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The Academic Versus Athletic Experience for Intercollegiate Football Athletes

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Introduction- The continued focus on the collegiate careers of student athletes continues its presence within the community of higher education. As this focus has been historically centered on academic performance, we are beginning to see a growing concern for the overall experience obtained in a higher education setting, especially concerning athletes participating in the sport of football. Research in student athlete experiences has demonstrated that participation in athletics enhances learning, character development, leadership skills, social self-esteem and motivation (Astin, 1993; Childs, 1987; Hirko, 2009; Miracle & Rees, 1994; Pascarella & Smart, 1991; Shulman and Bowen, 2002). While this experience has traditionally been examined through a comparative lens between traditional non-athlete students and the student athlete population, the athlete experience needs to be further investigated through a qualitative lens to assess the true phenomenological environment.

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The Academic Versus Athletic Experience for Intercollegiate Football Athletes

Michael Godfrey

I. Introduction

The continued focus on the collegiate careers of student athletes continues its presence within the community of higher education. As this focus has been historically centered on academic performance, we are beginning to see a growing concern for the overall experience obtained in a higher education setting, especially concerning athletes participating in the sport of football. Research in student athlete experiences has demonstrated that participation in athletics enhances learning, character development, leadership skills, social self-esteem and motivation (Astin, 1993; Childs, 1987; Hirko, 2009; Miracle & Rees, 1994; Pascarella & Smart, 1991; Shulman and Bowen, 2002). While this experience has traditionally been examined through a comparative lens between traditional non-athlete students and the student athlete population, the athlete experience needs to be further investigated through a qualitative lens to assess the true phenomenological environment. Within the qualitative lens, the self-reported experiences of specific athletic populations can be investigated to gain a better understanding these group experiences.

The importance of intercollegiate athletics to students, faculty, and surrounding college community is unquestionable as intercollegiate athletics have long been considered an integral part of the higher education system in the United States (Despres, Brady, & McGowan, 2008). Within higher education, the dual roles student athletes accept to be successful athletes and academic scholars can be difficult to maintain. Thus, academic personnel and administrators as well as coaches must strive for a deeper understanding of athletics while trying to provide an environment that promotes learning, performance, institutional integrity, and academic rigor (Godfrey & Satterfield, 2010; Suggs, 2005). Historical studies investigating student athlete performance provide a grim portrait of college athletes as academics. Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel (1982) detailed athlete academic deficiencies compared to the general student population on dimensions of high school GPA, class rank, SAT scores, college GPA, and graduation rates. Additionally, male athletes scored lower in all aspects compared to the general student population, and student athletes participating in revenue producing sports of football and basketball have a relatively low probability of receiving a degree compared to non-athletes (Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982; Eitzen & Purdy, 1986; Warfield, 1983; Weber, Sherman, & Tegano, 1987). Although these studies are dated, the cultural implications and stereotypes created and reinforced by these studies exist today.

The facts regarding student athlete academic performance is that student athletes graduate at higher rates than non-athletes and are highly involved in college life (Simiyu, 2010). While athletes have traditionally been stereotyped as lesser students, we are seeing an adaptation in the student athlete population. Recently, studies have shown dramatic improvements in student athlete academic successes as athletes' academic performance is similar to other students who enter college with similar SAT scores and demographic background (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004). Recent data shows that graduation rates for student athletes are consistently on the rise (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 GSR however varies widely by sport, race, and gender (Fountain and Finley, 2009). Male basketball athletes graduated at 62%; football 66%; lacrosse 88%; water polo 87%; fencing and gymnastics each 86%. On average, female athletes graduated at a rate of 87% compared to men's 71%. For female sports, skiing graduated at 96%; gymnastics 95%; field hockey and lacrosse 94% for each; basketball 82%; and bowling came last at 68% (Sander, 2008). Comparing these graduation percentages to the average graduation rate within six years for the whole student body being 53%(Simiyu, 2010; Marklein, 2009); it is perplexing how stereotypes such as the "dumb-jock" have maintained momentum in the academic culture, and requires an examination of the appropriateness of comparing student athletes to non-student athletes.

As student athlete graduation rates and associated academic success continue to rise, we must investigate why traditional stereotypes maintain their strength and the fairness of the expectations placed upon student athletes. Student athletes enter an academic system for the production of marginal students through the relationships that are developed

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between all significant members of the academic setting (Benson, 2000), as student athletes are continually categorized as less-academically competent, regardless of intelligence, dedication or potential. Traditionally, student athletes enter college with limited expectations, face negative reinforcement from teachers, and experience poor academic advising (Benson, 2000). As recently as 2005, Singer (2005) found that student athletes lack the opportunities to make educational decisions and are still being treated differently in the academic domains of higher education. However, as previous research has brought these issues to light, the higher education community has shown an interest in providing a more adequate experience for the student athlete population.

The academic performance of student athletes has become a focal point of evaluation and comparison by academic researchers over the past three decades. Steps by individual athletic departments, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and educational researchers have been taken to amend discrepancies between the student athlete population and the traditional non-athlete student population. Examining the lifestyles, expectations and demands placed upon student athletes, especially those in revenue producing sports at the Division I level, have yielded detailed findings on academic time restrictions due to athletic time requirements; limitations in class choice due to athletic schedule conflicts; limited educational major choices due to class choice limitations; and differences in communicated expectations between the student-athlete population and non-athlete population from the faculty (Benson, 2000; Harrison, Comeaux & Plecha, 2006; Jolly,2008; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006). While improvements have been made in regulating classes, attendance, graduation rates, and grade point average, the most influential change has been the willingness of the faculty and student athletes to communicate. The cultural improvement in the faculty and student athlete relationship are integral for the success of student athletes as students and determined to be an important predictor of academic success and especially grade point average (GPA) (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Harrison & Comeaux, 2006). Therefore, an increased understanding of the student-athlete's world and a more active approach by faculty to encourage both academic and informal interactions has the potential to provide student-athletes with a greater understanding of the academic environment and help them develop as true student-athletes (Jolly, 2008).

The cultural influence experienced upon entering college as a student athlete can also be different from the general student population. Student athletes on most college campuses today represent a special population of students with unique challenges and needs different from their non-athlete peers (Gayles, 2009). Non-athlete students are encouraged to socialize throughout the campus and provided with gatherings and events organized by the university and student organizations. Student-athletes are encouraged to prepare for their sports and use their limited free time to balance academic expectations. Student athletes are required to attend and prepare for hours of practice a week than can equate to a full-time work schedule. As the general student population has the option to obtain outside employment, these employment opportunities are unlikely to possess the physical demands experienced by student athletes. This does not indicate that athletes have appropriate excuses for any academic shortcomings, only that the culture in which they exist in higher education is indeed different that that of the general student population.

Culture itself is difficult to define and examining cultural differences in a particular setting presents many challenges because culture results from several social processes among an organization and its members (Geertz, 2000; Martin, 2002). Culture is a collective process determined by accepted actions, ideas, and items that provide meaning within an organization or a group (Schroeder, 2010). To examine athletic culture within the organizational culture of an institution of higher education, the phenomenological environment must be examined. The athletic culture can be defined as the environment in which a student athlete lives as they are fulfilling their roles and responsibilities as both a student and an athlete (Despres, Brady, McGowan, 2008). As with any culture, the athletic culture possesses both positive and negative aspects and is generally examined through the lens of student athlete roles and identifying primarily as a student or an athlete and investigates the emotional influence of pressure to succeed in both worlds. The pressure to be a successful student and a successful athlete separates the two worlds and creates a double life for the athlete (Godfrey & Satterfield, 2010). The athletes exist as two separate individuals living two different lives in the world of higher education. The student athlete is immersed in a truly different culture as compared to the rest of the student body (Depres, Brady, & McGowan, 2008). This cultural difference makes demands on student athletes that non-athlete students do not endure. The deficiencies in educational literature exist in the examination of the influence of cultural relationships and the methods in which the student athlete population experiences them. Therefore, to aid in filling this gap, a phenomenological research method was selected to examine the lived experiences of the student athletes that are explored with the goal of giving the reader an accurate understanding of the essence of an experience (Moustakas, 1994).

II. Objective/Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain understanding and insight into the relationship between

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athletics and academics for Division I football players at a large Division I institution in the southeastern United States. This leads to two additional purposes: 1) to examine the overall college experience for division I football players to better understand the relationship between the athletic and academic culture at the institution, and 2) to provide university faculty and staff an updated vision of the student athlete experience to enhance the academic growth and development of this student athlete population.

III. Theoretical Lens

The research tradition driving this study is the interpretive approach as the goal is to determine the academic and athletic cultural interpretations of collegiate football athletes. "Interpretive methods are based on the presupposition that we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations" (Yanow, 2000, p. 5). To explore this experience, the researcher will use Organization and Institutional Theory as a theoretical lens. Using the notion that institutions consist of regulative, normative, and cognitive structures will offer meaning to the development of the relationships within organizations and the ways in which student athletes experience culture and associated relationships. This notion will be used as an orienting lens to shape the methods of data collection and interview questions (Creswell, 2009).

The theoretical lens further focuses on neoinstitutional theory. Neoinstitutional theory examines the cultural norms within higher education institutions concerning the normative, regulative and cultural-cognitive perceptions of the institution. The normative pillar of institutions places emphasis on the normative rules that introduce a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension into social life (Scott, 2001). More specifically, the normative pillar focused on the values and norms of the institution in designating a means to set and pursue goals and objectives (Scott, 2001). The regulative pillar of institutions examines the set rules of the institution in the attempt to regularize and constrain behavior, and the cultural-cognitive pillar examines the shared understandings, beliefs, and stereotypes held by faculty members of the institution that create the social reality of the institution (Scott, 2001). Within the cultural-cognitive pillar, the individual experiences of the student athlete population can be investigated. Using Richard Scott's (2001) analytical description of the three pillars, this study will focus primarily on the sociological development of relationships and culture formation using the three pillars of institutions to assess the individual experience of Division I football athletes. Culture formation, academic socialization, time constraints and faculty influence can be investigated through each pillar.

Since no evidence exists in the literature that examines the student athlete experience of academic and athletic relationships using the neoinstitutional perspective, the researcher examines the essence of this experience using Neoinstitutional theory as a guide. The researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current division I football athletes, to discover the behavioral and social relationships that are created between college athletics and academics from the student athlete point of view. By using this model as a guide, this phenomenological exploration was used to answer the following question:

Central Question:

What is the meaning of the relationship between the athletic and academic culture for student athletes participating in the sport of football at a large Division One institution?

IV. Methodology

Using a phenomenological method, this study seeks to describe the relationship between athletics and academics through the experiences of intercollegiate student athletes. In contrast to the more traditional quantitative approaches to research, phenomenology falls under the qualitative research tradition. Creswell (2009, p.4) defines qualitative research as "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem". The qualitative research approach seeks to explore social or human problems to provide outsiders with an experiential understanding of a phenomenon. Qualitative methods are ideal when attempting to answer experiential questions that are participant-centered (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of phenomenology is to produce detailed descriptions of the research participants' lived experiences, rather then hypothesis, opinion, or generalization (Wertz, 2005). This research focuses the lived experiences of intercollegiate football athletes and the ways in which they understand the relationship between athletics and academics at the intercollegiate level and the ways in which they experience institutional culture.

a) Data Sources/Participants

For this research study, individual interviews were conducted with 10 student athletes who participate in football at one division I-A university located in the southeast region of the United States in which football exists at the highest revenue sport. The participant requirements included current enrollment and participation within the varsity level sport of football at the university and a class classification of junior, senior, or graduate student. The classification of graduate student is possible due to 5th year eligibility in which a student athlete can red-shirt (participate in all team functions but not participate in competitive events) for

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one academic year and still possess 4 years of athletic eligibility. All twenty-seven athletes who met the criteria at the time of the study were contacted and ten agreed to participate in the study. Of the 10 student athlete participants, 7 were African-American and 3 were Caucasian; 5 participants were academically classified as seniors, 4 were juniors, and 1 participant was a graduate student. All ten of the participants were athletic scholarship athletes.

V. Results/Significance

Analyzing phenomenological data follows a systematic procedure that is rigorous yet accessible to qualitative researchers (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Data analysis, according to Moustakas, requires a description of the researchers own experience with the phenomenon (epoche), followed by identifying significant statements, meaning units and themes. Next, the researcher synthesizes the themes into a description of the experience that can textually represent the actual lived experience of the research participants (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Thematic analysis was conducted at the conclusion of the transcription process to allow for each athletes voice, perception and opinion to be included in the analysis. As significant statements were selected and categorized into meaning units and ultimately themes, the goal was to produce a written description that adequately and appropriately describes the lived experience of this population of student athletes. At the conclusion of the thematic analysis, member checking was conducted to increase the trustworthiness of the study. The results of this study produced the following three themes to describe the student athlete experience: (1) Helmet Fraternities, (2) Identity Adaptation, and (3) Interconnected Cultures.

a) Helmet Fraternities

The helmet fraternity is a statement created and presented by one of the research participants. Participant #1 described the connection between teammates in the following statement:

> "You know, being around your teammates, it is almost like being in a fraternity. Like when people ask me if I am going to pledge or do this, I tell them that the helmet is my fraternity. That is my sign. That is what I represent. And I will choose that every time."

Helmet fraternities, is a reference to the cultural association student athletes make towards the symbol on their helmets. This association is closely associated to the Greek life culture, especially fraternities. A fraternity, as defined in Webster's Dictionary, is an organization of male students, primarily for social purposes that is associated by ties of brotherhood and possess a common purpose or interest. For football players, this brotherhood is a characteristic of being a teammate that forges a deep rooted relationship of respect, unity, and love. The daily angst of being a college football player combined with the expectations of academic success creates a tight and focused sense of community among teammates. As individuals grow and mature, they tend to lean on those similar to them in their experiences and daily routines thus effectively creating the helmet fraternity. Participant #6 describes the different experiences of the collegiate football athlete compared to the non-athlete student illustrating the dynamics behind group development:

I have had a few non-athlete relationships, but they are kind of weird because they always want to do things and I am like, cant, I've got to go to practice. Or lets go out, I can't, going to the hotel. Cant skip practice. I mean, they stay up all times of the night and we are trying to go to bed because we got to get up early. They sleep in till 12 because their classes don't start until 1, and by the time 1 comes we are headed to meetings because we have been up since 6. So, it's just a different life.

Intercollegiate football players possess a unique schedule in college that is exacerbated by the physical work and mental preparation that occurs on a daily basis. To understand this experience without participating in the daily rigors of a student athlete is difficult. The mental, physical, and emotional toll that football takes on the body forges the bond between teammates. Therefore, the fraternity is created by growing and learning together as a team and becomes the foundation of the college experience. The loyalty and respect towards each other is created through countless hours of practice and training. Despite the various social backgrounds, cultural differences, and personal goals, intercollegiate football creates a bond that withstands multiple criticisms, stereotypes and social hurdles unseen by the non-athlete student body. The requirements of the sport, at the collegiate level become a job in itself with pressures, expectations, and diligence that is only accomplished by pledging loyalty to the athletic symbols. This fraternity, the brotherhood, and the meaning of being a teammate are a lived experience. The fraternity is forged in the daily battles of being a student athlete. The fraternity is a way of life. Although each participant expressed the difficulty of the sport, it was their teammates that pushed them to continue. Every participant spoke about the importance of this relationship, using descriptors such as "love", "beneficial", "brothers", and "great relationships". Participant #2 describes the relationship in the following statement:

> "I have said this for a long time that the best thing that I have taken from college is the relationships I have made, and the guys on the football team, and the friendships I have made. My relationship with the guys on the football team… one thing I can say, the thing about football… we have 115 guys, so you really learn how to mesh with guys from different backgrounds, or guys that you would not usually like

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or usually hang out with. But they are on the football team so you have got to make it work. And I am really grateful for that because it has taught me how to gel with a lot of different types of people. And I definitely feel like that is something that will help me later on in life."

Participant #7 simply states, "Well your football teammates are like your brothers and stuff. I spend the most time with them and they will always come first with any relationship." Upon further examination into the development of this concept, the bond is forced out of necessity. The role of the student athlete in higher education becomes a cultural reality that is separated and specific to age and sport, especially that of a football player at a school in which football is the highest revenue sport. The team becomes a separate microcosm of the student population that provides social benefits, cooperation, and a means to work through differences that are experienced between the academic and athletic cultures. The student athletes' role as a student is limited in both the amount of time available to fulfill that role and the other experiential opportunities available for them to pursue. Therefore, conforming to the standards and norms within the team becomes the safest and most comfortable path to a successful academic and athletic career. The team, and the relationships developed within the team, is a safe haven of understanding, as student athletes find comfort in knowing that their teammates are experiencing the same stresses of balancing athletics with academics.

b) Identity Adaptation

The theme identity adaptation is a reference to the perception of cultural reality that the research participants experience during their time in the collegiate setting and what it means to be a student athlete. As an intercollegiate football athlete in a setting in which football exists as the most important revenue producing sport at the university, it is particularly difficult to separate the student from the football player. The importance of football to the students, faculty, and administration within the culture of the university makes it difficult for these student athletes to establish themselves as students. Participant #6 describes the culture as an expectation, "As far as sport performance goes, the expectations are to win championships and that expectation comes from coaches, teachers, students, fans, anybody you name it." Participant #9 describes the culture by stating, "Athletically, our expectation is to win. Compete with the best of the best. We are about championships here."

The student athlete also has problems identifying as students due to the amount of time that is focused towards their sport. Identifying as athletes does not diminish the importance of academics, but it does present how important and influential the sport of football is to establishing their identity. Upon separating the concept of student athlete and creating a choice to identify by, the participants all chose athlete. This identity classification provides insight into the relationship between athletics and academics for Division I football players by indicating the student athlete's perceived role on the college campus. The athlete identity is reinforced by the time dedicated to their sport and the idealized importance of receiving an athletic scholarship. Their perception of college, athletics, and academics transforms and grows as personal maturity and development occur. The student athlete reality is more focused on the concept of employment rather than purely education. Student athletes perceive their purpose on campus is to perform athletically and a means by which to obtain an education. It is important to note that although every athlete chose to identify as an athlete, they took great care to include the importance of an education. For student athletes, identifying as athletes does not decrease the desire to graduate or be an educated member of society. This is reinforced by the following response:

"Judging by the amount of time that I put into each, I am an athlete. Judging by the one that is more important to me it would be student. Because I mean, football will end for me some day you know, but I will always have an education to fall back on. A degree is ultimately the most important thing. I know that is kind of a cliché answer, but it really is the way that I think about it. But that is a tough question… Part of being a football player and a student athlete, is that it is easy for football to be the thing that defines you."

Being defined as an athlete, especially a football athlete, is described as easy because of the cultural perception of both the football players and the importance of the sport of football. As participant #7 describes, "It is easy to only talk about football with the students, it is easy to only focus on football and do enough to "just get by" in class. But I want more than that. I have other plans for my life."

Student athletes consistently exist between identities. The constant rush between classes, workouts, and practice create unique situations in which the athlete has to change focus and concentrate on separate purposes. The classroom presents itself as the most difficult change due to the environment in which they enter. The academic perception regarding football players varies among students, faculty, administration and other athletes. These perceptions can be stereotypes, admiration, understanding or disdain and each class and faculty member create a different cultural environment within the classroom and more specifically between non-athlete students and the student athletes. Participant #8 sums up the perception of student stereotypes with the following statement:

"Well most students here at State, for the most part, stereotype athletes regardless of which

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sport you play and probably more so the black athletes. The relationship in class is very… it is not bad… it is just not close. You don't feel like they want to interact with you. And probably because you're an athlete they just think or have disrespect for you because you're an athlete. And if they do talk to you it is generally about football. If you are talking about something else, then you probably brought it up. But for the most part it is about athletics."

While the relationships among students exist as a vital component to the lived college experience, for student athletes, the relationship can best be described as strained. Other students foreclose on their identity and only reinforce the importance of athletics. This creates a distance or void between the two sub-groups as the participants described relationships and friendships with the general student population as "few" and "limited", especially as their college careers progressed. The trend that became apparent between the interaction of the general student population and student athletes is of misunderstanding and creates extreme caution towards accepting new members into an individual's group of friends.

The role of the individual as a football player is perceived to take precedence over the individual and the person, thus creating an identity crisis for student athletes. They become chameleons within the classroom who adapt to the atmosphere of the environment. The perception of the student athletes as being different from the student body is in fact created by the student body treating them as if they are different. They feel as if they are treated solely as football players. They are treated different, they feel different, the culture that they become a part of is different and thus their experience is different.

c) Interconnected Cultures

The third theme, interconnected cultures, represents the connectedness of the academic culture and the athletic culture for student athletes. There has always been the assumption that athletics and academics were at war with one another for student athletes with each component trying to establish itself as the most important reason for being in college. The reality is that these two may be a bit more intertwined than we think. While the relationship between academics and athletics exist as unstable at times, it also can serve as a driving force to assist both towards success. The academic reputation of the university influences expectations for student athletes to be successful in the classroom. Intercollegiate football athletes, with the weight of the university's athletic program on their shoulders, must adhere to the academic expectations of representing the university as students. Although student athletes were limited in choices of majors in higher education and the time available to focus on academics, the university expected them to be successful in the classroom and graduate (Jolly, 2008).

The responsibility of intercollegiate football and academics takes a physical, emotional and mental toll on student athletes. The balance between the two seems to exist when both are simultaneously successful. Balancing academics and athletics is often a roller coaster of emotion and stresses that change on a weekly basis. The relationship between the two is undeniable. Participating as a student athlete in the sport of football affects every aspect of college life. Football is not an extracurricular activity for these individuals; it is a way of life. Football is a core piece of their identity and a component that has been used to define these individual for years. Football is not something they do, it is a part of who they are, and to not fully conceptualize this underestimates the desire and dedication it requires to be successful as both a student and an athlete.

Football can have positive and negative effects on academics, but academics can also have positive and negative effects on football. The balance between the academic and athletic lives of a student athlete reinforces the importance of both for intercollegiate football players.

Football becomes more difficult when the mind is clouded with academic shortfalls, and academics become more difficult when football is faltering. For student athletes, learning to balance these two responsibilities is an accomplishment. Examining the relationship between athletics and academics for these student athletes provide examples of their experiences in achieving balance as student athletes. Participant #8 describes achieving balance by stating:

I don't think it (balancing athletics with academics) is something that you can put into words. It is something that you have to find within yourself and you have to put some personal things on the backburner. Mostly and get whatever done that you can. It is hard. That is not something that everyone can do, but it takes a special person to balance that emotionally. It is a lot of stress and a lot of stress all the time.

The mental challenge of succeeding in both academics and athletics also poses challenges to success. Football is as much of a mental activity as it is a physical activity. Each week during the season requires a new game plan, a detailed focus on a new team, and hours of mental preparation to be successful. Each week produces new study guides in the form of game plans and strategies vital to team success. Therefore, on top of the physical exhaustion created by the sport itself, the mental exhaustion also steals time away from academics. Participant #5 describes this effect in the following statement:

It (mental stress) does affect you from practice to everything. It can be tricky, especially during the season. You get very tired. Especially when you have a

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little work do and you are trying to prepare for tomorrows practice.

Athletic success can also positively affect academics. One participant describes a positive scenario by stating,

> "For me they don't go hand in hand, however it gets easier to do your academics when you are having success in football. It is easier to go to class. You are just in a better mood. You spend the majority of your time in football. And when you are winning, your coaches are not angry, and everybody on the team is in a better mood. And that puts you in a better mood, and that makes it so much easier to come home from football and sit down and write a paper when you are in a better mood."

Just as success in football improves the mental outlook on academics, for the participants of the study, the lack of success in athletics tended to have more of a negative effect regarding academics. The psychological effect of losing affects the individual student athlete and the environment in which learning occurs. The social impact losing can have on the classroom environment can negatively affect learning as a whole, especially in the desire to be in class as well as ability to participate and pay attention. The participants describe the effects of losing in the following statements:

> "I think it is harder to go to class. You don't want to have to deal with the scrutiny from the students when you lose. People talking about you. A lot of people take losing pretty hard and they get like I don't want to do anything else until we win again. "

As higher education professionals begin to understand the affects athletics and academics have on one another, the concern becomes how to distinguish the two or at least learn to balance them. Attempting to separate athletics from academics in higher education is not an easy task. With so much external focus placed on athletics from fans, student body, faculty, administration and coaching staff, there are no environments that provide an escape that separate the two. The student athlete constantly presents two identities and separation becomes an individual task in which they must chart their own path and determine what methods work the best. Participant #7 describes the balance between academics and athletics in the following statement:

> "I don't think it is something that you can put into words. It is something that you have to find within yourself and you have to put some personal things on the backburner. Mostly and get whatever done that you can. It is hard. That is not something that everyone can do (balance both athletics and academics), but it takes a special person to balance that emotionally. It is a lot of stress, and a lot of stress all the time."

In addition to the athletic impact on academics, there is a substantial academic impact on athletics. Maintaining good grade point averages, class work, and assignments provides the student athlete with the opportunity to focus on football. Properly managing time and staying up to date with class requirements eases the difficulty of athletics and decreases the mental and emotional stress of attempting to balance the two. Jamal was the first participant to express the connection as he stated, "Well when you are successful in the classroom, the average player on the team, was successful on the field. It reflected that. The time that you would put into your school notes, you would try and put that same amount of time and effort into your assignments on the fields, so there was definitely a connection." Upon further investigation into this concept, it was discovered that academics does in fact play a role in the athletic success for student athletes. The stress of being a good student athlete is relieved by being successful in the classroom. The failure to maintain academic standards in the classroom adds a dimension of stress that negatively affects both academics and athletics. Participant #1 and #3 reinforce this with the following statements:

When you are doing well in the classroom, you don't have to think about it on the field, like oh man I got all of this stuff to do. You don't have to think about it, you can just focus on football. If you are doing well in class, you actually have the time to focus on football. You don't think about it (on the field).

When you are doing good in class it is just easier to play football. Having a good semester and (academic) stuff is flowing real easily and you are getting your stuff turned in and you are on top of your stuff it definitely translates onto the field. When it (academics) is running smoothly, you can be on top of your game.

VI. Conclusion

The philosopher William James once said that any difference that is a difference should make a difference. Intercollegiate football players exist in higher education in-between classifications of being a student or an athlete. They are so far removed from the traditional undergraduate experience that it is hard to classify them with the general student population. They are more closely related to a working professional who is enrolled as a student, similar to the graduate student population. The working professional maintains a primary job and completes academic responsibilities during non-work hours. The football student athlete describes their experiences in this manner. While work may exist as a primary objective, the academics can still exist as the most important.

The typical regulative, normative, and cognitive structures within higher education do exist for student athletes who participate in the sport of football at the Division I level. However, they are compounded by the associated regulative, normative, and cognitive

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structures of the athletics, creating a unique culture in which these student athletes exist in higher education. The pressures to represent the university academically, athletically, and socially indeed creates an experience that at least warrants a discussion on the classification of student athletes.

The concern with classifying student athletes as a separate population is that it indicates that they are or should be treated differently, which is inaccurate; however, judging them in comparison with a population that does not reflect them is inappropriate. The means by which higher education professionals evaluate the success and failures of student athletes needs to be reevaluated. As we begin to deepen our understanding of the relationship between athletics and academics, so to must we expand on our understanding of the implications of that relationship. The relationship between athletics and academics does not exist as a complex conflict between two separate worlds in academia. Instead, they are reciprocating worlds that have dramatic effects on those that participate in them.

a) Limitations and Research Implications

As the research base on intercollegiate athletics continues to grow, it is important to look at the implications and limitations of research. This research simply provides evidence that reinforced the need for further research. Additionally, due to the nature of this study, this research is limited to the sport, gender, and athletic culture on one institution as phenomenological research cannot be generalized across athletic departments and institutions. The most important limitation is that these findings are only representative of the ten participants and their experiences in the higher education setting. The findings do not represent the physical, mental, or emotional experiences of all intercollegiate football athletes or the overall student athlete population in general. With the understanding that there are academic and athletic specific challenges that intercollegiate football athletes face while in higher education, further research is needed to compare the experiences between institutions, between sports, especially revenue and non-revenue sports, and between genders. Additionally, there is need for researchers to apply and conduct this study to other sport populations. These studies will help to distinguish between sport specific experiences, population specific experiences, and the methods in which they differ from the general student population.

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