Aspirations: What Student-Athletes Want From Their College Experience

The GOALS and SCORE studies seek to identify the “added-value” that college sports participation has on NCAA student-athletes and what factors within the college athletics experience influence a positive outcome.

To that end, the first task is to explore how prospective student-athletes make their college choice and what they expect from their athletics experience upon enrolling.

Previous studies haven’t captured the academic motivations and aspirations of student-athletes, but both GOALS and SCORE asked respondents about their degree plans and the importance of education in their lives.

Graduation as a priority

While existing NCAA graduation-rate data confirm that most student-athletes are completing their degrees – and that student-athletes in general graduate at rates equal to or greater than their student-body counterparts – those data do not address student-athletes’ motivations for enrolling and if those motivations are primarily academic- or athletics-related in nature.

Data from GOALS show that most student-athletes enter college highly motivated to leave with a degree. Overall, more than 80 percent of the student-athletes in the 2005-06 GOALS study said it was very important for them to graduate with a bachelor’s degree. Another 16 percent said it was important or somewhat important.

By division, 83 percent of respondents in Divisions I and III reported that graduation is very important to them, while 78 percent of respondents in Division II felt that way.

Understanding that pursuit of an athletics career is one of the motivators for many student-athletes to enroll in college, the GOALS study examined how responses to the importance of graduation may vary among Division I student-athletes who believe it is likely they will become a professional or Olympic athlete. While those who indicated a likelihood that their athletics career would continue after college placed less importance on graduation, 79 percent still responded that graduation was very important to them. This is compared to 85 percent of those who felt it was unlikely that they would be pursuing athletics endeavors after college.

GOALS respondents also were asked how important they believed earning a bachelor’s degree was to their families and coaches. The responses regarding their families largely mirrored their responses regarding how important graduation was to them personally.

Their perception of the importance their coaches placed on their graduation, however, was considerably less. Overall, 65 percent of student-athletes believed their graduation was very important to their coaches, while another 22 percent believed it was important.

A much higher percentage of Division I female student-athletes reported that their coach emphasized graduation when compared with the men’s sports. In Division II, student-athletes participating in baseball and men’s other sports were considerably less likely to report that their graduation was important to their coaches.

College choice

The GOALS survey also asked student-athletes to identify the primary influence on their college decision from among the following seven choices:

• Academic offerings, academic reputations, etc.
• Athletics participation
• Proximity to home, family, friends
• Proximity to spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend
• Social scene at this school or have friends attending
• Expectations (of parents, teachers, community, etc.)
• Cost or financial reasons

Athletics participation and the academic offerings/reputation of the institution were by far the most popular choices, as more than 80 percent cited one or the other as their primary reason. Most student-athletes in Divisions I and II cited athletics (61 and 65 percent, respectively). While academics was the favored choice among Division III student-athletes, still 36 percent of them selected athletics participation as their main driver.

Differences were seen among sports as well. Across the three divisions, student-athletes in baseball and men’s and women’s basketball chose athletics at significantly greater rates than student-athletes in football and in the men’s and women’s other sports categories. Of particular note is the comparatively low percentage of Division I football student-athletes citing athletics as their primary reason. Fifty-nine percent of football student-athletes reported athletics as the most significant factor in choosing their institution compared with more than two-thirds of men’s and women’s basketball student-athletes and more than three-quarters of baseball student-athletes.

Also of interest are the differences in reported attitudes and behaviors between student-athletes who cite athletics as the primary driver of their college choice and those who cite academics, particularly when it comes to academic engagement and aspirations. Across divisions, student-athletes who choose their institution based on athletics:

• Feel less positive about their choice of academic major;
• Feel less positive about the efforts they have put into class; and
• Generally report lower levels of engagement on several measures, including participating in class, discussing coursework with others and engaging in the academic extras, such as an internship or completing a senior thesis.

Further, those who report basing their decision on athletics also indicated that they view themselves more as athletes than as students, and they report spending, on average, an additional five hours a week on athletics activities and six fewer hours on academics.

Not only are these student-athletes reporting they are less engaged in their academics, they also self-report lower GPAs (0.14 lower for Division I student-athletes who based their decision primarily on athletics, 0.18 lower for Division III and 0.25 lower for Division II). These findings are discussed further in Part 2 of this report (Student-Athlete Experiences).

**Aspirations for life after college**

In addition to aspirations of obtaining a bachelor’s degree, GOALS respondents were asked about their intended plans immediately after leaving school. Response options included: working, graduate school, serving in the military, devoting time to their sport, taking transition time, and homemaker.

Approximately 44 percent in Divisions II and III and 35 percent in Division I believed they would be working in a job
related to their major. Another 12 percent across divisions believed they would be working in a job unrelated to their major. Only 5 percent reported having no post-college plans; and military service, staying at home/caregiver and taking some transition time received very little endorsement.

Overall, about 27 percent believed they would be attending graduate school in that first year. However, the overall percentage of student-athletes who indicated that they intend to pursue a graduate or professional degree at some point in their future is much higher. When asked how likely it is that they will obtain an advanced degree, 41 percent responded very likely and another 24 percent responded somewhat likely. Division III student-athletes reported this in higher numbers than either Divisions I or II, and consistent with national trends, females were much more likely to report a strong probability of attending graduate school than males (52 vs. 33 percent overall).

Wanting to go pro

The NCAA has long been concerned about inflated aspirations from young people who believe their likelihood of “going pro” is much higher than it actually is. Chances of NCAA athletes playing professionally are highest in baseball, but even that is only about 10 percent. The likelihood of it happening in football and men’s and women’s basketball is just a little over 1 percent.

That hasn’t stopped prospective student-athletes from dreaming big. Among responses from all the student-athletes in the GOALS study, about 10 percent reported they would be devoting themselves to their sport during their first year out of college. And, many student-athletes believe it’s possible they will continue their athletics careers at the professional level after college. There were, however, significant divisional differences. A higher percentage of Divisions I and II student-athletes (35 percent and 28 percent, respectively) thought it was at least somewhat likely they would become a professional or Olympic athlete, while only 9 percent of Division III student-athletes thought so.

The SCORE study on former student-athletes showed a similar percentage (35 percent) of former Division I student-athletes who had believed upon entering college that they would become a professional or Olympian in their sport. At the time of survey administration, though, only 2 percent of former Division I student-athletes reported they were indeed a professional athlete. (However, that doesn’t take into account former professional and Olympic athletes who may no longer have been competing at age 30.)

There were some noteworthy differences by sport in the GOALS study as well. Among Division I student-athletes, for instance, almost two thirds of men’s basketball players and 55 percent of baseball players reported they believe it is at least somewhat likely that they will become professional or Olympic athletes. In Division I football, 46 percent believe that a career in sports is at least somewhat likely. Among Division I males in other sports, more than one-third felt they might be able to pursue athletics dreams after college, and 39 percent of female basketball players felt that this was at least somewhat likely.

In Division II, 46 percent of men’s basketball student-athletes believed that they were at least somewhat likely to have a professional or Olympic opportunity. Football and baseball players were slightly less likely to believe this was possible (39 percent).

The Division III group with the highest expectations of professional or Olympic athletics participation was baseball players, 18 percent of whom felt the possibility was at least somewhat likely.