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## The association between athletic participation and academic achievement and aspirations

### Abstract

Interscholastic sports have become accepted in most quarters as an intergral [sic] part of our educational system in America. It has come to be referred to as co-curricular rather than as extra-curricular and many benefits have been attributed to athletic participation. Among these are sportsmanship, discipline, cooperation, persistence, competition, character and moral development.

THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN ATHLETIC PARTICIPATION  
AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND ASPIRATIONS

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by  
Greg DeTimmerman  
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Interscholastic sports have become accepted in most quarters as an intergral part of our educational system in America. It has come to be referred to as co-curricular rather than as extra-curricular and many benefits have been attributed to athletic participation. Among these are sportsmanship, discipline, cooperation, persistence, competition, character and moral development.

Athletics have also come under criticism. Does the great amount of time, effort, and money devoted to athletics in most of the nation's high schools interfere with the main responsibility of our education system, namely to educate our students? Do student-athletes achieve less than their nonparticipant counterparts? Are non-athletic participants more likely to finish high school and go on to college? These questions focus attention on the effect of athletic participation on academic orientation.

The purpose of this investigation was to ascertain the relation of athletic participation to the academic achievement and educational aspirations of student-athletes.

Prior to 1960, very few research studies seem to have been conducted in regards to the role of athletics in high schools. In 1961, James S. Coleman wrote a

book called The Adolescent Society in which he made a comprehensive study of the American educational system. Since his research was published, a considerable amount of research has been done in this area.

Coleman maintained that participation in athletics was detrimental to scholastic pursuits. He reasoned that students expended so much time and energy on athletics, that academics were slighted. However, other studies have provided evidence that student athletes tend to get better grades (Eidsmoe, 1963; Schafer & Armer, 1968; Soltz, 1986) and have higher educational aspirations (Rehberg & Schafer, 1968; Spreitzer & Pugh, 1973; Spady, 1970; Otto, 1975; Otto & Alwin, 1977; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1977; Landers, Feltz, Obermeier, & Brouse, 1978).

Even Coleman's research, which suggested that athletic participation detracts from academic pursuits, presented evidence to the contrary. A review of Coleman's (1961) research revealed that the top athletes in six of the ten schools surveyed had higher grade point averages (GPA) than the male student body as a whole.

Eidsmoe (1964) compared the scholastic averages of 168 participants in the 1960 Iowa Boys' Substate Basketball Tournament with all the members of the

classes in which these players were enrolled. The GPA for the basketball players was 2.56 compared to 2.18 for all others. Two years later, Eidsmoe conducted a similar study of 592 football players which found that the student athletes compiled a GPA of 2.52 compared to an average of 2.08 for non-athletes.

Schafer and Armer (1968) examined the grades of 585 boys in two midwestern high schools in a study that found that student athletes had a GPA of 2.35 compared to a GPA of 1.83 for the rest of the sample. This study also adjusted the results for four relevant variables: father's occupation, measured intelligence, curriculum type, and previous GPA. The data still showed a slightly higher GPA for the student athletes, 2.35 as compared to 2.24 for the non-athletes.

The National Federation of State High School Associations (1987) has reported the findings of two recent studies which have documented the relation between athletic participation and higher grades. The Minnesota State High School League conducted a survey involving more than 300 schools. The results showed that the grade-point average of student-athletes was 2.84 while the overall average was 2.68. A similar study conducted by the Iowa High School Athletic Association showed that students who do not participate

In sports average 2.39 while participants in one sport average 2.61, and those involved in two sports average 2.82.

Research conducted by Soltz (1986) further supports these findings. This study compared over 1500 student athletes with over 4500 students who did not participate in athletics. Interscholastic team members had an average GPA of 2.67 compared to an average of 2.12 for nonparticipating students.

The data from these research studies seem to argue strongly that participation in sports is associated with greater academic performance. There is not, however, complete consensus. Hauser and Lueptow (1978) used longitudinal analysis to examine the relation between student athletes and academic achievement in twenty Wisconsin high schools. The results of this study show that student athletes were better students to begin with, but lose a portion of their advantage during their years of athletic participation. These results support Coleman's conclusion that athletics detract from the academic program.

Nevertheless, the bulk of the evidence indicates that athletic participation does not result in lower GPAs for student athletes in comparison to their nonparticipating classmates. In fact, student

athletes' GPAs appear to be quite higher than nonathletes.

Spady (1970) and Landers et al. (1978) concluded that athlete-only students were deficient in the academic skills necessary for college success. They used Scholastic Aptitude Test scores to compare athlete-only students with athlete-service activity participants and the second group had significantly higher scores. It should be noted that these two studies do not compare athletes with non-athletes, but rather with athlete-service activities participants.

Before the implementation of Title IX, few interscholastic sports opportunities existed for adolescent females (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1977). This resulted in most studies investigating the relation of athletic participation with academics to include primarily males. Feltz & Wels (1984) examined what effect athletics have on the academic achievement of female high school students. The results of this study indicated that athletic participation without other forms of co-curricular activity was not detrimental to educational attainments of female athletes.

There does not seem to be a definitive answer to what relation existed between athletic participation and academic performance. Most of the research pointed

to a positive correlation between these two variables. However, Hauser and Lueptow (1978), as reported earlier, present research that points to athletics having a deleterious effect on academic achievement.

The opinion about the relation between athletic participation and academic achievement may be divided, but there seems to be general agreement that athletic participation has a positive effect on student aspirations, especially on the desire to attend college. Coleman (1961) stated that the formation of aspirations is affected by athletic participation. He found that the clearest and quickest way to become a member of the leading crowd was to participate in athletics and further that these "elites" more often intend to go to college than do others who are not part of the group.

Rehberg and Schafer (1968), using data from 785 male seniors from six urban Pennsylvania high schools, found that a greater proportion of student athletes than non-athletes expect to enroll in a four year college. This was found to be especially true of those boys not otherwise disposed toward college. In other words, those in the lower half of their graduating class, and those with low parental encouragement had received the greatest impact from athletic

participation in terms of increased educational aspirations. In explaining this relation between sports participation and academic aspirations, Rehberg and Schafer (1968) offered these suggestions: (a) student athletes tend to achieve higher academically, (b) as members of the leading crowd, student-athletes' aspirations are influenced by their peers, (c) student-athletes have a high level of self-esteem which influences their level of aspirations, (d) student-athletes receive better counseling and more encouragement from teachers and coaches, and (e) some student-athletes desire to attend college in order to continue their athletic career.

In their replication and extension of Rehberg and Schafer's (1968) study, Spreitzer and Pugh (1973) introduced perceived peer status and school value climate as additional intervening variables between athletic involvement and educational expectations. Their results supported the earlier study. They further concluded that involvement in sports leads to high peer status which leads to a desire for more recognition by going to college. This relation is affected by school value climate because it holds especially true in schools where athletic achievement was valued more highly than scholastic achievement.

Spady (1970) found that the student's role in the high school peer group had an important influence on educational aspirations. This was particularly true when attitudinal, financial, intellectual, and academic resources were low. A strong association between participation in extracurricular activities, especially athletics, and high status attainment was discovered. Spady suggested that students who were active in both athletics and other co-curriculars had the highest aspirations. This was due, it seems, to their popularity, which stimulates a desire for further recognition through college attendance.

A replication of Spady's (1970) study was done by Otto (1975). This research lended support to the earlier findings and evidence that co-curricular activities, including athletics, had a positive effect on the formation of educational aspiralons. This effect was found to be independent of influence from socioeconomic status, academic ability, and academic performance.

Otto and Alwin (1977) also found that participation in athletics had a positive effect on educational aspirations. However, they refuted Spady's (1970) and Spreltzer and Pugh (1973) contention that perceived peer status either mediated the effect or

Independently accounted for variance in aspirations. They suggested three alternative explanations for the process: (a) participation in athletics lead to the acquisition of "interpersonal skills" that can be utilized outside athletics, (b) student athletes had increased visibility and were perceived as successful individuals, and (c) through their participation, student athletes established a network that was beneficial in establishing careers.

As females have become more involved in athletic participation, it has become important to ascertain whether earlier findings for males on correlates of athletic involvement are applicable to females. Snyder and Spreitzer (1977) analyzed the relation between co-curricular participation and educational aspirations among high school girls. They found that the positive relation between athletic participation and academic aspirations among males was also present for females.

Results from another study by Landers, et al. (1978), supported the earlier work in regards to the positive relation between male athletes and educational aspirations. However, the results of the study were inconclusive in examining the same variable for females.

This research also concluded that many students would not remain in school if not for the opportunity to participate in sports. This finding was supported by several studies reported in the IHSAA Activites Report (1981).

In summary, it would appear that dichotomizing sports participation (involved/not involved) may not define athletic involvement fully. Time committment, extent of activity, and simultaneous participation in athletics and other co-curricular activites are other variables that need to be considered. More research should be done to adjust for the effect caused by socioeconomic status and higher beginning abilities. Other considerations that need further investigation include more research to determine the relevancy of earlier findings about male athletic participation to female participation. Finally, it is imperative that researchers conduct more longitudinal studies to determine whether these results invalidate or support the earlier work of Elsmoe (1963), Schafer and Armer (1968), and those reported by the National Federation of State High School Associations (1987).

With respect to the overall effect of student participation in athletics, it seems that Coleman's contention that athletics has a deleterious effect on

academic pursuits has not been supported during the nearly three decades since he conducted his research. Although there is some controversy concerning the relation between athletic participation and academic achievement, the bulk of the research supports a positive correlation between these variables. Most of this research reveals that the GPAs of student athletes tend to be higher than those of non-athletes, indicating that participation in interscholastic athletics does not divert excessive amounts of energy away from the pursuit of primary educational objectives. The grades of student athletes with low socioeconomic backgrounds reflect a greater increase than those with higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Those student athletes who participated in a greater number of athletic activities did better than those less involved, further disputing earlier claims that athletic participation had a negative influence on academic achievement. Although there is compelling evidence that student athletes get better grades than do comparable non-athletes, a definitive explanation for cause and effect has not been established.

A positive relation between athletic participation and academic aspirations is clearly supported by educational research. Not only does interscholastic

athletic experience seem to promote higher aspirations for post high school education but also appears to increase the likelihood that the student athlete will complete high school in the first place. These observations are particularly true for student athletes who are least disposed toward completing high school and attending college.

The criticism leveled at interscholastic athletic participation concerning academic achievement and aspirations is unfounded in educational research. Although a causative effect between these variables has not been established, the net effect of athletic participation on academic orientations appears to be supportive rather than detrimental.

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