Literature Review

Success Indicators of NCAA Division III Student-Athletes

Amanda Means

Baldwin-Wallace College
Who are student-athletes?

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (2011) defines a Division III student-athlete as such: “To participate in Division III athletics, a student-athlete must have been admitted as a regularly enrolled, degree-seeking student in accordance with the regular, published entrance or admissions policies of that college or university.”

The focus of the literature review is Division III student-athletes because it is within the scope of research necessary to determine best practices for the success of Division III student-athletes. For the purpose of this review, the American Council on Higher Education (2005) defines student success as “the ability to persist toward degree completion at one or more colleges or universities.” The two main bodies of research surrounding student-athletes that are applicable best practices for the success of student-athletes are faculty-student engagement and student-athlete engagement and academic support. Understanding these two student-athlete research areas is key in determining the potential for success in living-learning communities for student-athletes, specifically those in Division III athletics.

Synthesis

According to National Collegiate Athletic Association (2011), approximately 3% of men’s high school basketball players, approximately 3.3% of women’s high school basketball players, approximately 5.7% of high school football players, and approximately 6% of high school baseball go on to play their respective sports at the collegiate level. According to enrollment data at the Division III level, approximately 30% of all students are student-athletes and participation in intercollegiate athletics is an important component in the overall educational experience for many Division III students (Simons, 2007). Student-athletes are an important population of students to study and account for because they
are more likely than non-athletes to transfer institutions and less likely to be retained from their first to second year in college (Jolly, 2008).

In the age of outcomes assessment and accountability in higher education, it is essential to study the student-athlete population. Nationally, senior Student and Academic Affairs officers are concerned with the decreasing college retention and graduation rates (Kissinger & Miller, 2009). First year or freshmen student-athletes face the greatest demand both in the classroom and on the playing field once they are recruited, admitted, and matriculated (Kissinger & Miller, 2009). According to Kissinger and Miller (2009), these reasons include: low psychological coping strategies, mental and physical health factors, family stability and financial readiness, peer pressure from the neighborhood, misleading promises from athletic recruiters, poor study skills, lack of academic motivation to succeed, inadequate preparation for college, delusions of instant stardom.

*Faculty-student engagement*

The impact of athletics on student success has been the subject of debate in higher education for many years (Thelin, 2008). Thelin (2008) directs awareness on the academic and athletics balance, as well as the experiences of athletes within these programs. In other research, investigation concerns within this area including academic integrity, athletic identity, academic success, preferential treatment of athletes, and effects of participation (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). Interactions with faculty and utilization of academic support services have also been identified as important factors in student-athlete success (Cotten, 2006).

Via survey research, Cotten and Wilson (2006) brought to light the fact that misconceptions about a student-athlete’s motivation and academic ability spawn from stereotypical images of these students. It can also be concluded that although student-athletes often receive both positive and
negative reactions from faculty members, they are often perceived to be less academically competent (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). Faculty members’ frustration stems from the fact that student-athletes are less likely to take advantage of faculty as an educational resource and are hesitant to meet with them outside of the classroom (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). It is documented in several survey studies that to a student-athlete, a faculty advisor can be especially critical to their success, yet student-athletes are most likely to interact with a faculty advisor only when struggling in a course or experiencing difficulty with a particular assignment (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). Cotten and Wilson (2006) also suggest for some students, various informal, out of class interactions with faculty increased their comfort level, resulting in increased in-class interactions, however many student-athletes do not realize potential benefits of interaction with faculty members. Faculty members who had taken more interest in the academic success of student-athletes reported additional beneficial results from their informal interactions with the athletes (e.g. attending games and practices) and student-athletes also embraced the engagement of the faculty in their athletics, thus became more comfortable interacting with faculty in an academic setting (Jolly, 2008).

\textit{Student-athlete engagement and academic support}

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) share that academic preparation and motivation are the best predictors for academic success, creating a difficult situation for institutions of higher education. Ideally, only admitting the brightest and best students would increase graduation rates admitted but realistically, this is an unreasonable solution for most institutions. It is difficult for campus leaders to increase student success with students coming to college underprepared.

The National Survey of Student Engagement is used to compare student-athletes to their peers, non-athletes. According to NSSE data, student-athletes are involved in educational practices, often
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more involved than their non-athlete peers (Umbach, 2006). Generally consistent across all Division I-III levels, student-athletes are also more likely to perceive campus environments to be more supportive of their social and academic needs than their non-athlete peers (Umbach, 2006).

In a case study, Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) found that athletes had responded positively to the special academic support structures. The most influential support came from coaches, academic advisors, and professors (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). In terms of emotional support, family, teammates, roommates and friends made the largest impact (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). The researchers recommend the implementation of a living-learning community for an intensive and comprehensive summer bridge programs to aid in the transition from high school to college for student-athletes (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). In addition, they suggested that once admitted, athletes should be offered access to academic areas of interest (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). With a 12-month, living-learning format, student-athletes would be able to take a less course load during the academic year and take other courses throughout the summer program (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007).

Although their research was conducted among only Division I student-athletes, Gaston and Hu (2009) examined student engagement of Division I athletes in four areas: a) interactions with faculty; b) interactions with students other than teammates; c) participation in student groups, other organizations and service activities; and d) participation in academic related activities. Athletes engaged with students other than their teammates most often of the four engagement areas (Gaston & Hu, 2009). Gaston and Hu (2009) suggest that increased opportunity for engagement of student-athletes in all four areas will have an overall positive impact on their student success.

Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) found no “one size fits all” approach to academic support structures for student-athletes. Umbach et al. (2006) included Division III student-athletes and determined that these student-athletes had greater access to academic support services than other
division-level student-athletes. In this study, Division III student-athletes indicated that although programs were highly accessible (via academic and athletic departments), many were under-utilized; only 15% often used academic learning centers/tutoring and 23% often used team study tables, presenting a challenge for college leaders to incentives and increase usage of these academic support services (Umbach, 2006).

**Discussion of implications**

In critiquing the research of best-practices for success of student-athletes, it is alarming that although college athletics have existed since the late 1850s, not much research has been conducted surrounding this specific population of college students (The National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2011). However, the majority of the small body of research that does exist focuses mainly on NCAA Division I and II student-athletes, most likely due to the assumption that these student-athletes are receiving scholarships to attend their colleges and universities. Key stakeholders, such as corporate sponsors, alumni donors, and athletic programs’ fan bases, are invested in the athletic success of the Division I and II student-athletes. Thus, colleges and universities are devoting research methods toward the academic success of these student-athletes because without their success in the classroom, these students will be ineligible for the playing field. Many research articles of the NCAA Division I and II student-athletes even discuss the idea of these students being “employed” by their institutions, due to the nature and pressure of their scholarships and athletic success.

More research needs to be conducted surrounding best practices for NCAA Division III student-athletes because in Division III athletics, the balance between academics and athletics is promoted and new best practices may be realized using this population (The National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2011). In the age of importance of data collection and assessment for accountability reasons in institutions on higher educational across the nation, it is crucial to investigate student success among NCAA Division III student-athletes because they comprise over 30% of Division III student populations.
(Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). NCAA Division III student-athletes are more likely to transfer institutions for athletics and are less likely to be retained from their first to second year in college (Jolly, 2008).

As the research surrounding best practices for increasing student success among student-athletes is mainly of NCAA Division I and II student-athletes, it is also important to note that much of the data collected is through a survey method. The survey method may provide researchers the qualitative evidence they need in order to draw inferences, however, survey data is also self-reported, which can lead to privacy issues, difficulties in tracking students, and other challenges. More longitudinal case study methods and quantitative data supporting best practices for the success of student athletes would provide more supportive evidence for assessment for college and university leaders.

Recommendations

The research that exists surrounding the best practices for increasing student success among student-athletes is relevant to the student outcomes literature because it provides two suggested success indicators: faculty-student engagement and student-athlete engagement and academic support. The evidence from the literature review of research in these two areas is useful to the development of a program that will address the issue of discrepancy in student success among student-athletes versus non-athletes.

Our suggestion to combat the conclusions that student-athletes are less likely to be retained from their first to second year is to create a living-learning community for NCAA Division III student-athletes (Jolly, 2008). After reviewing the literature surrounding best practices for the increase in student success among Division III student-athletes, it seems as if a living-learning community would provide a community for these students to interact with their teammates more outside of the playing field, which Gaston and Hu (2009) evidenced that student-athletes are more likely to engage with students other than their teammates outside of practice.
Cotten and Wilson (2006) also evidence that student-athlete’s interactions with faculty and utilization of academic support services have also been identified as important factors in student-athlete success. In a living-learning community, special academic support services, such as team study tables and academic advising could be providing in-house in the residence hall or building designated specifically for the student-athletes. The living-learning community would also be an ideal venue for faculty interaction because the faculty members could teach a study skills course or meet with their advisees in the residence hall or building. The student-athletes could also host social events after an athletic event to invite the faculty members who attend their athletics into their space, again encouraging more informal faculty interaction, which is a proven success indicator.

The student-athlete living-learning community would also provide the student-athletes opportunity to engage in activities outside of their sport or academics. For example, a component of service-learning and outreach projects would be part of the living-learning experience, not only encouraging student involvement outside of the class room or athletics, but also remedying the faculty members’ misconceptions of decreased academic integrity and motivation of student-athletes.

Conclusion

The research surrounding best practices for increasing student success of student-athletes is limited, especially when focusing on NCAA Division III student-athletes. However, the two main bodies of research surrounding student-athletes that are applicable best practices for the success of student-athletes are faculty-student engagement and student-athlete engagement and academic support. The methods used for data collection in this research are mostly survey-based and in order to best evidence these best practices, further research should be conducting using longitudinal studies and collecting more quantitative data. A student-athlete living-learning community would provide a venue for increased faculty interaction, increased engagement, and increased student success for Division III student-athletes.
References


