How Athletics Affects Choice of Curriculum

When it comes to discussions regarding athletics’ impact on academics, perhaps nothing generates more conversation than student-athletes’ choice of major.

Colleges and universities offer vast academic menus to their students, and they offer dozens of extracurricular activities as well. From the institution’s perspective, the goal is for the student to participate fully in that menu in order to develop the contributing leader/citizen the college experience aims to produce. But the institution doesn’t (and shouldn’t) dictate how the student engages in that experience.

It stands to reason that a student who attends a Division I institution with athletics as his or her primary focus will spend more time in that pursuit and perhaps be limited in how he or she participates in other activities the college has to offer. In that instance, the student may have to make various sacrifices to achieve his or her primary goal. Even so, from the NCAA’s perspective, students having to sacrifice academic pursuits for athletics participation is not an intended outcome. The obvious goal is structuring athletics participation so that the student has a balanced educational experience (with athletics as a contributing factor).

Using GOALS and SCORE to examine the “choice of major” concern can inform the discussion on whether the time demands of athletics participation at various competitive levels and in different sports overly restrict student-athletes in being able to broadly experience all college life has to offer.

No more so than in Division I has the “choice of major” issue been scrutinized. Academic reforms in that division over time have placed a premium on student-athlete eligibility and retention (via the Academic Progress Rate), and ramped up the progress-toward-degree path by requiring student-athletes to complete 40 percent of their degree requirements by the end of their second year (the previous rule required only 25 percent to be completed by that time). That has heightened the choice-of-major conversation, since student-athletes are having to choose an academic path more quickly than in the past, and they are more dramatically (and negatively) affected if they decide to change that path in mid-stream.

The GOALS and SCORE studies help by examining not only what the student-athletes are choosing to study but also what influenced their choices and how they feel about their selection of majors.

When it comes to choice of major, overall responses (all three divisions combined) in GOALS showed the top two majors were business (27 percent) and social sciences (13 percent).

Gender differences among the student-athletes mirror what is generally seen in larger student populations. To better understand the differences between student-athletes and non-athletes, the data for the former student-athletes were checked against the national Monitoring the Future (MTF) sample and disaggregated by gender. Male respondents in the SCORE study were more likely to be business or social science majors, which corresponds generally with the male population in MTF. Male respondents in SCORE and MTF were equally likely to have majored in education, and the male former athletes were 5 percent less likely to have majored in the physical sciences, math or engineering (excluding those athletes who were exercise science/kinesiology majors).

Among females, student-athletes were more likely to choose the social sciences but were much less likely to major in education than the females in the general student body.

Whether these choices were made from aptitudes and interests or from some direct effect of the student-athlete experience cannot directly be judged from these data. Observed differences in selection of major between student-athletes and non-athletes also could be related to other factors on which the student-athlete population differs from the student body, such as ethnicity proportions, family socioeconomic status, percent of first generation college students, etc.

In addition to athletics participation affecting academic outcomes, student-athletes report that it also affects academic choices, including choice of major and coursework. Overall, 16 percent of respondents in the GOALS study said athletics participation in general affected their choice of major.

While most respondents across the three divisions disagree that athletics affected their major decision, Division I student-athletes were most likely to report that it did. And by sport, that response was more likely from men’s and women’s basketball and football players.
Ten percent of Division I student-athletes also reported that a coach did discourage a specific major, compared to 6 and 3 percent, respectively, of Divisions II and III student-athletes. (It is not known, though, whether these respondents heeded the coach’s advice.)

In terms of attitudes toward their choice of majors, the current and former student-athlete groups both were very positive. More than 90 percent of the current student-athletes across the three divisions reported positive feelings about their choice of academic major – less than 5 percent in fact felt negatively about it. Similarly, among the former student-athletes, 89 percent reported positive feelings regarding their eventual choice of academic major.

A key component in the “choice of major” debate is whether student-athletes choose less-rigorous academic paths to better ensure athletics eligibility. However, when GOALS asked the current student-athletes in 2005-06 about their primary reason for choosing their majors, fewer than 4 percent gave ease of major as the reason. The most frequently cited reasons for choosing a major in fact were preparation for a career (47 percent) and personal interest (40 percent). The other possible option was preparation for graduate school (9 percent).

Also of interest here is the significant relationship by statistical standards between the cited reason for choosing a major and feelings regarding that choice. Those who indicated choosing their field of study primarily to prepare for a career or graduate school reported more positive feelings about their choice than those who based the decision on the perceived ease of the major or because of personal interest.

The most pronounced difference was among those student-athletes who indicated that they chose their major primarily because of its perceived ease. Only 63 percent of this group reported positive feelings about their major, while more than 90 percent reported positive feelings if they made this decision for any other reason.
The choice-of-major discussion shows that athletes have to ask themselves whether the athletics scholarship and the subsequent benefit of participation in sports are worth not having the full array of academic choices. According to the GOALS data, most say it is.

That answer affirms that the 40-60-80 progression of academic requirements is not as much of a deterrent to choice of major as some people suspected when the new standards were adopted with the entering class of 2003.

In particular, opponents at the time were concerned that requiring athletes to have completed 40 percent of their degree requirements before their third year was too much to ask. While the escalated progression might cause athletes to choose a major more quickly, it has not tainted academic success.

The new rules were not intended to restrict the choice of a major, or to force the major choice too rapidly. On the contrary, they were based specifically on requiring athletes to pattern their academic choices on the existing academic profile of most college graduates at the time, 95 percent of which would have met the new standards had they been in place.

Percent Reporting Athletics Participation Affected Choice of Major by Sport Group

Percent Reporting Athletics Participation Affected Choice of Major by Division