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# ACADEMIC CLUSTERING IN ATHLETICS: MYTH OR REALITY?

by

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A recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education contained the following statement pertaining to the Len Bias case at the University of Maryland:

That the 'general studies' major appeared to be less rigorous than others and was abused by athletes. Forty percent of athletes in men's basketball and football were enrolled in general studies, compared with four percent of all students (Farrell & Monaghan, 1986, p. 48).

The above paragraph describes the phenomenon of clustering. In other words, it is the grouping or clustering of a disproportionate percentage of athletes into selected majors when compared to the overall university percentage in the same major.

Although the authors of this paper coached and participated in athletics at the collegiate level, we were not fully aware that clustering existed. We were certainly aware of the problems associated with athletics such as recruiting violations, inadequate funding, gender discrimination, eligibility requirements, etc. Clustering, however, was not clearly noticeable to us as players or coaches.

One of the authors was first introduced to the phenomenon of clustering approximately two years ago. He was invited to the campus of a major research university to interview for an academic teaching position in a newly created departmental major. After arriving on campus he was taken directly to the Athletic Department to meet the coaches and tour the athletic facilities. His immediate response was to ask why he was meeting all these individuals and not other faculty and administrators in the academic area for which he was being interviewed. He was told that if hired he would be teaching in a major that was established to house selected athletes. He was appalled by this response.

When he asked how administrators at the university could justify this, he was then told that a primary reason for

establishing this major was in response to a directive from the President of the University who felt that certain athletes were being exploited as reflected in poor graduation rates. Evidently the President felt that an academic major designed specifically for selected athletes would give them a better chance of graduating from college and perhaps enable them to become more productive citizens.

The author then decided to examine varsity athletic teams at schools with which he was familiar. He discovered that one major university in the South, for example, had 12 out of 15 basketball players in the same major. The varsity football team at the same school had over 40 percent of its athletes in the same major, whereas less than one percent of the rest of the student body majored in the subject area.

### THE PROBLEM

A review of the literature related to athletic participation and academic achievement reveals that it has been a topic of special interest to sport researchers for a number of decades. Cooper and Davis (1934), for example, reported that eight studies conducted between 1915 and 1934 found no significant differences between the academic performance of college athletes and nonathletes.

Savage (1927), however, stated as part of the Report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that small differences do exist in the academic performance of athletes and nonathletes. Griffith (1930) reported similar findings in his study of 400 college athletes and 666 nonathletes. In a related study, Purdom (1931) discovered that the grade point averages of varsity athletes are indeed similar to the averages of other college students. Additional studies by Tuttle and Beebee (1941), Summers (1945), and Belk (1955) offered corroborating evidence that athletes and non-athletes are similar in terms of academic attainment.

In summarizing the many studies completed during the first six decades of this century, Shaw and Cordts (1960) concluded:

A survey of the literature on the relationship of athletic participation to academic performance yields conflicting and inconclusive results. There are just about as many authors who conclude that athletes are academically superior to nonathletes, as there are who believe there is no difference, or that nonathletes are superior (p. 620).

Although a number of studies dealing with academics and athletics have been completed during the past twenty five years (e.g., Stecklein & Dameron, 1965; Webb, 1968; Pilapil, Stecklein & Liu, 1970; Stier, 1971; Billick, 1973; Larson, 1973; Nixon,

1976; Harrison, 1976; Harris, 1980; Purdy & Eitzen, 1981; Eitzen & Purdy, 1986), no studies examined the phenomenon of clustering directly and only two studies referred to it indirectly.

The first study that indirectly referred to the phenomenon of clustering was completed by Purdy et al. (1982). They reported that 17.5 percent of the athletes at a major western university were enrolled in professional studies compared to only 6.3 percent for the general student population. Data for this study were collected from more than 2,000 athletes over a ten year period. In the second study, Raney et al. (1986) examined the transcripts of athletes over a three year period at a western university. They found that one department accounted for over a third of the credits taken by athletes who participated in three major sports. They noted that if athletes were deprived of these credits "most of the basketball players and some of the football players would likely be ineligible to play or to remain enrolled as students" (p. 59).

#### METHODOLOGY

In an effort to examine the possible phenomenon of clustering, the authors conducted a survey study. Press guides for men's and women's varsity basketball teams (1985 to 1986 school year) were requested from 103 colleges that were randomly selected from all NCAA Division I basketball teams. Clustering was operationally defined as occurring when 25 percent of the players on a team (usually three or more players on a twelve person team) were located in the same academic major.

In addition, a follow-up questionnaire was sent to the Departmental Chairperson where the clustering effects appeared. Information was requested pertaining to the total number of male and female students enrolled in the clustered major. Male and female enrollment figures for the entire university were also requested.

#### RESULTS

A total of 77 (75%) men's and 53 (51%) women's press guides were received. Of the original 77 men's teams who responded, 55 (71%) reflected evidence of clustering. A total of 27 (51%) of the 53 women's teams exhibited clustering as well. Some teams had as many as 12 players clustered in the same major.

A total of 28 out of 55 (51%) of the follow-up questionnaires were returned for the men's teams and 20 out of 27 (74%) were returned for the women's teams. Comparisons were made between the percentage of players (male or female) in the clustered major and the percentage of students (male or female) in the departmental major throughout the university. Z scores were then computed and revealed that 68 percent (19 of the 28) of the men's team respondents had scores that were significant at

the .05 level. Furthermore, 75 percent (15 out of the 20) of the women's teams had scores significant at the .05 level.

When looking at clustering with regard to race, it appears that the clustering phenomenon is greater for blacks. For example, 39 of 55 (71%) of the clustered men's teams were composed of 50 percent or more black athletes. Only seven of 27 (26%) of the women's clustered teams included a majority of black athletes.

"Big time" schools showed different clustering effects as well. When comparing the average Z scores of "big time" men's schools (i.e., finished in top 20 ratings at least once during past three years), some interesting data were discovered. The mean Z score for the "big time" schools (N=12) was 6.9 and the mean Z score for the other schools (N=16) was 2.9. It may be that the greater emphasis placed on winning and program expenditures, the more pronounced clustering becomes.

In addition, results from this study suggest that clustering is also more pronounced at highly regarded "elite" academic institutions. Unlike the clustering at "big time" institutions, this clustering may be the result of academic isolation from the rest of the student body. It is at these institutions that the development of special majors is more likely to be found and academic clustering may turn into academic dumping. The average Z scores for these academically elite schools was 8.82 (N=7) compared to 6.9 for the "big time" schools and 2.9 for the other colleges.

The data also show that clustering is not limited to one or two majors. Although physical education has often been accused of housing unusually high numbers of athletes, data from this study reveals that only five percent of the men's teams which exhibited clustering were in the major of physical education. One clear finding, however, is that clustering does not occur in the sciences (e.g., biology, chemistry, mathematics, ...).

In summary, the data collected in this study suggest that clustering is a phenomenon affecting collegiate Division I basketball programs. Clustering is evidenced more among males than females, more among black athletes than white athletes, and more among "big time" and academically elite schools. Clustering also appears to be well distributed among non-science majors, with no single major dominating in the number of recurring clusters.

## DISCUSSION

### Causes

In reference to how clustering might take shape, we would like to make the following observations. First, in its worst

form, it appears that clustering is part and parcel of the "big time" athletic system that now exists in some NCAA Division I schools. In other words, it is imperative that coaches recruit and retain top athletes in order to compete at a high competitive level. The school's investment in each athlete in terms of time (e.g., recruiting time) and money (e.g., scholarships) is significant. Likewise, the time demands placed on athletes are enormous. In an effort to maintain eligibility, these athletes are placed (both overtly and covertly) into selected courses, programs, or majors to maintain eligibility. Athletes themselves may gravitate to selected majors because they view the majors as being compatible with their time demands, eligibility needs, etc. Unfortunately, it is not clear where career goals fall within this hierarchy.

The phenomenon of clustering is perhaps best compared to the phenomenon of centrality. In the 1970s, sport sociologists conducted studies (e.g., Loy & McElvogue, 1970; Dougherty, 1976) which revealed that black athletes can be found in non-central playing positions primarily in football and baseball. The exact causes of this phenomenon were difficult to determine. Some suggested that it was because of discrimination on the part of coaches who placed black athletes into non-central playing positions primarily because of racist attitudes and/or existing stereotypes. Other researchers argued that black athletes "placed" themselves into non-central playing positions primarily because role models already existed in these positions. The same difficulty in pinpointing exact causes may be true for the phenomenon of clustering.

Some individuals who may be skeptical as to whether clustering exists or not might suggest that the Maryland incident (Farrell & Monaghan, 1986) and Jan Kemp case (Sack, 1986) are anomalies and clearly exceptions to the norm. Up until two years ago, the authors would have agreed. Obviously, our views have changed since then.

The Jan Kemp case certainly personifies some of the dilemmas that face academic advisors for athletes. Their role in academic clustering in its worst form could be significant. Let us relate a conversation that one author had with a friend who is the Director for Athletic Academic Advisement at a major university. During the conversation, this individual described in detail the avoidance systems used by some academic advisors in keeping athletes eligible. Every possibility that was presented to him concerning athlete eligibility and normal progress toward a degree could be handled in his elaborate avoidance system.

According to him, he was hired by the athletic director and keeping his job was based on his success in keeping athletes eligible. Although he would like to see athletes graduate, his first priority was to keep them eligible.

When asked if clustering does take place, he stated that it is a necessity in big time athletics. Students are placed by some advisors into courses and majors that allow them to maintain eligibility. He noted that recent legislation instituted by the NCAA will not eliminate clustering. Instead, it will foster another form of clustering whereby athletes will be placed in general studies programs.

In its best form, it is likely that nationally recognized academic majors offered at selected universities attract athletes and, thus, a form of clustering develops. Also, it may be that highly skilled athletes are attracted to careers in sport related professions and thereby choose specialized career paths (e.g., coaching).

### Solutions

Immediate solutions to the clustering phenomenon are not readily apparent, but long term solutions may be possible. First, it appears that institutions should be prepared to transfer advisement of athletes out of the Athletic Department's control if necessary. The University of Maryland and the University of Georgia found that such changes were needed. Second, universities as well as the NCAA need to monitor clustering effects more closely. When a basketball program in this study exhibited 12 out of 12 players in the same major, something is obviously "out of kilter." Perhaps an individualized education program approach (similar to the individualized education programs used with special populations in the public schools as a result of Public Law 94-142) needs to be established for each student-athlete and placed on file with the NCAA as well as the Dean for Academic Affairs at the institution. When the athlete deviates from this plan, the Dean's office should be notified and appropriate action taken. Such individualized education programs might include career goals, course work needed to achieve career goals, remedial work required, etc. (Hagerty & Howard, 1978). It is obvious that the colleges, as well as the NCAA, must assume a more aggressive role in this area.

Along with the previous recommendation, legislation controlling the amount of athlete participation time is urgently needed. Although it is difficult to estimate the exact number of hours athletes commit to athletic endeavors, it appears to be quite significant. Combine this with a normal class load of 12-15 credit hours with homework time added on to this and the athlete has a considerable amount of occupied time.

In addition, one must take into consideration the fact that many college teams have "off season" conditioning programs that last for several months. Some conditioning programs have even extended into the summer months with the attendance of selected athletes required. Once again, the NCAA needs to intervene and

set seasonal limitations so that more hours are available for academic pursuits. The University of Maryland initiated similar steps after the Len Bias incident when administrators decided to delay the start of their basketball season by one month.

It has been suggested that athletic scholarships be tied to graduation rates of athletes within the institution. Unfortunately, it is likely that such a plan will foster additional clustering and lead to further abuses. Although more athletes may graduate, it is probably that selected majors will be identified for clustering with extreme pressures placed on professors who teach in such majors.

Proposition 48 is definitely a step in the right direction. However, continued strong legislation and enforcement techniques are needed to preserve all that is good in intercollegiate athletics. Despite all its attendant problems, the authors are strong advocates of the "athletic ideal." Like Michael Novak (1976), the authors believe that intercollegiate athletics belongs to the Kingdom of Ends and not the Kingdom of Means. Unfortunately, the "ideal" has sometimes been prostituted and used as a means to selfish ends (e.g., academic clustering to maintain eligibility).

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