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INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETICS

High School Academics: Increasing the Standard

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Abstract

Beyond heightened academic requirements, student athletes face a multitude of tasks including weight training, practice, film review, and travel for competition. This makes the student's life complex. As student athletes progress through their educational experience, they experience higher structured time demands in regard to their sport participation, this being very true for college freshman. "Many studies over the past ten years have documented the disconnect between what high school teachers teach and what postsecondary instructors expect with regard to students' preparation for first-year credit-bearing courses in college" (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013, p. 119). As a result, states have adopted the Common Core in an attempt to level the educational field and prepare students for college rigor and their chosen career field. Meanwhile, the NCAA has also increased its initial eligibility rules to ensure incoming student athletes are ready for college rigor and athletic participation. However, the state and NCAA academic requirements have increased at different rates. As a result, student athletes are potentially unprepared for the academic rigors and challenges of college. In this study, I compared all 50 state course completion requirements to the 2014 NCAA initial eligibility standards. The results of this study show the specific qualitative differences in the interscholastic and intercollegiate academic requirements. Based on these differences, I provide recommendations of how interscholastic policy makers can adjust their academic requirements to align them better to those at the intercollegiate level.

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The challenges faced by student athletes are a growing concern in today's society. Beyond heightened academic requirements, student athletes face a multitude of tasks including weight training, practice, film review, and travel for competition. This makes the student's life complex. According to Watt and Moore (2003), student athletes are constantly balancing their academic and athletic roles to satisfy their obligations to parents, guardians, coaches, and teammates. Further, Jolly (2008) indicated that as student athletes progress through their educational experience, they also experience higher structured time demands in regard to their sport participation, this being very true for college freshman.

As a result, states have adopted the Common Core in an attempt to level the educational field, to prepare students for college rigor, and to prepare them for their chosen career field (CCSSI, 2010). Meanwhile, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has also increased its initial eligibility rules to ensure incoming student athletes are ready for college-level academic rigor and athletic participation (Hosick & Sproull, 2012). However, the state and NCAA academic requirements are different. Even with the Common Core standards at the high school level, the interscholastic-level athletic eligibility and graduation requirements still may not match the initial eligibility requirements that the NCAA deems necessary for success in college. Even so, student athletes who wish to continue their athletic career into the college arena are required to meet rigorous incoming NCAA requirements. Student athletes wishing to participate at the Division I level are held to requirements in English, mathematics, and social science; must earn a minimum GPA; and must earn a combined SAT or ACT sum score that matches the core course GPA and test-score sliding scale (NCAA, 2015a).

The states and the NCAA have acknowledged this lack of preparedness among entering college students and as a result have increased their requirements (Dickman & Lammel, 2000). However, they have not changed their academic requirements at the same rate. As a result, this leaves student athletes potentially unprepared for the academic rigors and challenges of college.

Venezia and Jaeger (2013) noted that "many studies over the past ten years have documented the disconnect between what high school teachers teach and what postsecondary instructors expect with regard to students' preparation for first-year credit-bearing

courses in college" (p. 119). At the time of this study, 43 states in the United States have adopted the Common Core as their curriculum standard (CCSSI, 2015; Stewart, 2012; Ujifusa, 2014). Yet, even with the Common Core standards placed at the high school level, the interscholastic-level athletic eligibility and graduation requirements still may not match the initial eligibility requirements deemed necessary by the NCAA for success in college. Even so, student athletes who wish to continue their athletic careers into the college arena are required to meet rigorous incoming NCAA requirements. Furthermore, Allison, Whitted, and Sawyer (2007) demonstrated that administrators, parents, coaches, and booster clubs have had a stronger influence on interscholastic policy makers than what research or even the motivation to prepare students better for college or career reflects.

The purpose of this study was to provide a thorough analysis of the 50 state high school activity/athletic associations' interscholastic academic requirements compared to the NCAA Division I (DI) initial eligibility core course requirements. I also sought to determine whether an academic course completion gap exists between the interscholastic level and the NCAA Division I level for student athletes and, if so, the parameters of that gap.

Literature Review

There is a growing concern regarding preparedness at the interscholastic level for students who are preparing to transition to college. High school success is vital in that it develops the gateway to college admissions. Currently, concerns surrounding graduation rates and overall academic success are growing. As a result, there have been strides regarding minimum academic requirements for students at all academic levels. Crom, Warren, Clark, Marolla, and Gerber (2008) noted that the best way to approach these concerns is by examining individual subgroups rather than the general population as a whole. One subgroup that falls under high scrutiny concerning academic success is student athletes (Crom et al., 2008). For student athletes, proper high school preparedness is a large part in determining not only their college preparedness but also their initial eligibility for athletic participation (Allison et al., 2007, p. 9). Student athletes spend their time practicing a balancing act between their academic and athletic commitments (Watt & Moore, 2003).

Therefore, this population faces increased concerns when it comes to academic success.

The majority of interscholastic institutions have set an academic standard for student athletes to participate in athletics and/or other cocurricular activities, but there is not a one-to-one match in academic standards from the interscholastic level to the intercollegiate level (Allison et al., 2007, p. 10). Interscholastic and intercollegiate governing bodies have increased their requirements to reflect the need to increase success rates among students (Allison et al., 2007, pp. 9–10). However, these requirements have increased at a higher rate at the intercollegiate level than at the interscholastic level. Allison et al. (2007) noted that interscholastic administrators, coaches, and parents fear that increased academic requirements will lead to large-scale declines in athletic participation. Meanwhile, individuals at the intercollegiate level are noting declining graduation rates and increasing dropout rates; these declining rates have prompted intense academic reform for the past several years (Crom et al., 2008). As a result, the academic requirements are disproportionate from high school to college and therefore are a cause for concern regarding the academic preparation given to student athletes transitioning from one level to the next.

State Associations

All 50 United States and the District of Columbia reside under the oversight of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS). The NFHS (2014) develops and determines sport rules and guidelines for those within its membership. As stated in the NFHS (2014) eligibility rules, each state has its own athletic/activities governing body that determines if more rigorous academic requirements should be enacted for athletic participation. These requirements may include a minimum GPA, enrollment, and credit hours completed. As a result, every state does not have the same academic requirements for its student athletes. Thus, the states lack consistency in academic requirements. For example, the Vermont Principals' Association (2014) leaves additional academic requirements up to the individual schools within its state and the Georgia High School Association (2014) requires its athletes to "pass classes [with at least a 70%] that carry at least 2.5 Units counting toward graduation the semester immediately preceding participation"

(§ 1.50). In turn, the differences in requirements may result in different academic expectations for student athletes from one state to the next. Sequentially, this may cause student athletes to develop differences in self-awareness in regard to their academic performance.

Common Core

A defining component of academic curricula is the Common Core. The Common Core was developed in 2009 by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA; CCSSI, 2013). The CCSSO and NGA have illustrated that the Common Core standards were developed solely from research that revealed the essential skills students need to master for their future careers and to succeed in meeting rigorous college requirements (CCSSI, 2015). Academic standards before 2009 determined what content should be taught in the classroom; however, few resources were available to assist teachers in determining the cognitive skill benchmarks students should reach by the end of each year. This situation created not only a knowledge imbalance for students within a single school but also a dramatic difference between students in different states and countries (CCSSI, 2015). Therefore, the Common Core was developed to level the educational field, to prepare high school students for their future careers, and to prepare them for the academic rigors of college (CCSSI, 2015).

The Common Core standards were developed not only to level the educational field in the United States, but also to make it comparable at the international level (CCSSI, 2015). Therefore, regardless of what country, state, or school a student attends, the student should achieve the same academic expectations as his or her peers around the world. To make sure these expectations are being maintained, the CCSSO and NGA ensure that the standards reflect worldwide changes by further building on the foundation of the standards and drawing upon opinions from other entities. These opinions are solicited from "state departments of education, scholars, assessment developers, professional organizations, educators from kindergarten to college, and parents, students, and other members of the public" (CCSSI, 2010, p. 3). The CCSSI (2010) posits that the standards are a "living work" (p. 3). Therefore, as new research emerges, the standards will continue to reflect these changes (CCSSI, 2010).

According to the standards for learning languages within the CCSSI (2013), the Common Core requirements focus on the "English Language Arts [ELA] and Mathematics that need to be effectively taught and learned for students to be ready to succeed academically in credit-bearing, college-entry courses and in workforce training programs" (p. 1). It should be noted that the ELA area extends into the subjects of history/social studies, sciences, foreign language, and technical subjects, as well (CCSSI, 2013). The ELA standards have been developed around the coverage of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and languages, with the determined goal that from these strands students will learn effective communication skills (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL], 2012). The Common Core provides not only the standards for the material that should be covered, but also the cognitive proficiency level that students should demonstrate as they progress through each school year. These proficiency levels are defined as Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced (ACTFL, 2012). Therefore, as students acquire more schooling, they should be progressing through the proficiency levels (ACTFL, 2012).

In addition, the Common Core and K–12 standards define the benchmarks for student achievement for each academic year and readiness levels upon completing high school. However, the standards do not define how a teacher has to administer the material to students. The "standards do not mandate such things as a particular writing process or the full range of metacognitive strategies . . . needed to monitor and direct . . . thinking and learning" (CCSSI, 2010, p. 4). Thus, teachers can use their expertise to decide what materials and knowledge to use to meet the standards (CCSSI, 2010).

Moreover, the Common Core standards state that upon graduation students are college and career ready if they can demonstrate they are independent; can build strong content knowledge; can respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline; can comprehend as well as critique; can value evidence; can use technology and digital media strategically; and can understand other perspectives of culture (CCSSI, 2010, p. 7). However, the Common Core standards also note that these are the minimum knowledge and skills with which students should be graduating. The standards do not assert that additional knowledge and lessons can-

not be taught (CCSSI, 2010). The standards also do not define how to implement and use intervention methods for students who are low performing or have special needs. The school and its administration are responsible for determining the methods and resources necessary for these special circumstances (CCSSI, 2010). However, it is expected that upon high school graduation students will have acquired the knowledge and skills to be literate and versatile persons of the 21st century (ACTFL, 2012).

Standard High School Graduation Requirements

The Education Commission of the States provides information on the graduation requirements set by each state in the United States (Zinth, 2013). Each state shows minimum graduation requirements in English, mathematics, social studies, science, PE/health, art, foreign language, and electives (Zinth, 2013). The states with the Common Core standards tend to have higher graduation requirements in English, mathematics, social studies, science, and foreign language (Zinth, 2013). Common Core–driven states generally require students to complete more classes in these areas to graduate (Zinth, 2013).

However, there are no minimum core course requirements for each subject area (Zinth, 2013). Therefore, each state is different in its graduation requirements. For example, Alabama requires students to complete four Carnegie units in mathematics, Connecticut requires three Carnegie units, and California only requires two Carnegie units (Zinth, 2013). These types of differences exist across all states in each subject area (Zinth, 2013). Thus, there is a notable difference in academic requirements and expectations across the states. Although there is curriculum rigor expectations, such as those expressed by Common Core standards, there are no blanket course requirements or graduation requirements for all of the states in the United States. Therefore, students are engaged in curricula with differing time parameters for each subject and thus are still receiving different academic experiences from one state to the next.

Method

In this study, I qualitatively analyzed relevant documents and used frequencies to generate themes that revealed whether there is a gap between interscholastic academic requirements and the NCAA

Division I (DI) initial eligibility requirements. I identified differences by comparing requirements that resulted from various educational reforms that occurred between 1995 and 2014. The purpose of this study was to indicate if academic requirements changed at the interscholastic and intercollegiate levels equally over the past two decades, the lack thereof potentially resulting in an academic preparation gap for student athletes progressing from high school to college. Therefore, I analyzed the current state academic requirements for student athletes in comparison to initial eligibility requirements set by the NCAA for the DI level, to show whether there is an academic preparation gap.

I used document analysis because it provided the most meaningful interpretations of the interscholastic and intercollegiate academic requirements because of the way the requirements are communicated. Each of the 50 United States displays its academic requirements in its state constitution and bylaws publically through the state website. The NCAA displays its initial eligibility requirements in its annual NCAA DI manual, which is publically available online. These documents are updated each year and are therefore considered accurate information. I used a frequency table to accurately indicate the themes identifying academic differences between the 50 United States and the NCAA. I used the numeric findings to identify trends and as a basis for assertions about student athlete preparation in regard to their transition from high school to NCAA DI athletics.

Data Collection

I obtained documents from each of the 50 United States from the official state athletic associations online. Each state provides constitutions and bylaws regarding the minimum academic requirements its student athletes must fulfill to participate in athletics. The documents are kept online and open to the public so that any direct affiliates can access these rules at any time. Therefore, I assumed that these documents were up to date.

Like the states, the NCAA provides its academic requirements online and they are open to the public. Thus, those interested in intercollegiate athletics can easily access the requirements for initial eligibility. For this study, I accessed the NCAA DI 2014–2015 initial eligibility academic requirements. In addition, the NCAA keeps its handbooks online and open to the public. This way, anyone can

view historical rules and regulations. For this study, I also used the 1995–1996 NCAA handbook to compare initial academic eligibility requirements.

Last, I used Sawyer's (1995) research study to develop a comparison of state academic standards from 1995 to 2014. The data from Sawyer's (1995) study and the current state academic requirements provided an accurate look at the longitudinal changes that have occurred over the past two decades. Thus, I could make assertions on whether interscholastic academic requirements have increased, decreased, or stayed the same over time.

Results

I analyzed each state for a course completion requirement of at least four courses in the previous year for athletic participation. The completion of four courses per year is important because NCAA DI requires student athletes to complete 16 core courses over the course of eight semesters for initial eligibility (NCAA, 2015b). The NCAA's 16 core course requirements include 4 years of English; 3 years of mathematics (Algebra 1 or higher); 2 years of natural or physical science; 2 years of social science; 1 additional year of English, mathematics, or science; and 4 additional years of previously listed classes, foreign language, or comparative religion/philosophy (NCAA, 2014). The state courses did not have to be core courses defined by the NCAA. However, based on the Common Core standards, it can be assumed that the majority of the courses passed would fall into one of the core courses defined by the NCAA. Although I did not analyze the type of course, the number of hours completed in a previous year is still an essential stepping stone to NCAA DI initial eligibility.

2014 state course completion findings. A review of the state's requirements from each attendant website showed that 31 of the 50 states (62%) had a course completion requirement for the preceding year for student athletes to be eligible for play. However, only 26 (52%) required student athletes to complete a minimum of four courses in the preceding year to be eligible for play. The remaining five states (10%) allowed a minimum of three courses a year. The spectrum of completed course requirements for an academic year ranged from three to six courses. For the 31 states with a course completion requirement, the average was 4.45 courses.

Of the 26 states that required students to complete four courses in the preceding year, 10 (38%) specified that courses must count toward graduation. In addition, only three of the 26 states (12%) stated that the courses had to be new courses for which the student did not previously receive credit.

1995 state course completion findings. According to Sawyer (1995), 27 out of 50 states (54%) required student athletes to complete a minimum of four courses in the preceding year to be eligible for play. Within the 27 states, the course completion requirements for an academic year ranged from four to five courses.

1995/2014 comparison. For state interscholastic academic eligibility requirements, 27 states (54%) required students to pass at least four courses each year in 1995 compared to 26 states (52%) in 2014. This is a decrease of one state (2%) requiring student athletes to pass four courses in the preceding year. Between 1995 and 2014, seven states elected to relax their academic rigor. Only six states increased their academic rigor by 2014. The remaining 37 states (74%) experienced little to no increase in their academic requirement regarding course completion requirements.

In comparison, from 1995 to 2014 the NCAA increased its initial eligibility standards for core courses. In 1995, the NCAA required student athletes to complete 11 specific core courses to be eligible. However, by 2014 the NCAA required student athletes to complete 16 specific core courses for eligibility. Therefore, even though the NCAA increased its academic core course requirement by five courses in two decades, the interscholastic level experienced a decrease in the number of states requiring students to pass at least four courses in the preceding year.

Based on this data, it can be concluded that there is a marked negative difference in the 2014 NCAA initial eligibility standards regarding core courses compared to the declining course completion requirement within a portion of the 50 United States.

Discussion and Implications

NCAA DI presides over 350 institutions of higher education and a large body of students (over 170,000 athletes) that hold their student athletes to high academic expectations upon entering college and throughout their time within athletics (NCAA, 2015b). It is stated in numerous ways at the intercollegiate level that students at

the interscholastic level are in general coming into college not fully prepared for the academic rigors (Jolly, 2008). Therefore, understanding the current interscholastic academic standards provides a key indicator of academic preparation at that level. Preparing these students is imperative to their success at the intercollegiate level and within DI parameters.

By 2014 just over half of the states required students to pass four courses in the preceding year to be eligible for athletics. This is important for college athletic participation because NCAA DI requires student athletes to complete 16 core courses over eight semesters for initial eligibility (NCAA, 2015c). Therefore, the completion of four courses a year would place a student in a position to meet the NCAA DI 16-core-course requirement for initial eligibility. Furthermore, only 10 of the 26 states with a course completion requirement stated that the courses had to count toward graduation. Given these course completion details, interscholastic policy makers should create policies that ensure student athletes are making progress toward graduation. Not only is graduation a requirement for students to enter the intercollegiate level, but it is also a pathway to postsecondary education or extended employment opportunities. Because of the limited number of states with a four-course completion requirement, it is possible that some states are keeping their academic requirements at a minimum to keep athletic participation rates high and to encourage students to complete high school, but these short-term fixes are impeding the progress of students for the long term. Therefore, policy makers should also be cognitive of the courses required for high school graduation and should ensure that student athletes are making progress toward graduation goals.

The Common Core standards state that upon graduation students are college and career ready if they can demonstrate they are independent; can build strong content knowledge; can respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline; can comprehend as well as critique; can value evidence; can use technology and digital media strategically; and can understand other perspectives of culture (CCSSI, 2010, p. 7). The academic rigor within the Common Core assists students in becoming college and career ready. However, the Common Core does not specify a minimum number of courses for students to complete each year. Therefore, although one of the Common Core goals is to prepare students

for college, course time exposure and course completion rates are not regulated. As a result, this potentially leaves a preparation gap between the interscholastic and intercollegiate levels. Based on these findings, I suggest that interscholastic policy makers be aware of the 16 specific core course requirements for NCAA initial eligibility and be aware of how their specific state graduation requirements compare to the 2014 NCAA initial eligibility standards. Given that the Common Core addresses interscholastic-level course content and the attendant cognitive skills, there is a level of confidence that sufficient rigor is embedded in the core courses required by the NCAA initial eligibility standards to prepare students adequately for academic success at the intercollegiate level. Moreover, interscholastic policy makers should overtly consider the articulation of the curriculum within the realities of high schools to determine if their policy is ensuring students stay on track for graduation.

The NCAA has determined the 16 core courses for initial eligibility based on the skills that should be developed at the interscholastic level. The NCAA has determined that students who complete these 16 core courses will have developed the academic skills to handle the academic rigor of college programs at DI schools (Hosick & Sproull, 2012). The problem-solving and critical thinking skills upon which the NCAA bases its initial eligibility standards are the same skills mirrored within the Common Core rigor at the interscholastic level. However, as noted, the Common Core does not dictate the number of courses a student must complete. Therefore, the NCAA has determined the 16 interscholastic core courses that students need to develop the necessary cognitive skills to enter DI and succeed in college, whereas the interscholastic level does not have a blanket core course requirement for eligibility. As a result, this may create a college preparation difference in students who progress out of the interscholastic level.

In regard to this educational disconnect, John Dewey's argument against dualism reiterates the need to align the academic requirements between the interscholastic and intercollegiate levels. According to Kliebard (1995), "One had to get rid of the prejudicial notion that there is some gap in kind between the child's experience and the various forms of subject-matters that make up the course of study" (p. 72). That is, the child and curriculum are not

separate entities, but a single entity. As a child gains power within the curriculum by successfully solving challenging, relevant problems through critical thinking, then the child becomes engaged with the curriculum. Therefore, by making interscholastic requirements more rigorous, policy makers are developing a connection between students' academic and athletic experiences. By understanding this developmental connection at the interscholastic level, high schools can adjust students' educational experience to further build upon their academic goals for students. Without the development of this connection, students may simply be fulfilling the minimum requirements for high school graduation to move into the intercollegiate level to continue their athletic careers. Therefore, given Dewey's concerns regarding dualisms, and given the tie between athletics and academics, the educational experience for students could be further advanced.

Recommendations

The presence of a minimum four-course completion requirement in the previous year would help align the interscholastic and intercollegiate academic requirements. Based on the data in this study, the presence of a four-course completion requirement is declining for state academic eligibility. The data show that currently only 26 states (52%) require students to pass four courses in the previous year. This leaves a big difference in the state and NCAA initial eligibility requirements. Therefore, if states were to set a four-course completion standard for eligibility, their requirements would better align with NCAA requirements. However, states that specifically indicate that all four courses need to be new credit toward graduation put their athletes in the best stance to meet the core course requirements for NCAA initial eligibility standards.

Conclusion

It is stated in numerous ways at the intercollegiate level that students are in general coming into college not fully prepared for the academic rigors (Jolly, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative that policy makers understand the tie between athletics and academics, and how these conjoining units work together in the development of students. The purpose of placing additional academic requirements at the interscholastic level is not only to make the interscholastic- and

intercollegiate-level academic requirements comparable, but also to increase the academic performance of students. Therefore, interscholastic policy makers are responsible for further educating themselves on the additional benefits of increased academic requirements and for motivating academic change within the athletic arena.

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