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Education through Athletics

Interest in an Athletics Performance Curriculum

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Abstract

Intellectual and life-skill benefits of collegiate athletics participation have been documented in empirical research, yet athletics-centric curricula are traditionally not offered for academic credit in higher education. This pilot study employed a survey, distributed to FBS Division I college varsity athletes, coaches, athletics administrators, and faculty from three Atlantic Coast Conference institutions, to explore the interest in an athletics performance minor through the lens of the Integrated View of intercollegiate athletics. The results demonstrate a moderate interest in an athletics performance curriculum, with 66% of those surveyed voicing support. Those most supportive were varsity athletes and coaches, while faculty were the least supportive. This study adds to the literature by addressing the philosophical dichotomy that despite the nexus between educational outcomes and athletics, an opportunity for academic credit is lacking.

Keywords: *Intercollegiate athletics, experiential education, college sport, higher education, sport for development, curriculum*

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Introduction

Former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) president Myles Brand proposed the concept of an Integrated View of athletics within higher education in 2006 positing that credit should be provided for athletes as it is for music, dance, or dramatic arts students (Brand, 2006). While athletics is generally viewed as unworthy of academic credit due to its "extracurricular" status (Brand, 2006; Weight & Huml, 2016), other disciplines with similar organizational and pedagogical frameworks (i.e., theater, dance, and music) are considered "academic" and are offered as degree programs. Building on this comparison, the role of music or theater at the university is not unlike the role of athletics. A small portion of the student body majors in music or dance and only a small percentage of students participate in varsity athletics. Similarly, both musicians and athletes receive instruction from leaders in their fields, and few go on to perform at the professional level.

Music, dramatic arts, and athletics are appreciated by many university stakeholders; however, they are not valued equally when it comes to awarding academic credit (Brand, 2006; Weight & Huml, 2016). To this point, columnist Sally Jenkins (2011) asserted, "we congratulate music majors for their passion, and tell them that even if they don't make it in the symphony, they are acquiring an art and a method of thought that will be theirs forever. But for some reason we tell athletes who aspire to the highest levels that they are academically illegitimate and look down on them as vocational students" (para. 13).

Research conducted by Weight, Cooper, and Popp (2015) found that almost half of NCAA Division I coaches believed athletics should be structured similarly to academics, with a quarter of the coaches emphasizing within qualitative narratives that a change to an integrated athletics structure within higher education would be an effective medium to achieve the university's mission of education through athletics. Some coaches also believed the integrated view could serve as an avenue to build stronger ties between academics and athletics (Weight et al., 2015). Recent research has also supported the notion of intellectual and life-skill benefits of collegiate athletics participation, (Chalfin, Weight, Osborne, & Johnson, 2015). Despite this evidence, there remains no formalized applied curriculum in athletics performance. Given the educational value of athletics, it stands to reason a formalized curriculum could be offered.

One way to bring athletics into the academic fold is through the construction of an athletics performance minor (Potuto, 2017). While previous supporters of education through athletics have advocated for a major, a minor offers a logical first step toward that end. This research explores interest in an athletics performance minor that would pair "on-the-field" coaching and experiences (e.g., strength training) with traditional education (e.g., applied exercise physiology). A formalized athletics performance minor has the potential to strengthen educational experiences and opportunities for students interested in the study of elite athletic performance, while moving the needle toward education resurfacing as

the fundamental purpose of intercollegiate athletics in higher education (Brand 2006; R. Feezell, 2015; Weight, 2015).

However, while this idea has drawn support in the media and literature (e.g., Brand, 2006; Lombardi, 2014; Pargman, 2012; Weight, 2015), no research has explored the interest in such a curriculum to see if those in the academy and athletics support this concept. Considering this literary gap, the purpose of this study is to explore the level of interest in an athletics performance curriculum amongst FBS Division I varsity athletes, coaches, athletics administrators, and faculty.

Literature Review

Educational Value of Intercollegiate Athletics

The role of varsity intercollegiate athletics within higher education in the United States has been an area of concern for over 150 years (Ingrassia, 2012; Oriard, 2012). At the heart of the sport-university alliance is an assumption that there is an underlying educational value in competitive sport participation (Putney, 2009). This educational foundation of sport within the academy has come into question throughout history and is currently a topic of widespread dialogue due to recent cases of athletics-centric academic fraud, special admittance, scandal, and low graduation rates (Gurney & Southall, 2013; Harper, 2018; Smith & Willingham, 2015). These practices highlight issues of major clustering or "majoring in eligibility" wherein athletes are steered to majors that are seen as the path of least educational resistance, and not necessarily the path of educational fulfillment (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Schneider, Ross, & Fisher, 2010).

Countering this narrative, research has demonstrated that participation in intercollegiate athletics can develop a variety of skills (Gayles & Hu, 2009; Oriard, 2012). Demonstrative of this, some corporations specifically seek to hire former athletes because of the skills they practice through sport including goal-setting, competition, leadership, and team-building (Chalfin et al., 2015; Gould & Carson, 2008). Finally, research has demonstrated that former athletes who graduate and work full time have higher levels of job satisfaction, work engagement, income, health, and quality of life than their non-athlete graduate peers (Weight, DeFreese, Bonfiglio, Kerr, Osborne, 2018; Weight, Navarro, Huffman, & Smith-Ryan, 2014). Each of these studies provide insight into the educational value of sport participation.

Experiential Learning Theory

The theoretical foundation for this study is based upon Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which emphasizes the crucial role experience plays in the learning process (Kolb, 2014). The experiential learning pattern is cyclical, beginning with a concrete experience. This flows into stages two and three of reflective observation (reflecting on the action and in action/reviewing) and abstract conceptualization (learning from the experience). The final stage is active experimentation, when the person practices what was learned (Kolb, 2014).

ELT demonstrates that skills, knowledge, and experience can all be acquired outside of a traditional academic setting (Kolb, 2014). Examples of ELT can already be found in higher education, mainly in internship opportunities/requirements in certain fields of study. However, due to stringent time demands, many athletes struggle to locate internship opportunities that not only work with their schedules, but also fit their educational and career interests. An athletics performance minor could provide the opportunity to pair structured classroom education with an athletic participation lab to facilitate a synergistic application of experiential learning.

By taking the lessons learned in the training room, in the locker room, on the court, or on the field, educational curricula can become more personal and strengthen cognitive development and understanding for those interested in an athletics performance curriculum (Chaddock, Neider, Voss, Gaspar & Kramer, 2011). Not only could students engage in concrete experience, they could also participate in courses that directly tie into their athletic experiences, thus offering a unique opportunity for reflective observation. Whereas traditional experiential learning internships primarily focus on students working full time and not spending much time in the classroom, this minor is a unique combination of ELT that equally includes athletics and the classroom. This can lead to the formation of abstract conceptualization of these experiences, and the testing of this conceptualization through active experimentation (i.e., practice or competition). Thus, new knowledge is created and reinforced through hands-on experiences (Cantor, 1997; Weight et al., 2014).

For example, the day after intense strength training (concrete experience), an athlete feels muscle soreness (reflective observation). The athlete attends an applied exercise physiology course, where the professor discusses delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS), which results from microscopic damage to muscle fibers. The professor details the physiologic actions that take place during strength training, and steps to enhance muscle growth and reduce inflammation (abstract conceptualization). The athlete then imagines the physiologic processes during the next weight room session, utilizes a foam roller to apply self-myofascial release, and tests her knowledge through this active experimentation (step four). By pairing athletic experiences with academic instruction, there are tremendous opportunities for rich educational growth. Exploring this idea, the purpose of this study is to measure the level of interest in an athletics performance curriculum amongst FBS Division I varsity athletes, coaches, athletics administrators, and faculty in order to provide a foundation for future research.

Method

Participants & Procedures

The sample of athletics and educational stakeholders was drawn from three Atlantic Coast Conference institutions and included current varsity athletes, coaches, athletics administrators, and faculty (N = 539). Institutional directories

and athletic department websites were used to select participants and gather contact data. The sample of varsity athletes was drawn from only one institution due to access and privacy concerns, while all head and assistant coaches at the three institutions received the survey. Senior athletics administrators, compliance administrators, and athlete academic support administrators also received the survey. Faculty invited to participate included music, dance, theater, sport management, and exercise science professors, and faculty serving as athletics liaisons due to their familiarity with the potential teaching methods and pilot nature of the study.

Each participant received an electronic survey via Qualtrics which was open for one month. The following description of an athletics performance minor was provided with the goal of distinguishing this type of curriculum from other similar areas such as exercise science and sport management:

> Research over the past decade has provided insight into positive educational outcomes associated with participation in intercollegiate athletics. There appears to be education that happens through athletics that translates into increased marketability, satisfaction with life, occupational success, and health. This education is something many in athletics have felt, seen, or experienced, but little has been measured. As we seek to enhance the educational experiences of intercollegiate athletes, we are hoping to explore the possibility of designing an athletics performance minor that will pair a lot of the on-the-field knowledge gained (strength training, for example), with applied education (exercise physiology, for example), and facilitate credit for education that occurs outside of the traditional structures of the academy (viewing athletics similar in form to music, or dance, for example). Toward this end, we would like to gather your initial thoughts and ideas about an athletics performance curriculum.

Demographic questions relating to gender and ethnicity (Table 1) were posed after the curriculum description. The next questions were Likert scale, inquiring about the participant's opinions of an athletics performance minor on campus (Tables 2 and 3). Open-ended questions allowing for elaboration on participant opinions followed the Likert scale questions.

Data Analysis

This study employed qualitative and quantitative analysis procedures. Narrative responses were organized by repeated themes. These themes were coded, allowing for key points to be grouped together (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002). The research began with NVivo coding methods followed by axial coding to link the participants' narratives into condensed themes while also retaining their voices (Saldana, 2009).

Upon entering the quantitative data collected from the completed surveys into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), numerous statistical tests were run to analyze the results. Descriptive statistics provided the means and stan-

dard deviations, indicating differences in interest level and support of an athletics performance curriculum between the groups surveyed. A one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc analysis was also performed to test for significant differences between the independent variables of varsity athletes, coaches, athletics administrators, and faculty. Because distributions of the statistics of interest may not be normally distributed, nonparametric analyses using the Kruskal-Wallis test were also conducted. However, findings did not differ from parametric analyses.

Results

Demographics

Of the 539 varsity athletes, coaches, athletics administrators, and faculty invited to participate, 97 completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 18%. Coaches had the lowest sub-group response rate (24/215; 11.2%) and faculty had the highest (19/37; 51.4%). Of those who completed the survey, approximately 59.8% (n = 58) identified as male and 39.2% (n = 38) as female. A majority of the survey respondents (84.5%, n = 82) selected white or Caucasian as their ethnicity. Varsity athletes (37.1%, n = 36) and coaches (24.7%, n = 24) were most highly represented in the sample with faculty (19.6%, n = 19) and athletics administrators (18.6%, n = 18) following. Respondent demographic characteristics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

	%	*n*
Sex		
Male	59.80%	58
Female	39.20%	38
Unspecified	1.00%	1
Race/Ethnicity		
White or Caucasian	84.50%	82
Black or African American	5.20%	5
Hispanic or Latino	1.00%	1
Native American or American Islander	1.00%	1
Asian or Pacific Islander	3.10%	3
Other	5.20%	5
Title of Participants		
Varsity Athlete	37.10%	36
Coach	24.70%	24
Faculty	19.60%	19
Athletics Administrator	18.60%	18

n = 97

Support for an Athletics Performance Curriculum

Following the definition of an athletics performance curriculum, participants were asked, "based on your initial understanding, how supportive would you be of implementing an athletics performance minor on your campus?" The 5-point Likert scale ranged from (1) very unsupportive to (5) very supportive. Sixty-five percent (n = 63) of the respondents were supportive or very supportive. A breakdown of support for an athletics performance minor can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Based on Your Initial Understanding, How Supportive Would You Be of Implementing an Athletics-Centric Minor on Your Campus?

	%	*n*
Participant Response		
Very Unsupportive (1)	5.20%	5
Unsupportive (2)	7.20%	7
Neutral (3)	22.70%	22
Supportive (4)	40.20%	39
Very Supportive (5)	24.70%	24
Total	100.00%	97

M = 3.72, SD = 1.08

Variation between Stakeholder Groups

A one-way ANOVA was performed to test for significant differences among the participant groups regarding support for an athletics performance curriculum (See Table 3). Support was the highest among varsity athletes (M = 4.00, SD=0.79) and coaches (M = 4.00, SD = 0.78), followed by athletics administrators (M = 3.72, SD = 1.36). Faculty had the lowest mean (M = 2.84, SD = 1.17). The omnibus F-test was significant, suggesting at least one group mean was different, $F(3, 93)$ = 6.51, $p < 0.001$. Post-hoc analyses found that faculty showed significantly less support of the idea than varsity athletes (mean difference = -1.16, p = 0.01), coaches (mean difference = -1.16, p = 0.02), and athletics administrators (mean difference = -0.88, p = 0.04).

Athletics Performance Curriculum Initial Thoughts

Participants were asked to share their thoughts on an athletics performance curriculum in an open-ended question, which 77 participants completed. The responses were coded, evaluated for patterns and themes, and classified into 16 categories, which can be found in Table 4. One of the main themes of the responses is that athletics participation is deserving of academic credit (29%) and that the curriculum could couple what athletes learn from athletics with what is gained in the classroom.

Table 3

Support for Implementing an Athletics-Centric Curriculum

	Overall		*Athlete/Coach/Admin*		*Faculty*		*Mean Difference*	*F*	*p*
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*			
Support for implementing an athletics-centric minor	3.72	1.1						6.51	0.000
Athlete v. Faculty			4.00	0.79	2.84	1.17	1.158		
Coach v. Faculty			4.00	0.78	2.84	1.17	1.158		
Admin v. Faculty			3.72	1.36	2.84	1.17	0.88		
Credit for participation as currently organized	3.33	1.3						8.27	0.000
Athlete v. Faculty			3.86	1.22	2.21	0.98	1.651		
Coach v. Faculty			3.46	1.06	2.21	0.98	1.248		
Admin v. Faculty			3.28	1.41	2.21	0.98	1.067		
Credit for participation with clear educational outcomes	3.8	1.2						4.28	0.007
Athlete v. Faculty			4.11	1.04	3.00	1.20	1.11		
Coach v. Faculty			3.88	1.04	3.00	1.20	0.875		
Admin v. Faculty			3.80	1.31	3.00	1.20	0.944		

Fourteen percent believed that athletics participation provides valuable experiential learning opportunities that can tie into a curriculum. Four respondents indicated that this curriculum would prove beneficial for students interested in becoming coaches in the future. Eight of the respondents in favor of the academic credit for athletic participation raised concerns about the structure of the curriculum, grading processes, and impacts on eligibility requirements.

Some qualms pertaining to this style of curriculum expressed by those unsupportive of the curriculum (12%) include the potential for this to be an easy credit option (6.5%), the belief that basing a curriculum in athletics will further marginalize athletes (5%), and that athletics is purely extracurricular (4%). Four participants, all faculty members, also declared that intercollegiate athletics is a "racket," clearly conveying their disdain for an athletics performance curriculum, and the presence of athletics within the university. One faculty participant voiced, athletics is a "total drag on the mission of schools."

Table 4

Initial Thoughts on an Athletics-Centric Curriculum

	n	%
Supportive	32	41.6%
Athletics is worthy of class credit	22	28.6%
Transferable skills/experiential learning	14	18.2%
This could help prepare student-athletes for life after sports	12	15.6%
Curriculum needs to be very structured	11	14.3%
Unsupportive	6	7.8%
Curriculum offers potential for easy credit	5	6.5%
Want more information on the concept	5	6.5%
College athletics is a racket	5	6.5%
Athletics is similar to dance and theater so this curriculum should be an option	4	5.2%
Poses great opportunity for future coaches	4	5.2%
Campus is already too focused on athletics and this will further marginalize academics	4	5.2%
Athletics is purely extracurricular and should remain as such	3	3.9%
Bad optics for campuses	3	3.9%
This curriculum could help solve the disconnect between the Academy and athletics	3	3.9%

n = 77

Discussion and Implications

This research explores an avenue to bridge the divide between the academy and athletics, and the results suggest there is moderate interest in an athletics performance minor. Stemming from the conceptual rationale of an Integrated View of intercollegiate athletics (Brand, 2006), the educational value of intercollegiate athletics (Chalfin et al., 2015; Weight & Huml, 2016; Weight et al., 2015), and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014), this discussion focuses on stakeholder perspectives surrounding an athletics performance minor.

Perspective on an Athletics Performance Minor

The majority (66%) of participants voiced support for the curriculum. There were a variety of different rationales offered for why this curriculum would be advantageous. One of the most common reasons participants voiced support for the curriculum was the transferrable and experiential skills varsity athletes graduate with. One faculty member commented, "In a landscape that increasingly places

more emphasis on transferable skills development and competency building, I certainly see participation in athletics providing an experiential learning environment." The faculty member continued by stating that this style of curriculum could help all parties involved in higher education better understand each other. One varsity athlete wrote: "This would be AMAZING! I have learned things through my participation on a team that I never would have learned anywhere else… The lessons learned are applicable to life post-graduation and should be treated just like any other experiential education or hands on learning course."

The sentiments of this faculty member and varsity athlete provide supplementary voices to a foundation of literature exploring the educational value of participation in intercollegiate athletics (e.g., Bonfiglio, 2016; Paule & Gilson, 2011; Potuto, 2017; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Weight & Huml, 2016). These perspectives also stress the potential of experiential learning, and the opportunities that athletics participation offers to tap into new ways of thinking and learning.

Faculty perspectives. Faculty support of athletics on campuses has always been tenuous (e.g., Sack, 2001; Savage et al., 1929). Uncertainties and concerns about housing athletics within universities were expressed in the Carnegie Report (Savage et al., 1929), and many of those same concerns are still voiced today. Faculty remain the most vocal crusaders to enhance and protect the academic experiences of intercollegiate athletes (Comeaux, 2011; T. Feezell, 2015; Lewinter et al., 2013), and data gathered within this study support this notion. Of the participants who were either very unsupportive or unsupportive of implementing an athletics performance minor on their campus, 77% were faculty.

Faculty provided reasons why they do not support an athletics performance curriculum. The two primary themes were 1) athletics marginalizes the academic integrity of institutions, and 2) student-athletes are already more athletes than students (Atwater, 2010; Smith, 2011). Many faculty feel that athletics and the academy are incompatible (Comeaux, 2011; Sperber, 2000), and it is possible that much of the prejudice against athletics is rooted in misunderstanding. Many faculty do not understand intercollegiate athletics (T. Feezell, 2015; Gerdy, 2006). Likewise, those in athletics do not fully grasp the intricacies of the academy (Toma, 2009).

The concerns faculty cite relative to the role of intercollegiate athletics in the academy have merit, however, faculty have largely been apathetic toward or unable to address the issues that plague the athlete-student experience (Lederman, 2007). The University of Nebraska's Faculty Athletics Representative expressed the importance of synergy between university parties: "All the external noise and all the external factors facing college athletics demand a unified approach from the greater campus and the athletic department. A positive, mutually supportive working relationship… can go a long way to maintain, enhance, and showcase the positive values of collegiate athletics" (Potuto, 2017, para. 22).

Channeling this spirit, perhaps, many faculty members expressed the positive contribution that athletics brings to a university campus and community, and approximately 42% of faculty members surveyed were supportive or very supportive

of implementing the curriculum. One faculty saw this curriculum as an opportunity to "inspire athletes to examine their value as an athlete on campus, motivate them to consider graduate school, and help inform the campus community about the value of sport (more than entertainment)."

This minor has the opportunity to address the varied faculty perceptions by creating something that can touch and benefit multiple university populations (Brand, 2006). One faculty member's response on an athletics performance curriculum was reminiscent of Potuto's (2017) comments: "this would help both athletes and others (faculty, staff, students, community) better understand the skills and competencies gained through participation in athletics, especially if this experiential education was paired up with a more traditional academic course in a classroom/lab setting." This might allow students to think creatively and critically about experiences they have during training, competing, and performing, while challenging them to understand the underlying physiology, psychology, nutrition, leadership, and communication elements necessary to thrive.

A theater professor respondent made the comparison between his field and athletics: "I feel this is very comparable to the theatre world where I teach. Our students learn in the classroom and practice their craft on stage." This acknowledgment of discipline similarities highlights the potential for educational foundations in sport that mirror other professions (Jenkins, 2011; Pargman, 2012), facilitating opportunities for varsity athletes, and other elite performers in the student body (possibly in club sport or competitive non-sanctioned sports, for example). Perspective is an important construct in this curriculum and opening it up to those outside of intercollegiate athletics would provide for cross-campus connections, intriguing class discussions, and learning opportunities for all parties involved.

Conclusion

Building on research that provides support for the educational value of intercollegiate athletics, there seems to be a moderate degree of support and a rationale for the implementation of an athletics performance curriculum. There were significant differences in levels of support for an athletics performance curriculum between varsity athletes and faculty and coaches and faculty. However, many survey respondents, including faculty, believed that adding measurable educational outcomes to athletics participation would make the curriculum a viable option for implementation, while also helping to restore education as a central mission of intercollegiate athletics. An athletics performance curriculum founded on experiential educational opportunities provides an avenue to further integrate the academy and athletics.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was the first to explore the interest in and design of an athletics performance curriculum from a limited broad base of stakeholders. There are numerous follow-up studies that could be conducted to extend this research. The most logical follow-up would be to replicate the study with a broader sample to provide

a more expansive picture of interest and support for an athletics performance curriculum. As the purpose of this study was not to explore the implementation or design of an athletics performance minors, another study could delve more specifically into the implementation and design process of this curriculum.

Another limitation involves the respondents judging this minor as an abstract and novel idea. Participants' biases and motives likely skewed the results. Other research methodologies would also be helpful to further explore the research questions addressed with this study. Interviews and focus groups of stakeholder populations will facilitate a way to gather more information and a rich source of ideas and opinions about an athletics performance curriculum. Future studies could address the concerns proposed by the survey respondents.

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