

LIFE AFTER SPORTS: AN EXPLORATION  
OF THE ACADEMIC CHALLENGES  
FACING STUDENT-ATHLETES

by

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## **Abstract**

Any complaints from student-athletes regarding their college experience are often brushed aside in favor of the narrative that everything is handed to them. This is especially true in Division I revenue-generating sports, where student-athletes often receive full athletic scholarships to attend school and are treated favorably on campus. Yet the lengths to which athletic departments are willing to go to achieve success often negatively affect the academic endeavors of student-athletes. Academic scandals have abounded in recent years at programs like Auburn and North Carolina and student-athletes often find their academic needs devalued in favor of athletic ones. The purpose of this report is to recognize the academic challenges facing student-athletes, identify three potential causes and make recommendations to alleviate these problems. The three challenges addressed are overly demanding athletic schedules, eligibility-based education and academic clustering. The report is based in academic research and supplemented by interviews with former Texas Christian University football players. Research focuses on student-athletes in revenue-generating sports (football and basketball) at Division I institutions.

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## Introduction

The benefits that modern student-athletes receive at a university often overshadow the challenges they face. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), universities in Divisions I and II award athletic scholarships to more than 150,000 student-athletes annually with a combined worth of more than \$2.9 billion.<sup>1</sup> Most student-athletes receive partial scholarships, but some members of Division I revenue-generating sports like football and basketball receive full scholarships for their athletic abilities. These scholarships typically cover tuition, room and board, course-related textbooks and other fees. There are also social benefits for student-athletes—well-known athletes are treated favorably on some college campuses.

These are just a few of the advantages that student-athletes typically enjoy. However, with those advantages come problems that are addressed less frequently. The moniker of “student-athlete” implies a prioritization of academic over athletics, but in many cases the opposite would be more accurate. In a Senate Committee hearing on college athletics, former Senator John D. Rockefeller IV emphasized the economic advantages that winning athletic programs enjoy and the lengths some programs are willing to go to sustain success.<sup>2</sup> Author and historian Taylor Branch described this role conflict eloquently during the hearing:

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<sup>1</sup> "Scholarships." NCAA.org. March 10, 2017. Accessed February 01, 2019. <http://www.ncaa.org/student-athletes/future/scholarships>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, *Promoting the Well-Being and Academic Success of College Athletes*, 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, 2014, S Hrg. 113-726. Testimony of John D. Rockefeller IV.

“College athletes are, or should be, students in the classroom and competitor players in the athletic department. They face multiple roles in careers like many Americans, but their conflicting demands cannot be managed or balanced unless they are squarely recognized. The NCAA undermines this logical separation by insisting that sports are an educational supplement for a hybrid creature under its jurisdiction called the student-athlete.”<sup>3</sup>

This overwhelming emphasis on athletics in revenue-generating sports creates unique academic challenges for student-athletes. The aim of this paper is to investigate the claim that Division I universities are not adequately preparing football and basketball players for life after sports. The information that follows will seek to acknowledge this deficit and identify three specific factors that perpetuate it: overly demanding athletic schedules, eligibility-based education and academic clustering.

The research methodology used to prove this thesis is a three-pronged approach. The first element included is NCAA data, including metrics used to analyze the academic success of student-athletes and studies that show their involvement and level of comfort on university campuses. The second element is academic research and news articles pulled from several databases and ranging from studies on race in college athletics to the conservation of resources theory and everything in between. The final element utilized is a series of interviews with former TCU football players. This element gives more anecdotal, localized information and provides some individualized perspectives that research papers sometimes lack.

The former players who were interviewed were pulled from TCU football rosters from 2008 to 2011. This allowed for graduates to have experience in the job

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<sup>3</sup> Senate Committee Hearing. Testimony of Taylor Branch.

market and gain a better understanding of their preparation for life after sports, which they could then speak on in the interviews. Graduates were contacted through whatever medium they were located, including Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, email and phone. Participating graduates agreed to answer a series of questions, some by phone and some by email, about their academic experience at TCU and their preparation for the workforce.

While this paper focuses on revenue-generating Division I sports, it is important to note that college athletics encompasses a broader range of student-athletes, from Division I softball to Division III volleyball. However, the massive economic impact of college football and basketball at the Division I level amplifies issues that other students may also face. The testimonies of former student-athletes included in this paper are all from former football players at Texas Christian University for this reason. Not every academic challenge this paper addresses will apply to all student-athletes at all levels of competition, but some will.

## **Background Information and Data**

The NCAA has two metrics that they employ to analyze the academic success of their student-athletes: Graduation Success Rate (GSR) and Academic Progress Rate (APR). The GSR is the NCAA's own version of the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR).<sup>4</sup> The primary change made by the NCAA is that the GSR accounts for transfers in and

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<sup>4</sup> "How are NCAA Graduation Rates Calculated?" NCAA.org. November 2018. Accessed February 08, 2019.  
[https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/research/gradrates/2018NCAARES\\_HowGradRatesCalculated.pdf](https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/research/gradrates/2018NCAARES_HowGradRatesCalculated.pdf).

out of universities and tracks students beyond a six-year threshold. The GSR also includes mid-year enrollees and non-scholarship athletes at Division 1 universities without athletic scholarships.

The APR “holds institutions accountable for the academic progress of their student-athletes through a team-based metric that accounts for the eligibility and retention of each student-athlete for each academic term.”<sup>5</sup> The APR data is collected annually and released to the public each spring. The system includes rewards and penalties for athletic programs based on their APR score.

While both metrics are useful to evaluate the academic standards of these programs, it is important to note potential issues before doing so. Dr. Richard M. Southall analyzes the GSR as follows:

“One, neither the Federal Graduation Rate, FGR, mandated by Congress, nor the NCAA’s GSR, is perfect or inherently a more accurate metric. They utilize different sampling and statistical analyses to examine different cohorts. In short, [the FGR and the GSR] are different graduation rates. Two, the GSR consistently returns a rate 12 to 25 percent higher than the FGR. As far back as 1991, the NCAA knew that removing eligible dropouts, in other words transfers or athletes who leave school in good academic standing, from the GSR cohort would result in a markedly higher success rate. Three, there is no comparable national-level GSR for the general student body to report GSR and FGR data simultaneously in press releases or data-set tables, which invites inappropriate comparisons and fosters confusion among the general public.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Table 1: Comparison of Graduation Success Rates and Federal Graduation Rate Cohorts (2015-2018 graduating classes)**

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<sup>5</sup> “Division 1 Academic Progress Rate (APR).” NCAA.org. Accessed February 08, 2019. <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/division-i-academic-progress-rate-apr>.

<sup>6</sup> Senate Committee Hearing. Testimony of Richard M. Southall.

(NCAA, 2018)

	<b>Federal Rate</b>	<b>GSR</b>
<b>Enrolled (Under Federal Definition)</b>	89,392	89,392
<b>Enrolled as Frosh in January</b>	0	3,244
<b>Two-Year College Transfers</b>	0	9,988
<b>Four-Year College Transfers</b>	0	7,945
<b>Non-Scholarship Athletes (Only at Schools Not Offering Aid)</b>	0	10,482
<b>Total Enrolled</b>	89,392	121,051 (+35.4%)
<b>Allowable Exclusions (Death, Military, Church Mission, etc.)</b>	275	344
<b>Left Eligible</b>	0	24,298
<b>Participants on Teams No Longer Sponsored by Institution</b>	0	1,123
<b>Total Denominator</b>	89,117	95,286 (7.0%)

There has not been much controversy surrounding the APR formula itself; however, concerns about the methods schools use to improve their scores abound. A report by Kaydee McCormick points out that while the goals behind the implementation of APR are commendable, the metric places additional pressure on coaches, counselors and professors to maintain student-athlete eligibility.<sup>7</sup> This may lead to schools taking approaches harmful to the long-term education of student-athletes to avoid being penalized for poor academic performance.

With these qualifiers in mind, the NCAA's searchable APR database supports Dr. Eddie Comeaux's assertion that college athletes participating in revenue-generating

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<sup>7</sup> McCormick, Kaydee. "Academic Clustering in Intercollegiate Athletics." *K-State Research Exchange* (2010): 1-32.

sports exhibit poorer academic performance than college athletes in other team sports.<sup>8</sup> Table 2 illustrates APR comparisons between men's team sports from 2010-2017, and the numbers for basketball and football are significantly lower than any other sports. While it is apparent that scores are rising across all sports, it is important to note that McCormick's point about this increase being the result of educational approaches harmful to student-athletes is a possibility.<sup>9</sup>

This APR data points toward revenue-generating sports as a target for further examination, but does not offer any proof that Division 1 student-athletes face academic challenges any more significant than those in Division 2 or Division 3. However, a journal article about the effect of different racial backgrounds on student-athlete academic success states, "...college athletes graduate with GPAs that are similar to non-athletes within Division 3 schools, but there are slight differences among Division 2 and even greater grade-average differences than non-athlete peers within Division 1 institutions."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Comeaux, Eddie. "Innovative Research into Practice in Support Centers for College Athletes: Implications for the Academic Progress Rate Initiative." *Journal of College Student Development* 56 (2015): 274-279.

<sup>9</sup> McCormick, *Academic Clustering in Intercollegiate Athletics*.

<sup>10</sup> Oseguera, Leticia, Dan Merson, C. Keith Harrison and Sue Rankin. "Beyond the Black/White binary: A multi-institutional study of campus climate and the academic success of college athletes of different racial backgrounds." *Sociology of Sport Journal* (2018): 119-131.

**Table 2: Average APRs by Sport for Men's Teams**

(NCAA, 2010-2017)

<b>SPORT</b>	<b>2010-11</b>	<b>2011-12</b>	<b>2012-13</b>	<b>2013-14</b>	<b>2014-15</b>	<b>2015-16</b>	<b>2016-17</b>
<b>Baseball</b>	<b>963</b>	<b>965</b>	<b>971</b>	<b>974</b>	<b>973</b>	<b>976</b>	<b>977</b>
<b>Basketball</b>	<b>951</b>	<b>958</b>	<b>964</b>	<b>966</b>	<b>966</b>	<b>968</b>	<b>966</b>
<b>Cross Country</b>	<b>976</b>	<b>974</b>	<b>977</b>	<b>977</b>	<b>979</b>	<b>981</b>	<b>982</b>
<b>Football</b>	<b>947</b>	<b>953</b>	<b>958</b>	<b>963</b>	<b>966</b>	<b>965</b>	<b>965</b>
<b>Golf</b>	<b>970</b>	<b>975</b>	<b>981</b>	<b>987</b>	<b>984</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>986</b>
<b>Ice Hockey</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>985</b>	<b>985</b>	<b>986</b>	<b>988</b>	<b>983</b>	<b>986</b>
<b>Lacrosse</b>	<b>971</b>	<b>978</b>	<b>977</b>	<b>979</b>	<b>983</b>	<b>983</b>	<b>986</b>
<b>Soccer</b>	<b>966</b>	<b>970</b>	<b>972</b>	<b>977</b>	<b>976</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>977</b>
<b>Swimming</b>	<b>976</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>983</b>
<b>Tennis</b>	<b>973</b>	<b>977</b>	<b>979</b>	<b>979</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>982</b>
<b>Track &amp; Field</b>	<b>962</b>	<b>969</b>	<b>968</b>	<b>971</b>	<b>970</b>	<b>974</b>	<b>974</b>
<b>Wrestling</b>	<b>957</b>	<b>964</b>	<b>965</b>	<b>971</b>	<b>979</b>	<b>976</b>	<b>972</b>

If Division 1 student-athletes are struggling to keep up with their non-athlete classmates, it is understandable that athletic departments would search for ways to close that gap. Problems arise, however, when their methods are counterproductive to the education of their students. This was the case at the University of North Carolina, where professors offered a “shadow curriculum” of fake classes that athletes were steered into.<sup>11</sup> These classes typically did not require attendance and only had one assignment for the entire semester—a paper. Though athletes make up only five percent of the UNC student body, these “paper courses” were disproportionately athletes, primarily football and basketball players.

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<sup>11</sup> Tracy, Marc. “NCAA: North Carolina Will Not Be Punished for Academic Scandal.” *New York Times*, Oct. 13, 2017.

A similar scandal occurred at Auburn in the mid-2000s. Sociology professor James Gundlach noticed sociology majors that he never taught receiving high grades from a professor in his department for classes that required no attendance and minimal work.<sup>12</sup> These courses were known as “directed reading” courses, and while some non-athletes did enroll, more than 25 percent of students in the courses were athletes. 18 involved athletes that were investigated averaged a 3.31 GPA in directed reading courses and a 2.14 GPA in all other classes.

Michigan and Florida State each had their own academic plans for student-athletes. Michigan utilized psychology professor John Hagen, who taught at least 294 independent studies from 2004-2007, 251 of which were with athletes (85 percent).<sup>13</sup> The classes were used to boost the GPAs of athletes in danger of academic ineligibility—no athlete ever received a grade of worse than a B- from Hagen. Florida State, on the other hand, had a variety of methods to keep athletes eligible. The university had tutors who took tests and wrote papers for students, a learning specialist who provided ways to cheat, and a teaching assistant that felt pressured to give good grades and second chances to athletes.<sup>14</sup>

These four examples are on the extreme end of the spectrum of academic misconduct, but they show a pattern of disregard for the education of student-athletes in Division 1 revenue-generating sports. While it may seem like these cases are examples of the benefits student-athletes receive, their long-term impact will be negative to the

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<sup>12</sup> Thamel, Pete. “Top Grades and No Class Time for Auburn Players.” *New York Times*, July 14, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Rogers, Justin. “University of Michigan athletes steered to professor.” *Michigan Live*, March 16, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Zinser, Lynn. “NCAA Penalizes Florida State for Academic Fraud.” *New York Times*, March 6, 2009.

majority of those who do not reach the world of professional sports.<sup>15</sup> Once this negative impact is apparent, finding the specific factors that prevent student-athletes from receiving a proper education becomes paramount.

### **Overly Demanding Athletic Schedules**

There are few, if any, students on university campuses that are busier than student-athletes. While some would argue that their busy schedules prove athletes are getting the most out of their college experience, Elodie Wendling, a doctoral student with significant research experience in college athletics, points out that the overwhelming number of obligations they have could cause stress through psychological strain.<sup>16</sup> The time constraints placed on student-athletes affect their ability to fully apply themselves to their studies.

The first step in analyzing the effects of their busy schedules is to see what an average student-athlete's schedule looks like. Myron Rolle, a former professional football player who attended Florida State, described a mid-season school day as follows:

“Playing football in a major university program is almost like a full-time job. There is very little margin for error in managing your time. Typically during the season, your day begins with either a 5:00 a.m. or 6:00 a.m. workout in the weight room or a study session at the football facilities. This is followed by getting dressed and breakfast between 7:00 and 8:00 a.m. After breakfast, most players have morning classes that can take you through the morning and up to 1:00 p.m. Lunch is normally at an on-campus restaurant or cafeteria. There may be a little down-time between lunch and the time you must be at the facilities. If you have an injury, you make every effort to get that treated during this down-

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<sup>15</sup> Zinser, *NCAA Penalizes Florida State*.

<sup>16</sup> Wendling, Elodie, Timothy B. Kellison and Michael Sagas. “A Conceptual Examination of College Athletes’ Role Conflict Through the Lens of Conservation of Resources Theory.” *Quest* (2018): 28-47.

time. Around 2:30 p.m. or 3:00 p.m., players report to their section meetings dressed. Around 4:00 p.m. players report to the field for practice that can last anywhere from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. After practice the players shower and clean-up for supper that is around 6:30 or 7:00 p.m. Depending on the situation, there may be position meetings after supper or study sessions. A player normally could leave the facility between 8:00 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. and return to his dorm or apartment where he must study his films as well as his class work. Bed time could be any-time between 11:00 p.m. and 1:00 a.m. At 5:00 or 6:00 a.m. the process repeats itself. As you can see, a significant portion of the football players day is consumed by football and at the football facility.”<sup>17</sup>

Multiple former TCU football players confirmed the truth of Rolle’s testimony when interviewed. Jeff Olson, a 2011 graduate, said it was often difficult to find time to study after practice when he had to eat and get medical treatment as well.<sup>18</sup> Blake Schlueter, a 2008 graduate, compared playing football to a full-time job and said, “From having to schedule our classes to avoid practices and games to often missing spring, winter and summer breaks, we stayed very busy.”<sup>19</sup> Patrick McDonald graduated in 2012 and emphasized the effect football had on his academic freedom.<sup>20</sup> He believes that entire majors were unavailable to student-athletes because there were not enough classes that did not conflict with sports practices.

Marcus Jackson, a 2010 TCU graduate and former football player, summarized the lack of emphasis placed on the academics of student-athletes: “Honestly, the football program prepared me for life after college more than anything else. The degree got me through the door, but I attribute the strengths that have led me to quick promotions to my sports background.” The fact that student-athletes are garnering their

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<sup>17</sup> Senate Committee Hearing: Testimony of Myron Laurent Rolle.

<sup>18</sup> Olson, Jeff. Interviewed by Nicholas P. Stephens, May 6, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Schlueter, Blake. Interviewed by Nicholas P. Stephens, May 6, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> McDonald, Patrick. Interviewed by Nicholas P. Stephens, May 6, 2018.

workplace skills from sports and not from the academic programs designed to prepare them for the workplace is notable. Yet the fact of the matter is that they spend so much time in their athletic endeavors, their academic ones take a backseat. Former North Carolina football player Devon Ramsey reported that many student-athletes who earn internships end up quitting them because they are so exhausted every day.<sup>21</sup>

This exhaustion is indicative of the role conflict that student-athletes regularly experience. Elodie Wendling's investigation of college athletics through the conservation of resources theory is perhaps the best example of this. She argues that the biggest problem with the time constraints placed on student-athletes is the stress it places on them. This stress comes from the incompatibility of the student role and the athlete role, both of which are required of college athletes. The two roles have minimal overlap—for example, student-athletes cannot do their homework and practice their sport at the same time. Wendling describes this conflict as follows:

First, a significant amount of time is required to perform both athletic and academic obligations. Second, many of these demands are not complementary, so student athletes do not have other choices than to perform these obligations at separate times, creating time constraints and causing role conflict. Thus, the conflicting demands of academic and athletic roles, such as an athletic trip conflicting with fulfilling academic requirements, can cause stress because valued resources are potentially or actually lost in the process of juggling both roles.<sup>22</sup>

When one considers the already-discussed schedules of student-athletes, it makes sense that the stress of fulfilling both roles could be problematic. While it is safe to assume that some students successfully overcome this challenge, a 2016 survey

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<sup>21</sup> Senate Committee Hearing. Testimony of Devon Jahmai Ramsey.

<sup>22</sup> Wendling, *A Conceptual Examination*.

found that nearly one-third of student-athletes reported that feeling overwhelmed by their conflicting responsibilities.<sup>23</sup> The same study found that some student-athletes reported regularly spending almost 40 hours per week on their athletic pursuits, which could certainly be classified as overwhelming. These unique demands help to explain why the college experience of college athletes is so different from that of the average student.

Dr. Richard M. Southall points out that, “Contrary to the NCAA’s posturing that they are just normal students, profit-athletes tend, in important respects, to be physically, culturally and socially isolated from the campus community.”<sup>24</sup> He follows that up by describing this community as a “tightly-controlled parallel universe.” One of the most valuable parts of the college experience is a student’s ability to learn about themselves, and Southall, director of the College Sport Research Institute in South Carolina, emphasizes that athletes are not fully afforded this privilege. Often, they are unable to get involved on campus and discover new passions or areas of interests due to their packed schedules.

The demographics of revenue-generating sports explain why this separation is particularly damaging to student-athletes. A significant portion of Division I football and men’s basketball programs are made up primarily of students of color. Research by Leticia Oseguera found, “Generally, involvement in on-campus activities and other extracurricular activities positively influenced students’ of color perceptions of campus

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<sup>23</sup> Wendling, *A Conceptual Examination*.

<sup>24</sup> Senate Committee Hearing. Testimony of Dr. Richard M. Southall.

climate experiences and subsequent academic performance.”<sup>25</sup> Conversely, if student-athletes of color do not have time to become involved on campus outside of their respective sports, their college experience and academic performance will suffer.

### **Eligibility-based Education**

The common stereotype applied to student-athletes in revenue-generating sports is that they are unintelligent and attend college solely due to their athletic ability. This creates a perception that they are somehow less deserving of their place at a certain school than the typical student. While statistics like the GSR and APR do show that student-athletes in revenue-generating sports often struggle academically, these criticisms fall short because they fail to acknowledge the circumstances surrounding this struggle.

Student-athletes often focus more heavily on athletics than on academics because they believe this gives them a better chance to be successful, as Elodie Wendling states:

“It is also not uncommon for universities to lower academic standards to facilitate the admission of student-athletes with exceptional athletic credentials. Exhibiting lower levels of academic preparation, these students may have to spend more time studying to maintain their educational progress— taking away energy for other demands. Thus, it is not uncommon for many of them to experience academic challenges and perceive college as a means to play their sports, and view college sports as a social mobility conduit to professional sport opportunities and a way out of poverty.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Oseguera, *Beyond the Black/White Binary*.

<sup>26</sup> Wendling, *A Conceptual Examination*.

A college education can be more than a conduit for future social mobility—sometimes it is an economic advantage in the present. Some student-athletes send a portion of their scholarship stipend, intended as a small amount of expendable income, home to take care of their immediate or extended family.<sup>27</sup> Their athletic excellence is the reason they receive this stipend, so it makes sense that they would put a heavier focus on their sport. Yet stereotypes of unintelligence persist because these socioeconomic factors are not common knowledge, and they contribute a cycle of identity threat for student-athletes.

Social identity threat is defined as a person or a group of people affected by what other people think about them.<sup>28</sup> In the case of student-athletes, the type of identity threat at hand is group-status threat, whereby student-athletes are negatively affected because of their perceived unintelligence. Essentially, because student-athletes constantly hear that they are unintelligent and do not deserve their scholarships, they start to believe it and their academic performance suffers as a result. Leticia Oseguera, a Penn State University professor, concurs with this notion: “Negative stereotypes have produced an identity threat for college athletes, who perform worse academically when they perceive this stereotype.”<sup>29</sup>

Oseguera’s reasoning stems from a study of 200 Division I college athletes. The study found that college athletes who felt exploited on campus had lower grade point

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<sup>27</sup> Senate Committee Hearing. Testimony of Myron Laurent Rolle.

<sup>28</sup> Naomi Ellemers, “Social Identity Theory,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica inc., Jan. 4, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Oseguera, *Beyond the Black/White Race Binary*.

averages than those who did not.<sup>30</sup> This GPA difference was worse for student-athletes in revenue-generating sports than those in non-revenue sports. These findings show that the structure and culture at institutions of higher learning play an outsized role in the college experience of student-athletes. To achieve academic success, an athlete must feel valued academically by their university.

The problem with this statement is that finding a Division I school which values its revenue-generating student-athletes academically is exceedingly difficult. Dr. Gerald Gurney emphasizes this, stating that “Rather than try to ensure a meaningful education, athletic departments employ a cadre of tutors, learning specialists and class-checkers to focus on the remedial education and retention of the most academically marginal but best athletes.”<sup>31</sup> Maintaining athletic eligibility is paramount, and universities will do whatever they can to ensure that their athletes are eligible to compete, which often comes at the expense of what is best for the athlete academically. While it is understandable that schools lower their academic admission standards because of the outstanding athletic potential of a potential student, treating them as second-rate students upon arrival endangers the quality of their education and the reputation of the university.<sup>32</sup>

Eligibility-based education for revenue-generating student-athletes becomes even more maddening when considering the low odds of becoming a professional

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<sup>30</sup> Oseguera, *Beyond the Black/White Race Binary*.

<sup>31</sup> Gurney, Gerald S. “How to (Maybe) Reduce Academic Fraud in Athletics.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2018): 1-4.

<sup>32</sup> McCormick, *Academic Clustering in Intercollegiate Athletics*.

athlete. Only 2 percent of NCAA football players and 1.3 percent of basketball players will be drafted into the NFL or NBA, respectively. This means it is far more likely that their academic work will be important to their career path than their athletic work. Even for those who do play professionally, that will not last forever—at some point, athletes are forced into retirement because their age catches up to them, and that is often an age where retiring permanently is not an option. This makes it apparent that student-athletes are developing in an environment that has a negative impact on their transition to life after sports.<sup>33</sup>

Steven Coleman, a 2009 TCU graduate, spoke to the truth of these academic concerns in an interview. He said his academic advisor focused on keeping him eligible and that he was not made aware of opportunities outside of football that could affect his future.<sup>34</sup> He also said all of TCU's academic resources for athletes were eligibility-based: "There are many resources available to student-athletes to keep them eligible. If you are below a certain GPA, there is a mandatory study hall and if you are failing a class, there are tutors who will help you. However, there is not a single career advisor or mentor for anything other than playing football." Coleman said that this affected him because it narrowed the scope of information he had, and he ultimately went with the classes that seemed best for him at the time.

Coleman's statements fall in line with the concerns that have been voiced repeatedly by critics of the current state of college athletics. There is a widespread

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<sup>33</sup> Harrison, Louis, Gary Sailes, Willy K. Rotich and Albert Y. Bimper. "Living the dream or awakening from the nightmare: race and athletic identity." *Race, Ethnicity and Education* (2011): 91-103.

<sup>34</sup> Coleman, Steven. Interviewed by Nicholas P. Stephens, November 23, 2018.

belief that college athletes are lazy and do not care about their academics, but often that belief begins with the athletic administration. Myron Rolle summed it up in his Senate testimony: “A lot of athletes would go through this academic machinery in their colleges and be spit out at the end of that machine left torn, worn and asking questions with no direction or guidance on where they should go. No purpose, no idea of their trajectory, and sometimes left with a degree in hand that didn’t behoove any of their future interests.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Academic clustering**

Academic clustering is best defined as the concentration of a significant number of members of one athletic team enrolled within a certain major.<sup>36</sup> For example, if a university had 25 percent of its football team enrolled as computer science majors, this would be an example of academic clustering. This phenomenon has become much more common in the last five to ten years and is an issue that has been widely documented in academic literature.<sup>37</sup>

It is important to mention, before beginning to examine academic clustering, that it is not inherently a bad thing. Student-athletes often come from similar backgrounds and have similar interests, which is what leads them to become so exceptional in their given sport. This is not necessarily connected with academic fraud and could just be a result of these shared interests. Problems arise, however, when the

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<sup>35</sup> Senate Committee Hearing. Testimony of Myron Laurent Rolle.

<sup>36</sup> Fountain, Jeffrey J., and Peter S. Finley. “Academic Clustering: A Longitudinal Analysis of a Division I Football Program.” *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* (2011): 24-41.

<sup>37</sup> Wendling, *A Conceptual Examination*.

reason for clustering is the guidance of advisors and not the interests of students. These situations need to be investigated further, particularly when they include a significant number of students of color.<sup>38</sup>

One of the reasons for academic clustering is the time constraints placed on student-athletes (discussed on pages 8-12). An NCAA study shows that the conflict between athletic events and academic events can, in some cases, lead to the selection of easier majors or fields of study by student-athletes.<sup>39</sup> Part of this is the number of classes that student-athletes are forced to miss, and part of it is the make-up work that results. No one wants to be forced to make up missed work, and athletic advisors can relay to students the right majors to choose to avoid having to do so.

Another important factor in academic clustering is the progress toward degree rule, also known as the 40-60-80 rule. This is a rule that requires student-athletes to have completed 40 percent of their degree plan by the beginning of their third year, 60 percent by their fourth, and 80 percent by their fifth. While the rule is useful in that it keeps students on track to graduate, it also deters them from choosing certain majors.<sup>40</sup> This is because the guidelines of the progress toward degree rule are strict enough that some majors are difficult to complete without losing one's eligibility.

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<sup>38</sup> Stripling, Jack. "Inside Auburn's Secret Effort to Advance an Athlete-Friendly Curriculum." *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2018): 1-13.

<sup>39</sup> Wendling, *A Conceptual Examination*.

<sup>40</sup> McCormick, *Academic Clustering in Intercollegiate Athletics*.

2010 TCU graduate Andy Bohlig spoke to the dangers of academic clustering and its effect on an athletic program.<sup>41</sup> Bohlig transferred to TCU to play football and said that upon arrival, he was set up with an academic advisor within the athletic department who helped him create his schedule. Unbeknownst to Bohlig, he had been declared a social work major, which he believes was a default for TCU football players at the time. Bohlig wanted to study business, but because he had been placed in the wrong major, he had to complete an extra semester to be accepted into the business school.

Speaking of the incident, Bohlig said, “I guess it was a miscommunication, but it was frustrating when I found out. It was almost assumed that football players would be assigned the easiest course curriculum without anyone asking what they were really interested in.” This is just one example of the dangers of academic clustering and the perceptions it creates about student-athletes. Peter S. Finley, associate professor of sport management at Nova Southeastern University, summed up the problem bluntly: “They are encouraged to major in eligibility.”<sup>42</sup>

The academic major of any TCU student can be viewed via the TCU email system, making it possible to evaluate the prevalence of academic clustering at the university. Below is an analysis of the 2018-19 TCU football team. It is worth noting that this information was current as of fall 2018, so any major changes or declarations from pre-major students are not included.

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<sup>41</sup> Bohlig, Andy. Interviewed by Nicholas P. Stephens, June 6, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Stripling, *Inside Auburn's Secret Effort*.

**Table 3: Distribution of College Majors for 2018-19 TCU Football Team**

(TCU E-mail System, 2018)

MAJOR	NUMBER OF STUDENTS
<b>Business</b>	17
<b>Criminal justice</b>	17
<b>Communication studies</b>	14
<b>Pre-major</b>	9
<b>Liberal arts (graduate program)</b>	6
<b>Movement science</b>	6
<b>Film, television &amp; digital media</b>	5
<b>Economics</b>	4
<b>General studies</b>	4
<b>Psychology</b>	4
<b>Social work</b>	4
<b>Sociology</b>	4
<b>Engineering</b>	3
<b>Strategic communication</b>	3
<b>Six different majors*</b>	2
<b>Six different majors**</b>	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	118

When you look at the above numbers, it becomes apparent that TCU football players are primarily clustered within three fields of study—business, criminal justice and communication studies. Those three majors are studied by 40.68 percent of the team, which is significant enough to point to a clear instance of academic clustering. The numbers become even more striking when you discount graduate students and undeclared students. Of the 103 declared undergraduate students on the TCU football roster, 48 of them are studying one of those three majors, or 46.6 percent.

Again, it is worth repeating that these numbers are not inherently bad if they represent the interests of the student-athletes. However, the concentration is large enough that it seems unlikely that is the case. Of all the majors at TCU, that nearly half of the football team each individually chose one of three would show a remarkable display of shared interests. The same is true of the six graduate students on the 2018-19 team, all of whom selected a master's degree in liberal arts. TCU has a wide array of graduate degrees available, and it is quite a coincidence that every graduate student on the team wanted to pursue the same one.

## Summary and Recommendations

There are a multitude of factors that negatively influence the university academic experience of Division I student-athletes in revenue-generating sports, not all of which were covered in this paper. Fully identifying every damaging aspect of that experience would be nearly impossible and would require research on a much larger scale. With that said, data clearly shows that student-athletes struggle more academically than other college students, and each of the three causes examined plays a large role in shaping their negative experiences.

The time constraints placed on student-athletes are severe and affect their ability to successfully complete their classwork. Preconceptions and stereotypes abound about student-athletes and their academic credentials, and their busy schedules remove any chance to prove those notions wrong. Athletic administrators play into these stereotypes by promoting eligibility-based education and discouraging student-athletes from entering more difficult fields of study. This creates a false ceiling for student-athletes, who feel their academic potential has a cap and their only chance at success is on the field or the court. The emphasis on eligibility leads to academic clustering, which hinders athletes' academic potential by removing their interests from the equation.

There are three recommendations for potential action drawn from each of the three challenges identified in the paper. The first is to create stricter rules regarding practice time and other athletic requirements for student-athletes. Minimizing the time they are required to spend on their sport creates more time for classwork, allowing

student-athletes the opportunity to improve their overall academic experience. There are NCAA rules in place regarding practice time currently (20 hours per week during the season and 8 during the offseason, with the exception of football), but they are not strict enough and coaches regularly exploit loopholes. Tightening these rules and creating stricter punishment for breaking them has the potential to minimize this exploitation.

Another important change that should be made is the separation of athletic departments and academic departments. Currently, student-athletes across the nation have their studies organized and planned through their athletic department. Advising, tutoring and more leave them isolated from the campus community and reliant upon the athletic department to determine their academic experience for them. Athletes do have different academic needs than other students, but these needs are not truly being met. If the goal is truly to improve the academic experience for student-athletes, typical college academic advisors must be educated about those needs and how to meet them. This allows athletes to utilize all the resources of the university rather than a specific academic plan focused on maintaining their athletic eligibility.

In theory, this deemphasis of athletic advising should minimize academic clustering, as student-athletes would not be pressured into the same classes and majors. However, if the problem persists, the progress toward degree rule should be reevaluated. The rule has definite benefits, but the drawback of dissuading students from certain fields of study is significant. Perhaps a compromise of some kind could be reached—the rule remains, but students are evaluated on a case-by-case basis regarding

their degree progress. This would allow for students to pursue more time-intensive majors that interest them while maintaining their athletic eligibility.

The economic importance of athletic programs to universities cannot be understated, especially at Division I institutions. Any change to academic regulations will likely come at the expense of these programs, which means there will be significant pushback. That said, universities must look to their statuses as institutions of higher learning and remember that their mission is to educate. Student-athletes are as deserving of that education as anyone and it must be ensured that their degree is no less valuable upon graduation than that of any other student. The academic challenges facing student-athletes must first be recognized and then be acted upon if universities truly consider their education a priority.

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