

College Sports Project reports new findings about athletics and academics in NCAA Division III

Embargoed until Monday, March 9, 2009

MIDDLEBURY, Vt. — The [College Sports Project](#) (CSP) has released the second in a series of reports comparing academic performance between college athletes and non-athletes. For the student cohort entering college in 2006-07, differences in college class rank between female athletes and non-athletes were relatively modest again this year. However, male athletes had class ranks 9 percentile points lower at the end of their first year of college when compared with their non-athlete counterparts. Recruited male athletes also had class ranks 6 percentile points lower than non-recruited male athletes.

For students now at the end of their first two years of college, the differences in average class rank between athletes and non-athletes shrank by one percentile point since their first year (2005-06), possibly indicating that athletes gradually make positive adjustments to the demands of academic life. Women athletes in both cohorts fared better than their male counterparts, and non-recruited athletes of both genders had GPAs only slightly below those of non-athletes.

Percentile Class Rank GPA after Two Years: 2005-06 Entering Cohort

Student group	Athlete status	Count	Percentile rank of GPA	Difference in rank of GPA (athlete minus non-athlete)
Male	<i>Non-athlete</i>	11,227	47	—
	<i>Recruited athlete</i>	4,195	37	-10
	<i>Non-recruited athlete</i>	1,959	44	-3
Female	<i>Non-athlete</i>	17,323	55	—
	<i>Recruited athlete</i>	3,017	51	-4
	<i>Non-recruited athlete</i>	2,071	53	-2

Note: Data from 77 NCAA Division-III Institutions in the College Sports Project; n=39,792

The summary data provided in the accompanying table cannot reveal important variation in the outcomes, both across the institutions studied and across individual sports. Analyses for groups of institutions based on their selectivity reveal that students at highly selective institutions exhibit the greatest differences in grades between their athletes and non-athletes, especially for male students. At a set of 15 institutions that are less selective academically, the study has found no academic underperformance by intercollegiate athletes.

The analysis also examined academic outcomes by individual sports. Students on teams in some sports had higher class ranks than did their counterparts not competing on teams. For example, both men's and women's cross country yielded higher average percentile class ranks

than did their classmates who are not on intercollegiate teams. Men's tennis, women's soccer, and women's track also ranked relatively high on academic outcomes.

The reports from the CSP to 78 presidents of Division III colleges and universities are the second in a series of annual analyses titled "Representativeness of College Athletes," being conducted as part of a 5-year longitudinal study of students at participating NCAA Division III institutions, and funded by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The title refers to the goal, embraced by many Division-III institutions and conferences, that college athletes should be representative of their peers at their own institutions, especially with regard to academic outcomes such as chosen majors, grades, and graduation rates.

The new findings are based on analyses after two years of college for nearly 40,000 students who entered college in 2005-06, and analyses after one year of college for a similar group of students who entered college in 2006-07. Approximately 25 percent of the students at these relatively small colleges are intercollegiate athletes, and around 17 percent of all students were athletes recruited to play on athletic teams.

"The data reviewed to date begin to provide insights about possible changes over time," said John Emerson, Charles A. Dana Professor of Mathematics at Middlebury College and the study's principal investigator. "By examining their students' progress throughout their college years, and by comparing different student cohorts, college presidents will be able to see whether trends at their own institution are in the desired direction."

Emerson noted that the longitudinal nature of the latest data also presents interesting analytical challenges for the CSP research team at Northwestern University. For example, can differences in college GPA between athletes and non-athletes be explained by differences in their incoming educational characteristics or by factors they experience while enrolled in college? Preliminary analyses with regression models that incorporate many variables about the students and their backgrounds suggest that high school SAT scores, grades, the high school attended, gender, and race and ethnicity do not fully account for the differences in college performance between athletes and non-athletes.

Instead a significant part of the difference may be ascribed to what researchers have termed "underperformance" by athletes. (The CSP defines underperformance for a student group as the difference between the average GPA observed for that group and the average GPA that is predicted based on the students' test scores, grades, and other prior characteristics.) Research by other investigators has found, quite surprisingly, that the time athletes spend on their sport does not account for the differences in grades either. This year's new data support that finding by revealing that non-recruited athletes often do as well or better academically than their non-

athlete counterparts. Emerson notes that some findings remain puzzling, and that future data and analyses may shed further light on these questions.

In addition to the reports prepared for presidents of participating institutions, the research team also presented these findings at a recent meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). “Providing information to leaders in higher education about the impact of athletics on educational outcomes continues to be a primary goal of the project,” says Rachelle L. Brooks, who directs CSP’s Center for Data Collection and Analysis at Northwestern University.

The College Sports Project (www.collegesportsproject.org) is an initiative of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. CSP represents colleges and universities in the NCAA’s Division III that are committed to strengthening the bonds between intercollegiate athletics and educational values. In addition to the data collection, the College Sports Project also sponsors workshops for athletic directors, faculty, coaches and campus officials to work together toward better integration of the academic, athletic, and student life dimensions of colleges and universities in their efforts to align athletic programs with educational missions.

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