

Sports scholarships and academic fraud

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Abstract

American intercollegiate athletics have long been associated with academic corruption. The main enablers of academic misconduct within these institutions are the universities themselves. By violating the rules set by the National Collegiate Athletics Association, these universities display a disregard for both the academic integrity of the institutions and the best interests of their students. The present paper presents an overview of the most prevalent types of misconduct seen in intercollegiate athletics, and includes an examination of the main interests at stake as well as some recent examples. The aim of this study is to provide further insight into the academic corruption permeating collegiate athletics in the United States.

Keywords: scholarships, sports, academic integrity.

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In May 2012 the University of North Carolina (UNC) completed an internal investigation into the alleged misconduct concerning its student-athletes, athletics department and faculty. The results of this investigation uncovered academic irregularities within 54 classes provided by UNC's Department of African and Afro-American Studies, ranging from not requiring any student-teacher contact and cases of plagiarism to the falsification of signatures and grade changes. The students involved were all UNC athletes, most of whom had sports scholarships. The UNC case is far from the first case in which student-athletes play a central role in large-scale academic misconduct. Another example is the 2007 scandal in which Florida State University student-athletes and faculty members were discovered to have colluded in cheating on tests. In the light of the current interest in academic dishonesty generated by several high-profile cases concerning scientific misconduct, such as the stem cell cloning by Hwang Woo-Suk and the mass fabrication by Diederik Stapel, a further investigation into the motivations and causes of scientific misconduct is

warranted. In the aforementioned cases the misconduct centers on the university's student bodies and the staff members surrounding them. Scholarships granted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association provide the funding for these student-athletes to enroll in American universities. However, the eligibility for these scholarships is based on the academic performance of these athletes. The ensuing tension resulting from the interaction of the required academic effort, demands of athletic training, the possibility of a promising career in sports and the vested interests of not only the NCAA, but far more importantly, the prestige-hungry athletics departments and university boards, raises questions as to the role of these scholarships in academic misconduct.

The intent of this article is to illustrate to what extent these sports scholarships promote academic dishonesty in American academic institutions. The first section explains the American system of sports scholarships. The main focus there will be on the relevant parties and their respective interests – factors that are essential to understanding the motivations behind the various ways that academic fraud is committed. The second section

covers the ways in which student-athletes commit academic fraud and their reasons for doing so. The third and final section details the manner in which fraud is promoted and committed by members of the academic institutions themselves.

Diverging interests in intercollegiate athletics

In order to evaluate the academic behavior of American student-athletes one first needs to understand the complex dynamics of the world of intercollegiate athletics. First of all, the NCAA plays an essential role in intercollegiate athletics, in that it functions as the governing body of American college athletics. This association, which was originally founded in order to protect the interests of college athletes, serves as an organizing body for a wide variety of college sports and regulates recruiting, financial aid and eligibility for all its member academic institutions. Membership is open to all institutes of higher education. The NCAA provides the funding for sports scholarships to its members and, in turn, membership means that all of these institutes are subject to the legislation of the NCAA in order to remain eligible. With regard to this eligibility, the NCAA states that scholarship recipients must be enrolled as fulltime students and that they must maintain a certain minimum grade point average. In other words, for the university to maintain its ability to award scholarships and have its athletes participate in intercollegiate athletics, its student-athletes should fulfill the same requirements as regular students. Infractions of NCAA regulations can result in penalties such as the withdrawal of scholarships and bans from tournaments (Stern, 1979). As the mission of the NCAA is to ensure a level playing field for all of its members it follows that it is in the Association's highest interest to maintain and enforce its standards of both athletic and academic integrity. However, the NCAA is not the only player in the field of collegiate athletics.

The academic institutions are the second major party involved and they have their own interests. Whereas the NCAA provides the funding and drafts and enforces the regulations for the student-athletes, the universities themselves provide the infrastructure for the training and maintenance of their teams and athletes. In addition to the regular teaching staff, each member institute includes an athletic department, which has the sole purpose of seeing to the preparation and training of the student-athletes and scouting for new recruits. In addition, member institutes maintain a body of special athletic advisors, in order to help student-athletes navigate the demands of both their athletic and academic careers. These athletic departments are usually only partly dependent on a budget allocated by the institutions' main board of directors, for they are able to provide their own funding through revenue provided by (among other things) ticket sales for games and merchandise. However, the financial aspects of collegiate athletics are but one of the academic institutions' concerns. Far more important is the simple fact that collegiate athletics are a great source of pride for many universities. The prestige garnered by the performance of university's sports teams is shared amongst the board of directors, the faculty and the athletic department (Benford, 2007). Therefore it suffices to say that the interests of the academic institutions are not fully congruent with those of the NCAA given that, in the former case, ethics take a back seat to pride and competitiveness (Brand, 2006).

The third interest group is formed by the student-athletes themselves. These individuals, who have already been identified as promising athletes in high school, are scouted by the athletic departments of NCAA member universities and asked to enroll in order to compete in intercollegiate athletics (Toma & Cross, 1998). In return, the student-athlete is granted a scholarship that pays

for his or her tuition, which is provided by the NCAA. For a minority of individuals recruited in this way (and mainly in the 'marquee' sports of football and basketball in select high-profile programs), collegiate athletics can serve as a gateway to a career in professional sports. Even though this scholarship requires the athlete to perform academically, as well as athletically, the student-athletes are primarily recruited for their athletic abilities (although it should be pointed out that, in order to be eligible for a scholarship, a student has to have a minimum GPA in high school). The common assumption that this method of recruitment produces students that will not perform well academically is only partly justified, although there are cases where student-athletes were granted admission to the university even though they did not meet the usual academic standards. Even so, for many student-athletes (especially those in higher-profile sports like football and basketball), the focus will be on the athletic career more than on their academic performance, as the lure of possible stardom, the joy of playing prestigious competitive sports and the pressure from the athletic department and their peers usually relegate any academic aspirations to secondary importance (Ryan, 1989).

The American student-athlete

It is important to note in this analysis of the divergent interests at stake in collegiate athletics that it is not the academic institutions, but rather the NCAA, is the party that finds itself in the role of upholding academic integrity. In fact, it would seem that even the athletes own best interests are not taken to heart by the universities, as the drive to win prestigious tournaments appears to overshadow their duty to provide higher education.

To continue where we left off, it is interesting to examine one of the main prejudices towards student-athletes. It is a commonly held assumption that individuals recruited to play college sports tend to be poor students. The explanations

usually provided for this phenomenon range from the athletes hailing from poor socio-economic backgrounds, to athletes being less inclined to perform well academically, to the fact that the demands of the sports themselves hamper academic performance. Statistics seem to support the aforementioned assumption, painting an image of lower overall high school grades and academic grades of student-athletes compared to non-athletes (Maloney & McCormick, 1993). Graduation rates of athletes are lower on average as well, though this seems to vary, with high-end universities having lower graduating numbers compared to the general student population, and low-end universities having higher numbers of athletes pass out in relation to the general student body (Robst & Keil, 2000).. This discrepancy can be explained by the obvious poor academic fit of student-athletes at high-end universities (Ferris, Finster & Macdonald, 2004). The academic inclinations of athletes seem to mesh best with the environment provided by mediocre academic institutions. The entirety of this data appears to support the image of athletes being the least academically able students.

A relatively high incidence of cheating has also been reported among college athletes. Even though this would seem to be a natural consequence of the reported substandard academic performance of college athletes, the actual reasons for the phenomenon appear to be more complicated (Stearns, 2001). Research conducted on American college students in general does not point to poor motivation, but peer pressure as the primary explanation given for cheating (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001). The traditional methods of misconduct, such as copying papers and cheating on tests, are most apparent in student environments that generate high levels of peer pressure, and fraternities, sororities and sports teams rank highest in this regard (McCabe & Trevino, 1997).

Accordingly, especially those students who are in possession of a sports scholarship and who participate in high profile sports are immersed in an environment in which cheating is accepted and perhaps even encouraged (Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999). This peer influence, in combination with the academic disinclination of most student-athletes and the demands of the sports themselves provide a student environment that is exceedingly tolerant of academic misconduct (Carrell, Malmstrom & West, 2008). Of course, the exact reasons for and extent of cheating, or even whether cheating has occurred, varies for each individual student-athlete (Storch, Storch & Clark, 2001). Even so, while the exact causes and reasons for academic dishonesty amongst college athletes might prove hard to unravel, cheating is indeed pervasive among this subset of students at institutions of higher learning in the US (Splitt, 2007).

Cheating to win

The above-mentioned facts in themselves should not be sufficient to claim that the world of collegiate sports is rife with academic corruption. After all, administrators of the academic institutions could be expected to prevent any occurrences of academic misconduct, if for no other reason than to avoid tarnishing the name of their schools (Ridpath, 2008). Indeed, with the statistics that are readily available, there should not be any room for excuses concerning the continuing misconduct among student-athletes. Therefore, the continued occurrence of academic scandals in the world of collegiate athletics is particularly troubling.

The universities themselves play a pivotal role in the academic misconduct permeating intercollegiate athletics. As previously noted, universities stand to gain a lot in the way of prestige and prominence among their peers by the success of their sports teams. As the eligibility of their participation in college sports tournaments is dependent on the academic performance

of their student-athletes, the academic institutions have devised ways to better cope with, circumvent and sometimes outright defy the regulations set by the NCAA.

First of all, numerous measures have been taken by universities in order to keep their athletes from losing their legibility. None of these are outright cases of academic fraud, but the measures taken throughout all NCAA member institutions truly stretch the definition of academic integrity. First of all, a host of special benefits is made available solely to student-athletes. Individualized tutoring is provided to athletes who are in threat of failing classes. Additionally, guidance counselors work in conjunction with the athletic departments in order to guide struggling athletes towards courses and classes that are better suited towards their academic capabilities. Athletics advisors also take care to guide the students towards an academic lifestyle that is better suited for those that have trouble maintaining academic eligibility (Stegg, Upton, Bohn & Berkowitz, 2008). Secondly, special and non-traditional classes are specially arranged for student-athletes. Athletes are sometimes able to attend classes outside of regular hours, or are not required to attend as many classes as regular students. Thirdly, universities provide course programs with dubious and less stringent requirements, but which nonetheless fulfill NCAA requirements (while at the same time poorly preparing athletes for their post-college careers). Athletes tend to be clustered in these less-demanding course programs in numbers disproportionate to students who are not athletes. This clustering is most prevalent in social science courses (Wolverton, 2008).

This paper has thus far illustrated methods of dealing with eligibility issues that breach ethical boundaries, but that stop short of outright academic fraud. However, numerous recent cases have crossed that line. Continuing with the example of changing course requirements, the

University of North Carolina provided courses within its African and Afro-American Studies Department requiring little or no actual class time, in defiance of the rules set by the NCAA. Of all students enrolled in these classes, roughly fifty per cent consisted of athletes. In addition, investigations uncovered numerous cases of unauthorized grade changes and coerced faculty members to provide signatures to certify grades that were not fairly obtained. Furthermore, in several cases, the members of faculty and student tutors were exposed taking an even more direct approach to cheating, by actually taking the tests for the students and writing their papers. The following quote illustrates the extent to which this professorial misconduct takes place: "In the midst of March Madness last spring, a former tutor for the University of Minnesota revealed that she had written 400 papers for 20 basketball players between 1993 and 1998; four athletes were suspended, and the team was upset in the first round of the NCAA tournament." (Kleiner & Lord, 1999). It is important to note that, although the cheating might appear to be restricted to athletes and certain members of faculty, many other parties are also involved. NCAA reports show the involvement of not only professors, but also academic and athletic advisors, learning specialists and tutors. Additionally, though they are not directly involved, members of university boards of directors have also played a part in the corruption, whenever they have denied allegations of misconduct or impeded investigations into said allegations (Splitt, 2009). Such obfuscation among faculty and board members is not surprising when seen in the light of academic institutions' main interests concerning intercollegiate athletics, but it shows that the fundamental cause of this corruption can be traced back to the institutions themselves, rather than the student-athletes.

Conclusion

The world of American intercollegiate athletics seems to beg a wide variety of questions regarding their integrity and existence. Apart from the litigious concerns that arise from the quest to ensure eligibility for scholarships and enforcement of regulations, one might also question the merits of the system in relation to the academic performance and personal growth of students and even whether sports should be a part of institutions of higher learning. No attempt is being made here to suggest that the answers to these questions are all negative. In fact, no attempt has been made to answer these questions in the present paper. The objective of this article has merely been to display the various ways in which the existing system promotes academic misconduct within these institutions.

Having first examined the various interests at stake within intercollegiate athletics, it is now clear that the primary source of academic misconduct is not the student-athletes, but rather the universities themselves. Ranging from watering down academic requirements and providing additional tutoring to student-athletes, to falsification of grades and signatures and outright teacher collusion, all manner of measures are taken by the academic institutions in order to maintain their NCAA eligibility. The current system of intercollegiate athletics can therefore be said to promote corruption within the academic institutions themselves, placing the primary burden for upholding academic integrity on the National Collegiate Athletics Association.

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