Preparing Student Athletes for Life After College

Blake Newsock

Penn State University
Introduction

We live in a world where college sports have become a multi-billion-dollar industry and this industry demands a lot from student athletes. It demands their time, focus, toughness, and places pressures on them in different ways than a typical student. These demands and challenges can be very appealing to employers looking for new talent to strengthen their organization and work place. On the other hand, college campuses place stereotypes on student athletes labeling them as lazy, coddled, and entitled, which seem to be the opposite of what employers are seeking. There may be a small proportion who abuse their privileges, but the truth is, there have been great strides taken by the NCAA to promote academic progress and graduations rates for student athletes which are on the rise (Hosick, 2015). These negative stereotypes can be detrimental to one’s self-efficacy thus affecting their perceived identity, academic performance, motivation, and their views on career planning. Using campus culture and views as an example of many factors that can influence the educational experience. This paper focuses on the specialty areas within higher education; “student athletes” and intends to explain the extent of which self-efficacy plays on academic performance, self-perception and career planning. Student athletes have many attributes and qualities that are appealing to employers but according to NCAA (2016) they are failing to realize the connection between these skills and real world careers. In order to have a positive impact on a student as an academic advisor or anyone who influences students in higher education, it is critical to understand the varying needs and constraints as it pertains to each student.

Sub-Population: Student Athletes

Academic advisers wear many different hats, they must be able to work with multiple students on a day to day basis, support each person’s individual needs, and act as an advocate for
them. These are just a few examples of the many responsibilities academic advisers must uphold, and thus, an adviser’s responsibility for the student athlete is not much different as it relates to the typical duties and responsibilities one must uphold. The differences between academic advisers and specialized athletic academic advisers varies on the fact that student athletes are a sub-population with specific needs which are mostly driven by athletics. These needs vary based on the type of sport the athlete participates in, which can play a role on one’s level of motivation, perception and interest in academics and career planning. The positive note is that the NCAA has created strong initiatives to help monitor and control a student athletes academic progress. African-American male students who participate in sports graduate 12 percentage points higher than the African-American male student body (53 percent compared to 41 percent). For African-American females, the difference is 13 points (63 percent for college athletes in that demographic and 50 percent for the corresponding demographic in the student body) (Hosick, 2015). According to this information, we would infer student athletes are progressing at higher rates than the rest of the student body. But as previously stated, needs vary based on particular sport. According to Rubin (n.d.) female student athletes perform better academically than male student athletes, and male athletes, especially in the revenue sports of football and basketball, struggle academically and often come to college underprepared for college-level work (Rubin, n.d.). This is important to consider because according to Todd Kulka, the Assistant Director of Morgan Academic Support Center for Student Athlete at Penn State University, who discussed the most challenging aspect of his job was helping football players understanding the importance of their academics. These athletes at Penn State and across most of the premier revenue generating programs have the belief they are going to go professional in their sport. This belief relates to Kohlberg’s Cognitive Development Theory has
four stages. “Stage 1: go to school because you have to in order to go to the NFL. Stage 2: redshirt freshman, coach hasn’t noticed me yet, still focused on NFL. Stage 3: fifth year senior who hasn’t played but still thinks there is a chance because there may have been disagreement with coach and hope to perform well on pro day. Stage 4: academics and football is important and realize academics has more potential to provide for the next 40 years after college (Kulka, 2016).” Helping student athletes realize step four early on is critical and this is influenced through day to day interactions with coaches, advisers, staff members, teammates, and the rest of campus. It is important for coaches, administrators, and advisers to be on the same page and reinforce the importance of academics utilizing the same model, ethics, and beliefs in order to be effective. This model could include the importance of self-reflection which enables the student to make decisions based on past experiences which promotes responsibility and provide them with the resources to make an educated decision.

Self-Efficacy and Motivation

Understanding the differences regarding academic performance between sport is very important because it can enable academic advisers to devise a plan of directing athletic motivation to academic motivation and career planning. It is important to note that increasing one’s level of motivation can influence their level of performance, thus influencing their level of satisfaction. This concept relates to Bandura’s self-efficacy theory which is defined as, “An individual’s belief about his or her capability to complete a task successfully (Harper & Quaye, 2014, p. 213).” Gaston-Gayles (2005) developed a questionnaire; Student Athletes’ Motivation toward Sports and Academics (SAMSAQ) using parts of Bandura’s model, which is a scale designed to measure academic and athletic motivation. Academic motivation is influential in predicting academic performances and influences self-efficacy belief in the classroom (Harper &
Quaye, 2014, p.214). The significance of self-efficacy and the SAMSAQ is that it shows a correlation between motivation and success. If an advisor can find a way to help students connect their interests, such as athletics, and use these experiences in the academic setting, students may realize an increased sense of motivation on academics. An example would be to use a SAMSAQ or a career quiz to understand a particular student’s interests and followed by self-reflection, the student may learn how skills are associated with sport, class, or career. This example portrays the extent of which self-perception affects motivation and interest. One issue as stated before is that athletes in revenue generating sports are less motivated on academics. If an adviser can lead the student to understand talents learned in sport correlate to studies and jobs besides being an athlete, we may see even higher academic results.

**Academics and Career Involvement**

Bridging self-interests with involvement is important for academic advisers to assist student athletes with. Helping student athletes improve their level of self-efficacy is one important step because if students find they can perform academically, they may become motivated and assume there are possibilities outside of sports alone. This is where Astin’s involvement theory comes into play. Astin’s involvement theory suggests student involvement leads to student success as students become engaged with and invest energy in their environment (Outcalt, Skewes-Cox, 2002). Due to the highly structured athletic schedule paired with academic schedule, it is difficult for athletes to find the time to balance these priorities with internships and career opportunities. College sports, especially at the top tier programs with financial budgets to support year around training can be detrimental to the development and career opportunities for student athletes, thus it is not a surprise why student athletes in revenue generating sports have more motivation for sport than academics and career planning. The task
of assisting athletes with seeking internships, career fairs, balancing time constraints, and helping them understand how to search for careers is just as important of a task as academic and athletic performance. Outside sources who assist with this is career planning is the NCAA who created a program called “NCAA student-athlete” which is a foundational career that provides opportunities to develop leadership, communication, teamwork, motivation, and organizational skills. It is believed student athletes lack the understanding of correlating their skills and experiences to the workplace. This workshop helps athletes develop these skills through interaction and on campus delivery (NCAA, 2016).

Conclusion

Student athletes have many skills and experiences which are intriguing to employers looking for college graduates to saturate the job market. The issue lies within the fact that student athletes fail to understand they have skills that are attributable to the job market. The reason for this seems to be due to the particular sport they participate in which has an influence on the student level of motivation, pre-academic preparation, and we cannot ignore the impact campus culture has on self-efficacy. The type of sport such as football has much more media coverage than track and field which can bring with it a variety of opinions on campus regarding the team and particular players. It was previously discussed, increasing self-efficacy can play a role on an individual’s motivation and helping an individual get involved can lead to success. If athletes feel pressure and fear judgement on campus they may be withdrawn from the opportunities on campus to explore themselves and seek information as it pertains to studies and careers. It is very important to consider Brown et al. understanding of the significance self-efficacy plays on career planning. “Taylor and Pompa (1990) investigated the relative contributions of career decision-making self-efficacy, career salience, and locus of control as
predictors of vocational decidedness among college undergraduates and found career decision-making self-efficacy to be the only significant predictor. Research has shown that self-efficacy plays an important role in goal setting and goal commitment (Brown, Glastetter, & Shelton, 2000). This study demonstrates the importance of self-efficacy and thus an advisers’ role is very critical regarding the success of a student athlete academically and athletically.

We can conclude that athletic academic advisers perform similar functions of academic advisers who must consider each student has individual needs, interests, and goals. Understanding these factors and drivers that influence them is something applicable in and outside of sports. The difference lies within specialization and this specialization demands time differently than the general student which has been show to play a factor on academic performance. It is important for athletic advisers to not diminish athlete’s dreams of going professional in a sport but rather help them bridge their interests with academics to help increase their academic motivation to better understand the impact academics can have on life after sport.
References


