hu (2009b) and Watson (2007) found in their research on student-athlete wellness.

This is a call for Student affairs professionals to intentionally place themselves in the way of athletes and to build relationships for support. Certainly, there is a responsibility on the athletes to pursue help but this research affirms the time management struggle for athletes to simply survive in college let alone pursue a support system from faculty and staff. One suggestion is to have a few student affairs professionals who partner with athletic teams to be present, build rapport, and provide support services beyond the sport. The university researched here provides a free faculty/staff athletic pass meant to encourage faculty and staff to attend the events with their families and support their students outside of the classroom.

**Suggestions**

One suggestion is for a team-specific academic advisor. The research here has shown how familiarity plays a large role in the students’ motivation to seek help academically. This is why a team-specific academic advisor would be a huge benefit to each team. A team specific advisor could spend more time with the athletes building rapport and bridging the gap of hesitance to ask for help. The men’s basketball team at the university where this research was conducted offered a team specific advisor and the student spoke highly of the services available to him as a result. Another approach to motivate the athletes to utilize academic support services could be to have the staff from each of the services meet with each team to talk through services they offer and how athletes can get connected. Study halls are also a great opportunity to provide built in work time for students in addition to providing tutoring help.
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Another suggestion to combat specifically the negative stereotypes on athletes is to either initiate or enhance training for faculty and staff at the beginning of the school year on challenges student-athletes face and how they impact their collegiate experience. This training is important because assumptions are made but can be avoided if there is knowledge about how generalizations are dangerous and they impact student athletes.

Limitations and Future Research

There were a few limitations to this study. The first being the physical space for the focus group. Researchers reserved a space for the conversation to take place but when the time came for the group to begin, another research group was still in the room. The athletes were told the focus group would run no later than one hour and due to their limited availability, the researchers wanted to honor the time commitment. Consequently, the group of seven participants and three researchers began the discussion in a small office which quickly became hot, uncomfortable and not conducive to open discussion. Within thirty minutes the larger room opened up and the group moved. While this helped, the disruption impacted the momentum of the conversation within an already limited time frame.

Time constraints were another limitation for several reasons: Due to time limitations for both the researchers and the athletes, only 7 of the 19 teams at the institution were represented and included in the research. Additionally, the researchers were unable to get a full expert review on the coding and theme emersion.

Another limitation of this study was the fact the experiences shared in the interviews and the focus group were only the experiences of individual athletes. While this is the purpose and strength of qualitative research, information specifically on the priorities and values of each individual coach could be enhanced by including the coaches in the research to better understand
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their perspective. As is the case with any leader, they could state their priorities but those they lead are the ones to affirm or deny the leader’s values. Also, where researchers for this study were intentional in seeking a diverse group of athletes representing various sports to get a sense for the overall academic support at one university, further research should be done with more athletes from each sport to discover more team-specific themes.

Further research should also be conducted to compare the differences in perceived academic support between male and female student-athletes. Future research should be done on the various types of academic motivation for athletes, male and female, to learn how academic and student affairs professionals as well as coaches can better serve their student-athletes in preparing them for life beyond college.

In conclusion, research revealed certain aspects of the student-athletes experience which can impact the student’s academic experience. Efforts to increase academic support for student-athletes can be done by utilizing the six themes which emerged from this research. It is important to remember as student-athlete populations change it is important academic support also evolves with the differing needs of the students.
References


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Focus group/Interview Questions:

1. What is your name? What sport do you play? What is your major?

2. When deciding a major, did playing a collegiate sport impact your decision?

3. How are you doing academically?

4. Are you involved in anything other than athletics and academics here at Azusa Pacific University? If so, what?

5. What are the biggest challenges for you as a college student-athlete here at APU?

6. How do you feel you are perceived by the APU community as a student-athlete?

5. How has being an athlete impacted you academically?

7. What role have your coaches played in your academics?
   - In what ways does your coach support you academically?
   - In your opinion, what do you think is most important to your coach: athletics, spirituality, or your academics?
   - In what ways are they developing you spirituality? academically?
   - What is most important to you as a student-athlete?

9. With the demands put on you as a student-athlete, where do you feel you get the most academic support from?

10. What role have your faculty played in your academic success, whether positive or negative?

11. Have any of you sought out faculty outside of the classroom for help? If so, how often? Has your sport prevented you from seeking out help?
   - Have any of you utilized any academic support services here in campus such as the Writing Center, Learning Enrichment Center, or the Math Center?

12. Last question: In what ways would you feel more supported in your academics here at APU?