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Athletic participation and academic performance

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Athletic participation and academic performance

Abstract

Interscholastic athletics has long been an integral part of the American educational system. Gholson (1985) found that students believe they gain immediate and long-term personal benefits from their participation in the cocurricular activity program. Many believe athletic participation in high school is a valuable educational experience in itself, every bit as important to the student's development as the classroom experience. Jaekel (1985) reported that student activities have become an accepted part of a total school program. There are also indications that success in college and later life comes from participation in student activities.

ATHLETIC PARTICIPATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

A Research Paper

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by

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Interscholastic athletics has long been an integral part of the American educational system. Gholson (1985) found that students believe they gain immediate and long-term personal benefits from their participation in the cocurricular activity program. Many believe athletic participation in high school is a valuable educational experience in itself, every bit as important to the student's development as the classroom experience. Joekel (1985) reported that student activities have become an accepted part of a total school program. There are also indications that success in college and later life comes from participation in student activities.

This paper will examine the relationship between participation in interscholastic athletics and the academic performance of students. Specific consideration will be given to the merit of more rigorous eligibility requirements. Throughout this paper, issues will be investigated as they relate to the school administrator.

Reasons for the increased concern about this matter will be offered. The various eligibility rules used in several states will be compared. Results from research dealing with the academic performance of athletes will be analyzed. The viewpoints of educators and athletic administrators will be discussed. Finally, alternatives to denying eligibility will be discussed.

Reasons for the Concern

According to Edwards (1967) the scholarship of athletes has been of concern to educators, parents, and students not only because of the influence of athletics on academic achievement; but also because participation in athletics should be considered a privilege and a responsibility. It was with this reasoning that athletic eligibility rules governing scholastic achievement were established. In the past few years more national attention has been given to these eligibility requirements for high school athletes.

While student activities were all but overlooked in the recent national reports on the condition of education (Sandfort, 1985); the reports have influenced several aspects of the student activities programs. Joekel (1985) claims that in reaction to A Nation at Risk and other similar studies, a number of states are looking carefully at academic requirements for participation in student activities. Many states are considering measures to strengthen the academic eligibility requirements. Harper (1986) concurs by saying that the education reform reports conducted in the 1980s certainly intensified the push, because they painted an extremely grave picture of the educational system. Perhaps in reaction to these reports, some states began to adopt minimum standards for athletes.

Peterman (1986) contends the increased attention to eligibility requirements arises in part from the national concerns about excellence in schools and raising academic standards. Athletic eligibility requirements relate participation to achievement on the assumption that there exists a causal relationship between the two. It is assumed that setting higher requirements for participation will result in higher academic achievement by students who participate or who wish to participate in athletics. The logic is that higher eligibility requirements will create more incentive for students and thus grades will go up.

Possibly the most publicized example of this occurred in Texas. Flygare (1985) reported that the Select Committee on Public Education determined that a major shake-up was needed in Texas elementary and secondary education to bring the schools up to even minimal standards of excellence. Among the most controversial recommendations was the rule prohibiting any student with a grade below 70, in any course, from participating in any extracurricular activities for the following six week grading period.

Another contributing factor has been the effect of the measure recently adopted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for incoming freshmen. Durbin (1986) outlined the rule which was adopted on 1983. A high school student must take a specific core curriculum

and attain at least a 2.0 Grade Point Average (GPA) for the courses in that curriculum. The incoming student also must register a minimum score on the SAT or ACT. Failure to meet these standards prior to enrollment in an NCAA Division I institution prevents the student from being eligible to practice and participate in intercollegiate athletics as a freshman. The contention is that this rule will encourage students to perform better academically in high school and will help reduce the athletic exploitation of the students at the expense of their academic endeavors.

Thus, three major reasons for the increased concern have been identified. The plethora of reports about the condition of schools and education has increased the awareness level of many people. The attention given to the excellence in education concept has affected the consideration given to athletic eligibility requirements. A third reason has been the reaction by high school educators to the new NCAA requirements for incoming freshmen. Each of these factors has influenced contemporary policy.

State Eligibility Rules

State athletic and activity associations have had minimum statewide participation requirements for many years. Most state associations have guidelines that require students to pass a minimum of only four academic courses per term. However, there exists a wide range of rules

from state to state. Several states are considering or have adopted requirements which restrict participation to those who have maintained a certain GPA or have passed a certain number of courses. Durbin (1986) stated that the National Federation of State High School Associations endorsed an academic standard. Part of the standard requires a student to do passing work in full credit subjects to be eligible for participation. This was recommended as opposed to a higher qualitative standard such as a 2.0 GPA.

The state of Texas has been a leader in the movement to develop more stringent requirements. The University Interscholastic League of Texas (1985) outlined their updated standards. Any student with a grade below a 70, in any course, is prohibited from taking part in any extracurricular activities for the following six-week grading period. A student who has been suspended from participating in events shall also be prohibited from out-of-school practices in the activities. The school principal may remove the suspension if the class where the deficiency occurs is identified as an honors class. The honors class category includes courses such as Physics, Trigonometry, Calculus, English IV, other languages, and Fine Arts.

High school football has been very popular in Texas, and this "no pass/no play" has stirred much discussion. However, Flygare (1985) pointed out that the Texas Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the rule. The court stated that the rule was related to the State interest in providing a quality education to Texas' public school students.

California is an example of a state which has patterned their new requirements after the Texas rule. "Pass to Play" (1986) said that California passed a law requiring senior high students to maintain at least a "C" average to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities. This policy, which went into effect on January 1, 1987, ordered all school districts to require that students have a 2.0 GPA or better to participate in activities. Failure to comply could result in the loss of the annual inflation allowance in their state funding.

The wide range of requirements from state to state is demonstrated by Harper (1986). In Alaska students must maintain a 1.5 GPA with no F's being recorded. Idaho does not have a GPA standard, but requires that students attend at least 90% of the scheduled classes. Students in Kansas must take and pass five courses to be eligible for extracurricular activities. At least a "C" average is required in Montana for participation in activities.

While in Ohio, a GPA of only 0.6 (3 D's and 2 F's) must be maintained. Four of five classes must be passed to be eligible for extracurricular activities in Virginia. Students in West Virginia must have a "C" average.

Joekel (1985) cited Maryland as another example of the "C" average being required for participation. Standards used by the Michigan High School Athletic Association were reviewed by Peterman (1986). Students are required to have passed at least three courses the previous semester and be passing at least three during the current semester to be eligible. This translates to a GPA that could be as low as 0.5 to retain eligibility.

The Iowa High School Athletic Association (1986) said that their current rule of passing three subjects to be eligible is considered rather liberal. A proposed change to passing four subjects was not given approval in time to be instituted for the 1986-87 school year. Various alternatives have also been reviewed. "Grade bill drafted" (1986) summarized a bill to set minimum academic standards for Iowa high school athletes. The bill, which was fashioned after the Texas "no pass/no play" requirement, was introduced by Senator Joe Brown, former chairman of the Iowa Senate Education Committee. Students getting a grade of "D" or below in a particular class would not be eligible to participate the following term.

Results of Research

Now that the various eligibility standards have been examined, research analyzing the academic performance of athletes will be discussed. Much of the research also mentions other identifiable factors which may result from participation in athletics, but that will not be the main emphasis of this discussion. Soltz (1986) stated that a number of studies have reported that athletes not only attain higher GPAs than other students, but that their educational aspirations, self-concepts, and other effective characteristics are enhanced by participation.

Research from approximately the past 25 years will be reviewed in chronological order. This will help identify any trends which may have developed.

Eidsmoe (1961) surveyed the academic standing of basketball teams in the 1960-61 Iowa Boys Sub-State and State Tournaments. These teams were chosen because their practice periods and season would be as intense as any in the state. Fourteen teams of 12 players each turned in reports of their GPA at the end of the first semester. The GPA for the entire school was also reported for the same semester. The 168 basketball players had a combined GPA of 2.566. This is compared to a combined GPA of 2.186 for the entire student body in the 14 schools that returned their reports.

Eight teams in the Girls State Basketball Tournament were also surveyed. The 96 basketball players had a combined GPA of 2.887. This is compared to a combined GPA of 2.288 for the entire student body in those eight schools.

Eidsmoe (1964) did a similar survey using 24 of the 30 top rated high school football teams in Iowa during the 1962 season. The total GPA of all 592 football players was 2.523. This is compared to a combined GPA of 2.085 for the students who did not play football in those 24 schools. The survey analyzed the academic performance in the four subject areas of English, history, mathematics, and science. Each of the four classes, freshmen through senior, were analyzed. In none of the 16 classifications did the football players record a lower GPA than the other students.

A study of male athletes versus male nonathletes at Mehlville (Missouri) Senior High was reported by Edwards (1967). Fifty athletes were paired with 50 nonathletes of the senior class males. The athletes recorded a GPA of 2.32 as freshmen, 2.27 as sophomores, 2.31 as juniors, and 2.35 as seniors. This compared to the GPAs recorded by the nonathletes of 2.29 as freshmen, 2.23 as sophomores, 2.18 as juniors, and 2.21 as seniors. It was determined that this study provided

enough evidence to conclude that participation in athletics does not negatively affect the academic performance of the students.

An often cited study was done by the ACT Service to compare the relative value of factors in predicting success. It was noted by Munday and Davis (1974) that the four factors compared were (a) major achievements in cocurricular activities, (b) high grades in high school, (c) high grades in college, and (d) high scores on the ACT. The only factor that consistently could be used to predict success in later life was achievement in cocurricular activities.

After reviewing much research, Hanks and Eckland (1976) concluded that athletics neither depress nor especially enhance the academic performance of the participating athletes. Laughlin (1978) did find that athletics had a positive influence on academic performance. Elevated GPAs were reported during the season or time when the student was participating in the activity.

Another consideration was included in studies reported by Landers, Feltz, Obermeier, and Brouse (1978). Students were categorized into athlete-only and athlete-service groups and then compared on the SAT. Members of the athlete-only group participated in

athletics as their only extracurricular activity.

The athlete-service group included those athletes who also participated in at least one other extracurricular activity.

Results indicated that the athlete-only group was significantly lower than the national average on the SAT while the athlete-service group was significantly higher than the national average. These findings were for male students in Maryland and Pennsylvania. The time involved in athletics plus service activities would be even greater than the time spent in just athletics. These findings would seem to contradict the idea that athletics detract from the study time needed to maintain a high academic level.

The results for females were not as telling. Only the verbal scores of the Maryland students showed any significant difference, with the athlete-service females being significantly higher.

Cutright (1983) found that participation in athletics tended to slightly lower the average male student's grades, but it did increase his educational and career aspirations. These findings concerning grades were contradicted by Best (1985), who concluded that research tends to show that athletes perform better in school than nonathletes. Joekel (1985) concurred with Best.

He stated that most recent literature indicates that student grades are not hurt by involvement in student activities. In fact, school-related activities seem to draw a disproportionate number of students with higher grades.

A study conducted in Colorado during the 1982-83 school year was reviewed by Soltz (1986). By examining the records of over 1,500 athletes and 4,500 nonathletes, it was found grades do not suffer as a result of participation in sports. Athletes were found to have a mean GPA of 2.67, while the nonathletes were at 2.12. The study also found fewer athletes receive failing grades during the season or seasons in which they are participating than in their "off season". It was found that 23% of the actively participating student-athletes received one or more "F". This compares to 35% of the student-athletes who received at least one failing grade during their "off season".

Several studies were cited by the Case for High School Activities (1986) which supported the connection between participation in activities and high grades/better attendance. The Minnesota State High School League surveyed more than 300 schools in Minnesota. The results showed that the average student had a GPA of 2.68, student-athletes were at 2.84, and fine arts

students were at 2.98. The average student was absent 8.76 days per year, as compared to 7.44 days per year for athletes, and only 6.94 days per year for fine arts students.

A study by the Iowa High School Athletic Association showed that students who did not participate in sports had a GPA of 2.39; students in one sport were at 2.61; and those in two or more sports had a GPA of 2.82. This contradicts the contention that sports take excessive time away from studying. A study by the North Dakota High School Activities Association demonstrated an even more dramatic difference. Students in activities had a 3.32 GPA, while those not participating averaged only 2.48. Participants missed 4.9 days of school per year, while the average student missed 10.8 days per year. A study by Indiana University showed a GPA of 3.05 for students involved in four or more activities. Students in one or no activities recorded a GPA of 2.54.

The Kansas State High School Activities Association revealed that of over 7,000 students who dropped out of school during a one year period, only 6% were involved in activities programs. Findings which coincide with these were reported by Durbin (1986). He stated that 94% of the high school dropouts do not participate in activities

programs. Participants also demonstrate far better attendance records and record fewer discipline problems.

A study which directly addresses the question of more stringent eligibility requirements was conducted by Peterman (1986). The Oak Park (Michigan) School District adopted a new policy which took effect in 1985. The policy required that students have at least a 2.0 GPA and no failing grades to be eligible for athletics and other activities. Wide publicity was given to the policy for the nine months prior to implementation.

To test whether improvement was made because of the eligibility requirements, athletes were compared to a randomly selected control group. It was found that the grades of the ineligible athletes did not improve as much as those students in the control group.

Several other conclusions were reached. It was found that the GPA of all students did not improve as a result of raising the eligibility requirements. With the policy in effect the GPA for all students was 2.18, as compared to 2.22 for all students the previous year.

It was also found that the number of students with a GPA of less than 2.0 did not decline as a result of the policy. During the year of implementation there were 44% of the students with a GPA of below 2.0. In the previous year 42% of the students were below 2.0.

The new policy also caused a drastic decline in the number of students who participated. Of the students who participated in athletics during the first semester, 37% of them became ineligible for the second semester as a result of the new policy. Total participation dropped about 24% in fall and winter sports as a result of raising the standards.

Viewpoints of Educators and Administrators

Examination of the research leads to related concerns for educators. The educational value received from participation in activities must be considered. Standards need to be formulated which do more than serve as a punishment for some students. The possibility of students not taking difficult courses or even dropping out of school must be recognized. Most importantly, educators must be willing to work with students in need of help, rather than just eliminating them from participation in activities.

Thompson (1986) stressed that benefits gained from participation in activities can be transferred to the student's academic endeavors. Included are such things as teamwork, discipline, cooperation, time management, organization, and pride in accomplishment. Student activities traditionally have provided students with avenues for expression and relevant experiences (Joekel,

1985). It was reported by Smith (1986) that while it is not a right to participate in athletics, participation in athletics has a definite educational value. This thought is extended by Durbin (1986) who stated that athletic participation is a valuable educational experience in itself, possibly as important as the classroom experience. High school athletics do indeed make up "the other half of education".

Ruffin (1986) stated that educators must make sure students are aware that the primary purpose for attending school is to learn and achieve academically. But the purpose of eligibility requirements should not be to penalize those students who wish to participate in activities. This concern is shared by Joekel (1985) who states that there must be some eligibility requirements. But, the rules must be developed with the aim of improving education and not as a means of punishing students.

Saggau (personal communication, December 22, 1986) stated that he was not in favor of the "C" average or having to pass five or more subjects to be eligible. There are some youngsters who would never take anything that was difficult for fear they would fail the course. Joekel (1985) agreed by stating that students may be driven away from classes in which they fear they might

not do well, just so they do not jeopardize their eligibility to participate. An even more serious concern is that of the eligibility requirements causing high school dropouts. It was concluded by Soltz (1986) that raising the minimum requirements might cause some marginal students, who stay in school primarily to participate in sports, to drop out.

Durbin (1986) declared that the contention higher eligibility standards for participation stimulates better academic performance does not always stand up. This is especially true for those students who perform to their maximum academically and still fall short. Students frequently lack the structure or skills needed to manage their time and study more effectively (Thompson, 1986). Jones (1986) summarized the goal for all educators by saying we should challenge those student-athletes who can achieve at a higher level, while working with those who cannot. Saggau (personal communication, December 22, 1986) reiterated this idea. He stated that after being in education for many years it is realized that if a youngster is working up to their ability, most teachers will find a way to help the youngster succeed.

Alternatives to Denying Eligibility

Thompson (1986) recommended that schools conduct a seminar to help develop effective study skills and time

management strategies for athletes. It was suggested by Ruffin (1986) that every school have an academic support system for their athletes. The athletes would have additional access to tutoring and counseling services.

Lynchburg (Virginia) High School developed a mandatory athletic study hall which met three days each week (Jones, 1986). The study hall was supervised by coaches and met after school, but before practice time. All athletes who did not have at least a 2.0 the previous semester were required to attend. The study hall provided tutorial help and offered a place where students could study and complete their homework. Students who missed the study hall were not allowed to practice that day. After three unexcused absences, the athlete was dropped from the team.

Jones (1986) reported that the study hall is an alternative to establishing a minimum GPA for eligibility. It was concluded that students completed homework which otherwise would not have been completed; and that students studied more than they would have without the study hall. While the study hall will not solve all problems, it is a way in which educators can work with student-athletes to show that academics and athletics go hand in hand.

Jaworski (1986) reported that Mercy (Omaha, Nebraska) High School formulated academic probation procedures. These procedures were used only when a student's participation in a cocurricular activity was interfering with the student's academic performance. The policy was preventative in nature and any punitive action addressed the cause of the problem. Ownership of the problem was placed on the student and the policy was designed to help all students with a problem, not just those who were failing.

The teacher who observed the problem began the procedure by notifying the principal. If the principal concurred, a meeting of the sponsor, teacher, student, and the student's academic adviser was arranged. A contract was written which outlined what the student must do to bring up the grade. The student was allowed to practice and compete during the one week period of the contract. If the student honored the contract, then the problem was resolved.

If the contract agreement was not honored, the student was placed on probation. The student was not allowed to practice or compete during this two week period. The teacher listed what must be done during this time to improve the situation. If the student lived up

to the agreement, the problem was resolved; if not, the student would receive permanent suspension from the activities.

Jaworski (1986) stated that this policy has helped teachers and students work together to improve the situation. Since the implementation of this policy, students in activities have recorded higher GPAs than ever before. Teachers registered fewer complaints that cocurricular activities take excessive time away from the academic program.

Another alternative to denying eligibility was an attempt to limit the amount of class time students miss for practices and/or performances (Harper, 1986). Joekel (1986) listed several possibilities to gain more class time. Consideration should be given to: (a) more Saturday activities, (b) a reduction in the number of contests, (c) realignment of leagues to reduce travel time, (d) shorter seasons, and (e) more summer activities.

The approach of recognizing the student-athletes who demonstrate outstanding academic achievement has been used. The Iowa High School Athletic Association (1985) outlined a plan which was jointly adopted by the Iowa Boys High School Athletic Association and the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union. This program gives recognition for academic achievement by athletic teams. The "team"

is composed of all squad members in grades 10 through 12, any freshmen who were members of the varsity squad, and all student managers. An "Excellence in Academic Achievement" is given to teams with a combined GPA of 3.0 to 3.24. A "Distinguished Academic Achievement" is given to teams with a combined GPA of 3.25 to 4.0. Schools receive a certificate of recognition and each team member will also get a certificate.

Conclusion

This paper has identified three major reasons for the increased concern about the academic performance of athletes. Reports about the condition of education, the excellence in education concept, and the new NCAA standards for incoming freshmen have each influenced requirements now being implemented. Several states have adopted or are considering much more stringent academic eligibility requirements for participation in athletics.

State standards show a great deal of diversity. Requirements range from students having to pass as few as three courses to being mandated to compile a 2.0 GPA. The additional requirement of no grades below a "C" is included in some instances. The present trend seems to be directed toward a minimum GPA of 2.0.

The vast majority of the research examined indicated that student-athletes perform better academically than

students not involved in activities. While a causal relationship has not been verified, it is apparent that the academic performance of athletes is not hindered by their participation.

Researchers have expressed many other identifiable benefits resulting from the participation in activities. Munday and Davis (1974) reported that achievement in extracurricular activities was the only factor which consistently could be used to predict success in later life.

Some research has contradicted the logic associated with the push for stiffer eligibility requirements. Evidence has shown that when denying eligibility has been implemented, there has not been academic improvement. Peterman (1986) found that when more stringent requirements were implemented, the academic performance actually declined. Laughlin (1978) reported results which indicated students did better academically during the season or seasons in which they participated in activities than during their "off season".

Rather than taking the punitive action of denying eligibility, some schools have worked with the students involved in activities to improve their academic performance. Schools can hold seminars to develop study skills and time management skills. An athletic study

hall can be used to provide additional help for the student-athletes. An academic probation policy can be used to prevent problems as they begin to surface. The academic performance can be helped by attempting to reduce the class time that is missed to participate in activities. The positive approach of recognizing athletes who do well in the classroom can be used.

Just as there are physical or health requirements and training rule requirements for athletic participation, there should be some sort of academic requirements for athletic participation. The purpose of these academic requirements should not be to deny students the opportunity to participate. The rules should serve to emphasize the important relationship between athletic participation and academic performance. Many and varied benefits can be gained from participation in athletics. For some young people, athletics may be the only opportunity to experience success and to feel good about themselves. Educators must be willing to help the students in both their academic endeavors and their athletic pursuits.

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