



NCAA Academic Non-Qualifiers: Factors Effecting Graduation Rates

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Abstract

This study examined NCAA Division I men's basketball initial academic non-qualifiers, their low graduation rate, and variables that increase these rates. While graduation rates and overall academic success of Division I student-athletes has, in fact, improved over the past 25 years (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009e), there is still much room for growth. Academic support systems as well as a coaching staff's perceived communicated importance of academics appears to play a role in the student athlete success rate.

Keywords: Non-academic qualifiers, graduation rates, men's basketball, academic coordinators

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Introduction

Athletics and education form an intricate bond in American culture. During the late 19th century, athletics began to find their way onto the campuses of higher education (Chu, 1989; Lee, 1983). As the industrial era boomed, major employers across the nation were looking for workers that were competitive, aggressive, and accustomed to a team environment (Gerdy, 2000; Lee, 1983). The benefits of organized athletics were seen as positives in the American workplace. The “American Way” of winning had been born (Gerdy, 2000).

By the turn of the 20th century, athletic teams and clubs had become widespread on college campuses. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was ultimately formed in 1904 as a response to concern for safety of students on campus, particularly in football (NCAA, 2009f).

Today the NCAA oversees a 4 billion dollar athletics industry in the United States. (NCAA, 2009f). Under its direction are 36 sports (18 for men and 18 for women). Over 75,000 young men and women compete in NCAA Division I athletics each year

While the relationship between athletics and academics on a college campus has existed for over a century, many people have asked for clarification as to whether or not athletics should continue in relationship with academics. This question has been met with a variety of answers ranging from emphatic opinions that athletics should be eliminated from the academic arena (Flath, 1972; Gerdy, 2006, 2000), to those that have said that the nature of athletics are positive, albeit when properly administered (Bailey, 1991; Chu, 1989; Duderstadt, 2000). In almost every case, there is a consensus that athletics and academics in current United States higher education form a difficult bond, one that must be continually evaluated and effectively managed.

Over the past 25 years the NCAA has put into place a series of academic reforms in response to various concerns for student-athletes and their academic lives. The most widespread path of reform has been with regard to initial eligibility for incoming student-athletes. Over this timeframe, standards for acceptable high school grade point average, the number of required core high school classes, and level of acceptable standardized test score have all been increased (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009c).

Other avenues of academic reform have included percentage towards degree requirements and, the most recent, Academic Progress Rating (APR) (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009c). According to the rules of the APR, poor retention or poor academic achievement of student-athletes by an athletic program can cost it future scholarships or other sanctions (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009d).

Studies have evaluated the effectiveness of various NCAA academic reforms. Several questioned the overall effectiveness (Hatcher, 2004; Kulics, 2006; Smith, 2009), while others have even gone as far as to claim that some of these reforms are racially biased (Brooks, 1993; Smith, 2007; Takahashi, 2002; Taplette, 2005). A few, while questioning the NCAA's methods and direction, have in fact shown that the NCAA is accomplishing its goals through these reforms (Judge, 1991).

One reform measure put into place in order to accomplish goals of increasing student-athlete graduation rates makes it more difficult for high school students to qualify academically to compete in NCAA Division I sanctioned sports (Smith, 2009; Takahashi, 2002). The student-athletes who do not meet the academic standards set by the NCAA upon graduation from high school are declared "non-academic qualifiers", and are not eligible for Division I competition (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009a).

Non-academic qualifiers are given the opportunity to attend a junior college and graduate with an associate's degree in order to earn their remaining years of eligibility (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009a). The normal path for these non-qualifiers is to compete at a junior college for 2 years while earning their associate's degree and to then transfer to a Division I institution for their remaining 2 years of eligibility.

It has been shown that men's basketball student-athletes have been the most affected athlete group by the increases in initial eligibility standards and thus have been affected by NCAA academic reform more than any other sport (Smith, 2007; Takahashi, 2002). Proportionately, more men's basketball student-athletes have been declared non-academic qualifiers than in any other sport. As these NCAA academic reforms have been put in place, more men's basketball athletes have chosen to first attend junior colleges (Smith, 2007; Takahashi, 2002; Taplette, 2005).

For the general student who attends a junior college prior to attending a four year university, study results are mixed as to whether or not they succeed in a four year environment. Several studies show that junior college students fare worse than native four-year students (Geleskie, 2008; Horrell, 1992). There have also been studies that

question whether junior colleges prepare student athletes for the rigors of four-year university academic life (Kulics, 2006; Smith, 2009).

Currently there is no NCAA evaluation process for this junior college transfer subgroup within men's basketball. NCAA graduation rates currently are evaluated using one of two methods (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2008b). The first includes freshman class evaluation. The second accounts for transfers of all types, four year, and two year qualifiers.

The current study investigated the graduation rate of this particular subgroup within men's basketball. As the study was framed, it was supposed that if a difference in graduation rates existed, an evaluation of correlations between the availability of certain academic programs and institutional rules would also be conducted in order to find what factors helped create successful graduation rates for these student athletes.

Methodology

Sample

The study included a random sample of compliance officers at the 347 Division I men's basketball institutions. To obtain the optimum sample size, a 95% confidence level and a 5% standard error was used based on levels of confidence and error. Using these levels, the optimum sample size for the graduation rate evaluation of the studied sub-group was 183 institutions. 89 of the 183 compliance directors responded with data for the study.

The compliance director's role within an athletic department is to oversee that their respective department remains in compliance with NCAA Division I bylaws (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2006a). Part of this compliance process involves the evaluating and reporting of student-athlete academic eligibility. Because of their direct knowledge and access to academic information of athletes, compliance directors were chosen as participants.

Questionnaire

The current study used an electronic survey to ask the compliance director of the selected NCAA Division I institution to report the number of junior college transfers who were NCAA academic non-qualifiers competed for their institution in men's basketball.. The survey also asked how many of these particular student-athletes within the study years graduated with a bachelor's degree during their NCAA allotted six year window.

These results were then compared to the overall NCAA Division I men's basketball graduation rates of the freshman classes from the last five years' data.

The survey then asked a series of demographic questions on academic policies and institutional programs that may have an impact on athlete graduation rates. These programs and policies have been suggested to be related to student-athlete academic success, but there have yet to be any direct correlation studies conducted to evaluate the impact each of these variables has on graduation rates (Kulics, 2006; Newsome, 2005; Smith, 2009). Questions included whether the institution paid for degree completion costs after eligibility was used, if they had dedicated academic support staff specifically for Men's basketball, as well as the officer's perception of the coach's promotion and advocacy for academic programs.

Process

The time period of student-athlete classes studied included the freshman classes of 2000-2004. These years comprised the most recent 5 freshman classes for which graduation rate data was available and was be used in alignment with the method the NCAA uses to evaluate graduation rates. Current NCAA graduation rate evaluation allows for student athletes to take six years from their initial freshman enrollment to complete their bachelor's degree (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 1991). Taking into account that junior college transfers do not spend their freshman year at the current Division I institution, each of these student-athletes were evaluated based on their date of initial enrollment at their respective junior college.

Results

Compliance directors surveyed reported 417 non-academic qualifier junior college transfers within the study parameters. Of these 417 men's basketball players, the compliance directors reported that 141 graduated. This represents a graduation rate of 0.344. This data is presented in Table 1. According to the NCAA, the total number of Men's Basketball participants who fit into the timeframe of this study graduation evaluation was 4151 with a total graduation rate of 0.469. (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2010b). A one-tailed z-test shows a z-value of -16.11, showing a significantly lower graduation rate of the subgroup.

Table 1. Graduation Rate of Studied Sub Group.

	Number	Min	Max	Sum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Participants	89	0	12	417	4.69	2.86
Graduated	89	0	6	141	1.58	1.17
Rate	79	.00	1.00	27.19	.344	.191

Of the 89 member schools that reported data for this study, 10 of them did not have a single junior college transfer participant during the studied time frame. The average amount of participants from the 89 reporting institutions was 4.69. This represents just under one participant per year. The highest number of participants for a reporting institution was 12.

Because there was a significant difference in graduation rates of the study subgroup and the rest of the population, statistics were run on the program demographic questions in order to better understand what factors played a role in students successfully completing their studies. Results of the survey questions for the variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the variables measured for correlation.

	Number	Min	Max	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic Staff	89	0	1	36	.40	.494
In-State Associate's	89	0	1	54	.61	.491
Out-of-State Associate's	89	0	1	7	.08	.271
Coach's Emphasis	89	2	7	405	4.55	1.11

Correlation between having a men's basketball specific academic support staff person in place and the graduation rate of the studied subgroup was found by using a point-biserial correlation. As shown in Table 3, it was determined that having this academic support staff person in place had a positive correlation of .273 with graduation rate.

Table 3. Graduation support factor correlations.

		Rate	Academic Staff
Academic Staff	Pearson Correlation	.273	1
In-State Associate's	Pearson Correlation	.155	1
Out-of-State Associate's	Pearson Correlation	.219	1
Coaches' Emphasis	Pearson Correlation	.317	1

The next variables to be evaluated for correlation with the graduation rate of the studied sub-group focused on institutional credit transfer policy. Focus for this question was on whether each institution accepts associate's degrees from either in-state or out-of-state junior colleges on a direct transfer basis. As shown in Table 2, 54 of the 89 reporting institutions accept direct transfer associate's degrees from in-state junior colleges. There were only 7 of the 89 that accept direct transfer associate's degrees from out-of-state junior colleges. Accepting direct transfer associate's degrees from in-state junior colleges had a positive correlation of 0.155 to the graduation rate of the studied sub-group. Direct transfer associate's degrees from out-of-state junior colleges had a positive correlation of 0.219 to the graduation rate of these junior college transfers.

The last variable evaluated in this study was the perceived emphasis or level of importance placed upon academics by the current men's basketball coaching staff. The compliance directors were asked to rate the perceived level of emphasis/importance on a Likert 7 point scale. Table 2 shows that on the 7 point scale, the coaches' average level of emphasis placed on academics was 4.55. Using the Pearson Correlation it was determined that coaches' emphasis on academics had a positive correlation of 0.317 with the graduation rate of the studied sub-group. The strongest correlation in the study was found between the graduation rates and the perceptions of coaches' emphasis on academics at the university.

Discussion

Much of the information found in this study supports the changes the NCAA has made in academic reform. The NCAA has pushed to have academic support personnel and programs that in our study appear to make a difference in graduation rates of non-qualifier students. Studies like this that examine the effects of NCAA efforts provide

information that helps athletic department administrators make decisions as to the allocation of department resources.

While it cannot be disputed that improvements have been made, there are still areas of concern for sub-groups within Division I athletics. Men's basketball has had the lowest graduation rate of any sport in every year since graduation rates began to be tabulated (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009e). Research has shown that men's basketball has been the most affected sport of any with regard to NCAA mandated initial eligibility reform (Smith, 2007; Takahashi, 2002). This has led to the large volume of junior college transfers into Division I men's basketball institutions. The results of this study have shown the graduation rate of the transfer sub-group was, in fact, significantly lower than the overall graduation rate of the population of Division I men's basketball. In addition to this, in each of the variables that were evaluated, a positive correlation existed with the graduation rate of the studied sub-group.

Prior research has called into question whether junior college student-athletes are prepared for the rigors of four-year academic coursework upon transferring (Smith, 2009). The Knight Commission (2001) went as far as suggesting to the NCAA that all of these junior college transfers be required to sit out a year, while on scholarship, allowing them time to adjust to the added demands of the four year institution. Wong's (2006) study explicitly recommended that the graduation rate of this sub-group be evaluated. The current study evaluated this graduation rate, which was shown to be 12 percent less than the overall graduation of the men's basketball population during this same time.

The current study's findings that correlate a coach's emphasis on academics being a key factor in graduation rates of the study population aligns with earlier research. Smith's (2009) prior research showed a strong coach's involvement in the academic process to be a positive factor for student-athlete success and retention. On the other side, the results of Smith (2007) showed that coaching demands placing the sport ahead of study to be a negative factor toward academic success.

Smith's (2009) study of junior college athletes stressed the importance of academic support for junior college student athletes while still at junior college. However, there appeared to be a gap in the research as it lacked an evaluation of support staff members in the NCAA Division I setting. The NCAA partially funds certain academic support programs within all Division I athletic departments, but the extent of the total funding of academic support staff is up to the budgetary constraints and institutional decisions of the department administration (National Collegiate Athletic Association,

2010a). The level of correlation to graduation rate in this study would validate the NCAA in their aim to increase this form of student-athlete academic support.

The next pair of variables having positive correlation to graduation rate had to do with institutional credit transfer policy. Whether or not institutions accepted associate's degrees on a direct transfer basis from either in-state or out-of-state junior colleges were evaluated for correlation to graduation rate. These correlations are positive and show a relationship to credit transfer policy but these levels are not as high as the first two variables. The importance of this credit transfer situation for junior college transfers was pointed out in Smith's (2009) study. The NCAA makes no mention of credit transfer situation in any of its literature or directives.

Looking further into these pairs of variables and the results that have been shown in this study leads to some simple conclusions. Of the six variables evaluated, the two that are human had the highest correlation or effect on graduation rate. The coach and academic support staff member have the largest effect on graduation rate of any of the evaluated variables. This human support quality leading to academic success, while suggested in research (Smith, 2009; Smith, 2007), has not been specifically quantified with regard to NCAA Division I student-athletes.

Implications

The results of this study have importance to three different groups of people. First these results should have importance to policy makers at the NCAA. A piece of the NCAA's own mission statements calls for the integration of college athletics into higher education so that the student-athletes' "educational experience is paramount" (NCAA 2009a). This study points out that there is in fact a problem. Junior college transfers within Division I men's basketball are graduating at a significantly lower rate than even the entirety of the lowest graduating sport within Division I athletics. This is a specific problem that has not been evaluated outright before. Additional time and research should be focused on the initial non-qualifiers to ensure their educational experience is at the level of other NCAA athletes.

This study has importance to athletic department administrators and coaches. The fact that this sub-group graduates at such a low rate may have implications or cause changes in recruiting philosophy. Also, showing the correlation that these variables have

on graduation may help administrators make future decision as to allocating athletic department resources.

Between the difference in institutional credit transfer policy as well as the overall budget differences (Newsome, 2005), every NCAA Division I athletic department is unique. Administrators of these departments are charged with making the best decisions for their own respective programs that fit their own departments. Showing this problem may lead administrators to further evaluate the situation that they have in place for these junior college transfers and may either lead to a range of decisions from limiting their recruitment, to re-allocating resources into programs that have been shown to have a strong correlation to graduation rate.

In addition to making decisions with regard to department funding and recruiting philosophy, the current study may lead these administrators to look more closely at their coaching staffs as well as use this information in the hiring process of future coaches. The coach's role as a factor in academic success was put forth in prior research (Smith, 2009; Smith, 2007), as well as indirectly promoted by the NCAA through the APR (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009d). This bond was affirmed by the current study. Identifying that coaches indeed play a strong role in these student-athletes' academic success should provide clarity and help shape future athletic department decisions.

Thirdly, this study has importance to current and future student-athletes. This study shows that this particular sub-group is at risk of academic failure. Student-athletes that fall into this group may be able to use the results of this study to help make a more informed decision as to which institution to transfer to upon completion of junior college. The information put forth by this study could be used as a form of recruiting guide for student-athletes. Prior research suggested the importance of academic support upon transfer, as well as the importance of institutional credit transfer policy (Smith, 2009). Prior studies suggested the link between coach and academic success (Smith, 2009; Smith, 2007). The current study quantifies the correlation of these variables and graduation rate.

Future Study

This study identified a problem. It also identified certain variables that have an impact on graduation rate. But this is just the beginning into looking for a solution to this problem. Further study into these junior college transfer student-athletes is

recommended, especially during their time during junior college. Wong's (2006) study suggests that many junior college student athletes have a very limited understanding of what they must do to prepare for transferring to a Division I institution. Gaining a better understanding of this group of student-athletes is essential to find methods to improve their overall academic success.

Further study into the coach's role in student-athlete academic success is recommended. The NCAA has indirectly put pressure on these coaches by instituting the APR (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009d), but this is at the policy level. This study showed coaches to have the strongest single influence on graduation rate of any of the evaluated variables. Additional study into this coach/student athlete relationship, as well as methods to increase this emphasis placed on academics would be beneficial to the student-athlete.

To conclude, this study identified a problem amongst a sub-group within NCAA Division I men's basketball. It also put forth certain variables that have been shown to have a positive effect on overall graduation rates. Hopefully this study will be used in the future to assist in further research. While graduation rates and overall academic success of Division I student-athletes has, in fact, improved over the past 25 years (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009e), there is still much room for growth. The current study brings to light a group which seems to have been left behind. Hopefully future research will find the reasons for this, as well as the best path to improvement.

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