Experiences: What Student-Athletes Discovered Once They Enrolled

With data in hand on prospective student-athletes’ college aspirations, including their emphasis on graduation as a priority, and their college choices based in large part on schools’ athletics and academic offerings, the GOALS and SCORE studies also shed light on how well student-athletes’ actual experiences lived up to those pre-college desires.

This section of the report focuses on how well student-athletes balanced their athletics and academic demands, and whether their athletics participation helped or hindered their academic goals.

Academic engagement

Both the GOALS and SCORE studies probed student-athletes’ thoughts on their “academic engagement.” As defined in previous studies on college experiences conducted both by the NCAA and other organizations, “engagement” means active participation, not simply motivation. In that vein, the studies included questions used in other national surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and studies from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA (for example, Your First College Year and the College Senior Survey, which have explored student academic engagement, including student-athletes), in order to maintain a consistent and comparable response base.

GOALS study respondents (current student-athletes in 2005-06) were asked about the likelihood that they would engage in various academic activities, such as independent research with faculty, internships and completing a senior thesis. They also were asked how frequently they participate actively in class, how prepared they were when they came to class, and whether they were willing to discuss issues and ideas from class with faculty and other students afterward. SCORE respondents (former Division I student-athletes) also were asked to reflect upon their undergraduate experience and their level of engagement, including student-athletes, in order to maintain a consistent and comparable response base.

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Both studies indicate that despite the time demands resulting from their athletics participation, student-athletes are making a concerted effort to be actively engaged in the academic experience.

In the GOALS study, respondents reported a high level of engagement within the classroom, with more than 70 percent saying that they always or often participated actively in class. GOALS student-athletes also generally came to class prepared, as 87 percent said they rarely or never came to class without completed written assignments.

Percent Reporting Involvement or Interest in Completing a Senior Thesis

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<th>Division I</th>
<th>Division II</th>
<th>Division III</th>
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<tr>
<td>Current or Future Involvement</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Time</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Interest</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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Equally engaged?

While data on the levels of academic engagement of student-athletes compared to a non-athlete population are limited, they do reveal similar engagement between both cohorts. Using National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data as the comparison, for example, GOALS results showed student-athletes reporting greater levels of conducting independent research with faculty and participating in class discussions, and slightly lower levels of participating in a culminating senior project or an internship. Data from Your First College Year (YFCY) shows that student-athletes and non-athletes at NCAA institutions are participating actively in class at similar rates.

Not surprisingly, the data indicate that while student-athletes report being engaged in their academic careers, the type and level of engagement varies by division, sport and gender. For example, the GOALS study showed that student-athletes competing in Division III were more likely to report engagement in the out-of-classroom activities, such as independent research with a faculty member, senior thesis and internship or practicum.

And differences in the level of engagement are related to the factors affecting college choice. Those who choose their institution primarily for academic reasons are more likely to report higher levels of engagement than those who choose their institution primarily for athletics.

The data also suggest that the difference in the rate of participation between student-athletes in Division III compared to those in Divisions I and II is due not only to a lack of time but also to a lack of interest. Per the table below, more Division I and II student-athletes reported choosing not to complete a senior thesis because of a lack of interest as opposed to just not having the available time to do so.
In addition to traditional classroom activities, more than 40 percent of the GOALS respondents reported that they either already had participated or planned to participate in collaborative research with a faculty member. More than three-fourths said they would complete an internship or practicum experience, and almost half said they would complete a senior thesis. This level of engagement was reflected in their perceptions of their efforts as well. When asked how they felt about the efforts they put forth in their classes, 57 percent responded feeling very positive or positive about it, and another 28 percent said they felt somewhat positive.

SCORE respondents also thought highly of their academic engagement. More than 50 percent of the former Division I student-athletes responding felt very positive or positive, and another 30 percent felt somewhat positive. These results are telling, since a student’s perceived effort in class is known to be an important predictor of academic success. (The results also lend credence to the fact that student-athletes, in general, graduate at rates higher than those of their student-body counterparts.)

The balancing act

Another telling component of the GOALS and SCORE studies is the surveys’ probe into whether the college experience was befitting of the term “student-athlete.” The NCAA was quite intentional in establishing that term in the 1960s as a cornerstone of the NCAA’s mission to treat athletics participation as “an integral part” of the college experience. Since then, that balancing act has become part and parcel of the Association’s work. Even in some past branding efforts, Division II has purported a “Life in the Balance” mantra for its student-athletes, while Division III advocates a similar “proportioned” approach that emphasizes a well-rounded experience for athletes who also want to excel in the classroom and in other activities the college has to offer.

The GOALS and SCORE studies put it directly to the student-athletes: During their college experience, did they identify themselves more as athletes than as students? And how did that affect their satisfaction with the experience? Their answers are important, since data show that the way in which student-athletes perceive themselves has far-reaching implications for many aspects of their lives outside of athletics, including the level of engagement in their academic careers. But the increasing popularity of college sports brings some cache for the participants, too – there’s a lot of pride in saying “I’m a college athlete,” particularly when the student is on an athletics scholarship.

There’s also the issue of the time athletics demands from its participants, particularly at the Division I level. Many student-athletes are spending as much or more time on their sport as they are on academics or other activities the college offers. In fact, the GOALS and SCORE studies show that when student-athletes are asked what they’d do if they had more discretionary time, many said they’d devote it to athletics.

Given all of that, it is not surprising that 69 percent of Division I and II and even 53 percent of Division III respondents in the GOALS study (current student-athletes in 2005-06) said they perceive themselves more as athletes than as students. The athlete identifier was also more prevalent among males, particularly baseball players. It is important to note that in subsequent iterations of the survey, the question was worded differently to allow student-athletes to indicate how strongly they identify as athletes and as students. Findings from the 2010 study (which can be seen in greater detail here) show that student-athletes really have a dual identity – both as students and as athletes.

As noted earlier, the two studies indicate that a high percentage of student-athletes in all three divisions are committed to their academic work and hold graduation as the ultimate priority. But because self-perception has such
a significant relationship with the students’ level of academic engagement, it’s interesting to dig deeper into how students who see themselves more as athletes are affected.

Again, while the data show that all student-athletes are actively engaged in their academics, those who identify more as an athlete report lower levels of academic engagement on all measures studied and across the three divisions. That includes participating in an internship, discussing coursework with professors and other students, and completing written assignments on time. For example, 83 percent of those who identify more as an athlete report completing written assignments on time compared to 94 percent of student-athletes who identify more as a student. Granted, 83 percent is quite high, but the statistical difference is significant.

Student-athletes who identify more as athletes also report, on average, spending five additional hours each week on athletics and four fewer hours on academics, as well as missing almost one-half class more per week than those who identify more as students.

They also self-report a lower GPA and acknowledge that they are not putting forth as much effort into their coursework as they perhaps are able. When asked how positively they felt about the effort they put forth in their classes, 70 percent of GOALS respondents who identify more as students reported they felt very positive or positive compared to 50 percent of those who identify more as athletes. This shows in the percentage of those who report they are confident in their abilities to succeed academically. Seventy-nine percent of student-athletes who identify more as a student indicated that they are very positive or positive about their abilities to succeed academically versus 61 percent of those who identify more as an athlete.

The SCORE study (former student-athletes) revealed similar differences in levels of academic engagement as a function of self-perception. Former student-athletes in Division I who reported identifying more as a student while in college consistently reported greater levels of engagement on all measures. For example, 91 percent of them reported participating actively in class at least some of the time as compared to 79 percent of those who identified more as an athlete.

Similar to the current student-athletes, these greater levels of engagement were reflected in how the former student-athletes reported feeling about their efforts in class, as well as how positively they felt about the overall education they received. While less than half (41 percent) of former Division I student-athletes who identified more as an athlete said they felt very positive or positive about their efforts in classes, 65 percent of those who identified more as a student felt very positive or positive. Although most respondents in both groups reported very positive or positive feelings about their overall education, those who identified more as a student reported greater levels of positive feelings (84 percent) than those who identified more as an athlete (65 percent).

Using a subset of student-athletes for whom in-college academic records existed, in addition to their survey data, differences also were seen in reported academic attainment. Former student-athletes who identified more as a student while in college achieved a greater final GPA and had earned, on average, 10 additional credits. They also were less likely to transfer and were more likely to have earned a postgraduate degree or be currently enrolled in a graduate program.

Both studies asked respondents what effect they believe their athletics participation had on their academic performance, as well as their academic choices. Seventy percent of the GOALS respondents said their grades were affected by their athletics participation, but not all thought that effect was negative. Just over half (52 percent) believe their GPA would have been higher had they not been a student-athlete, while 18 percent thought it actually would have been lower.

In the SCORE study, more respondents (40 percent) said their GPA was unaffected by athletics, and a similar proportion to the GOALS respondents (19 percent) felt their GPA was positively affected.

Importantly, though, 53 percent of the former Division I student-athletes reported that their athletics participation caused them to spend

“During college I was never the most talented on my team, but I would attempt to make up for my lack of talent with spending many extra hours training and working harder than my teammates. This taught me perseverance and that an individual can gain a multitude of skills (leadership, emotional, etc.) through these types of activities. I learned a great deal in these years that have helped me achieve many goals.”

- Former Division I wrestler

“My participation in Division I athletics for four years was key to my academic and career success as well as learning time-management skills. During my fifth year of college (not swimming), my GPA actually declined due to not having to manage my study time around the 20-hour-per-week athletics schedule.

-Former Division I women’s swimmer
less time on their academic work than they wanted. Not surprisingly, there is a significant relationship between feeling athletics commitments cut into time spent on academics and perceptions that athletics participation affected a student-athlete’s GPA. Most of those who reported that athletics did not affect their time spent on academics also reported that their GPA was unaffected by athletics participation.

In regard to academic choices, a group of respondents in both studies (about one-third in GOALS and a little more than half in SCORE) reported that athletics participation prevented them from taking courses they wanted. In a separate question, student-athletes in GOALS were asked specifically if a coach had discouraged them from taking a certain class. Overall, 22 percent said that it had happened *once or twice* while 3 percent reported it happened *often*.

In light of the various academic sacrifices student-athletes report they make directly because of their athletics participation, it may not be surprising that almost two-thirds (64 percent) say they would be willing to sacrifice their athletics participation for academics – if forced to make such a decision.

By sport, football student-athletes in all three divisions were most likely to report their willingness to sacrifice athletics. This is an interesting finding and one that likely deserves more attention. It could be due to football student-athletes having among the greatest pressure on their time when compared with the other sport groups – both academically and athletically. The combined stress on time could be contributing to their willingness to sacrifice one of the activities.

Baseball student-athletes, across division, were least likely to indicate they would sacrifice athletics for academics if they had to choose one activity over the other. Interestingly, they report among the greatest time spent on their sport but among the lowest on academics across division. In the time they choose to devote to each activity, they are making their priorities known, so it is not surprising that they would be least likely to indicate a willingness to sacrifice their sport for academics.

**Social balance**

As indicated earlier, the balancing act isn’t between just athletics and academics, but offering student-athletes the chance to participate fully in all the college has to offer. While a great deal of time and energy is focused on academic and athletics activities, student-athletes still are part of a greater whole, including the campus and the community in which their institution resides.

The GOALS survey asked the current student-athletes in 2005-06 about their level of involvement with these communities. The study first probed how much time student-athletes were spending away from the campus during the season because of athletics. On average, student-athletes reported spending 1.6 days away (including weekends). Female student-athletes and baseball student-athletes reported the greatest time away at almost two days (1.8) per week on average. In spite of the time away from campus, though, more than 80 percent of GOALS respondents said their athletics participation benefited them socially.

The GOALS study also sheds light on how student-athletes would prefer to spend their discretionary time. While there are very few things student-athletes wish they could spend less time on; there are a few for which they feel they could use more time.

The areas student-athletes report really needing more time are academics and general “down time,” including socializing, relaxing and sleeping. In general, female student-athletes were more likely to want more time on academics when compared with their male counterparts. Football and men’s and women’s basketball players were more
likely than the other groups to want more time with family. Divisionally, Divisions I and II student-athletes were more likely than Division III to want more time for coursework, while Divisions II and III student-athletes were significantly more likely to report wanting more time for a job.