



Factors Influencing the Academic Performance of African American Student-Athletes in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT

Based on previous research, it is evident that college students benefit significantly when they are integrated into the social and academic components of higher education institutions, especially historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Student-athletes are often isolated from the traditional student population of the institution, mainly due to increased involvement in a sport. Nonetheless, there are few studies that have researched the impact of class preparedness and readiness, cocurricular activities, and type of current living arrangements on academic performance of student-athletes at HBCUs. Historically black colleges and universities are often regarded, as a group, as low-performing institutions and much of this perception stems from comparisons of graduation rates between HBCUs and non-HBCUs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to address student-athlete academic performance at the selected HBCUs, and determine strategies and programs for improved student-athlete academic performance at these institutions. The dependent variable was self-reported academic performance of student-athletes. The independent variables included hours of preparation for class, participation in cocurricular activities, and current living arrangements. Data from the National Survey for Student Engagement was used to answer the questions for the study. The sample consisted of 223 student-athletes at HBCUs. There was a significant

relationship between academic performance and current living arrangements. Participants that lived on campus performed better academically than those that lived in other housing arrangements. The findings indicate the need for student-athletes to live on campus with all options of campus involvement available and reevaluate the importance of campus living communities and access to academic success programs and offices for student-athletes.

Keywords: academic performance, student-athletes, living arrangements

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has increased the need for colleges and universities to put more emphasis on retaining their students and improving graduation rates. Colleges and universities have tried to make significant improvements through a variety of programs and student services. Higher education institutions have developed offices, programs, and departments specifically designed to improve retention rates. Many higher education institutions, especially Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), are faced with a lack of financial resources to develop specialized units of operation that are imperative to student success.

While many institutions do not have the financial resources to develop specialized units of operation, it must be imperative to encourage student success academically and socially. Having students live on campus is one part of the structure of higher education that has encouraged students to be more involved in campus life and activities. Students who reside on campus have a more connected feeling to the whole college experience (Montgomery & Montgomery, 2012). However, about half of students with dreams and aspirations based on their future receipt of an earned certificate or degree leave with that dream either stalled or ended. Access and completion rates for African American, Hispanic, and Native American students have always lagged behind White and Asian students, as have those for low-income students and students with disabilities. Although postsecondary enrollment rates for students of color are at levels similar to White and Asian students, access to 4-year colleges, especially our nation's most selective institutions, remains inequitable.

Historically Black colleges and universities are often regarded, as a group, as low-performing institutions and much of this perception stems from comparisons of graduation rates between HBCUs and non-HBCUs (Richards & Awokoya, 2012). Some HBCU institutions have graduation rates that compare favorably with the rates of other types of institutions, while others have rates that have trailed national medians (Richards & Awokoya, 2012). Many publicly operated HBCUs have seen a decline in state appropriations and decreased funds in state financial aid for college students. Private HBCUs have also faced declined enrollment numbers and difficulty in fundraising. This undoubtedly has affected these institutions' ability to retain their students and persist to graduation. Research has shown that the major reason that Black students drop out of college is money. Many HBCU students have relied on financial aid provided through Pell Grants, personal and family incomes, and savings. These funds often provided only a modest and limited level of the full financial support needed. Loans and other forms of government aid are often heavily relied upon to supplement the cost of tuition, which usually results in heavy student indebtedness upon graduation. In many cases, students take account of such potential indebtedness in making retention decisions. Research indicated that even though society rewards qualifications in many cases, most minority students worry about job prospects upon college completion, and therefore tend to think twice about the huge potential indebtedness and being tied down to loan payments in a world of unsure employment status before they decided to persist in college completion (Swail, 2003). Improved retention rates at these schools is a first priority because student enrollment is the key component to many of these institutions remaining open to offer students an opportunity at a college education.

The vast majority of studies completed on student retention have focused on social integration, socioeconomic values, and racial factors of students enrolled in college. Tinto (1987), Bean and Eaton (2000), Bowen and Levin (2003), and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have led studies that provided a great deal of work on minority student retention and student-athletes. Due to the impact these variables have on retention, the current study involved an analysis of student-athletes, academic performance, hours spent during the week preparing for class, hours spent

during the week on cocurricular activities, institutional type, sex, and living arrangements. A second level of analysis was conducted on living arrangements while enrolled to see if there was any significant impact on student-athletes' academic performance. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to address student-athlete academic performance at the selected HBCUs and determine strategies and programs for improved student-athlete academic performance at these institutions. The research also analyzed whether academic performance, athletic participation, hours spent during the week preparing for class, hours spent during the week on cocurricular activities, and living arrangements made a significant difference in academic performance. Analysis of the results will hope to increase awareness of student-athlete academic performance and give feedback on suggestive practices.

Issues for HBCU Institutions

Student retention is an important matter that impacts all students and not just a certain percentage of those who fall short academically. The increased awareness on the topic of retention is affected by the characteristics of the educational settings of an institution. Low student retention rates are a direct loss of tuition income for higher education institutions. Public and private HBCUs are more vulnerable to student retention issues because of socioeconomic backgrounds of students and depleted funding to support student services and activities. The problem with researching retention rates of any cohort of African American college students is complicated by the various kinds of institutions in which these students are enrolled.

Campus Interactions

Campus integration is important in retaining college students so they complete a degree. The campus climate mediates undergraduates' academic and social experiences in college (Swail, 2003). Minority students inadequately prepared for the nonacademic challenges that college brings often experience culture shock (Swail, 2003). The lack of diversity in the student population, faculty, staff, and curriculum many times restricts the nature and quality of minority students' interactions in and out of the classroom. The lack of interaction becomes a major factor in threatening minority students' academic performance and social experiences.

Student-Athletes

The assumption for many years has been that student-athletes only attend school to play the sport that they desire and love. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) requires that each student-athlete make satisfactory progress towards earning his or her degree to remain eligible to participate in NCAA intercollegiate athletics. The responsibility of making sure the student-athlete remains eligible, academically, is up to the student. Athletic programs at all levels of the NCAA are growing prominently and intercollegiate athletics is a vital component of recruiting and retaining talented students.

Academic Performance

In this section, student-athlete academic performance and other distinct variables will be discussed. The understanding of Black student-athletes within higher education has been filtered through data and studies primarily focused on Blacks at predominantly White and NCAA-affiliated higher education institutions (Horton, 2015). Black student-athletes versus their peers often times rely on athletics as an avenue to access higher education and for future earnings. As a result of these heavy expectations on athletics, student-athletes are expected to balance their academic studies as well as game and practice schedules, and they are often overburdened with high expectations from family and close friends for a professional sports career after college. The NCAA introduced Proposition 48 in 1984 to increase graduation rates for student-athletes. Proposition 48 altered the landscape of the future of intercollegiate athletics, especially for those students of color (Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012). Proposition 48 mandates that student-athletes have a minimum ACT score 17 or SAT score of 700 and a minimum high school GPA of 2.00 or better. Before the enactment of Proposition 48, many HBCUs were operating with an open admissions enrollment policy (Reynolds et al., 2012).

Bowen and Levin (2003) found that because student-athletes spend considerable time together, they inevitably develop very tight-knit communities within the general student population. Athletes spend time living, eating, studying, partying, practicing, traveling, and competing amongst one another all year, which inevitably develops

strong bonds of association and connectedness. A student's participation in athletics can offer challenges that may interfere with retention. Student-athletes become isolated within their own athletic subgroup and often find it difficult to adjust to institutional life if and when sports participation ends. Some student-athletes find it impossible to be involved in other cocurricular activities compared to other active students on campus, given the high level of involvement in their respective sport.

Student-athletes as a whole graduate at higher rates than students of the general population, but success in graduation rates is not consistent across gender, race/ethnicity, and sport (Bowen & Levin 2003). Compared to the federal graduation rates, student-athletes who entered college in 2004 at institutions with the largest athletic programs graduated at rates higher than students in the general population at those institutions. The NCAA uses a different method of calculating graduation rates that does not penalize institutions for student-athletes who transfer to another institution in good standing. Between 1999 and 2003, the graduation success rate used by the NCAA indicated that over 80% of student-athletes graduated within 6 years (Bowen & Levin, 2003).

There are many factors that affect the academic performance of student-athletes at the college level. Demographic variables, family structure, and socioeconomic status are among many factors that have a significant impact on academic performance of Black student-athletes.

African American and Minority Student-Athlete Factors

African American student athletes are often recruited from many of the larger American cities to play their respective sports, namely basketball and football, on the collegiate level. These athletes pursue or are clustered in majors in the social sciences and general studies, are usually recruited on athletic scholarships, and are often the first in their families to attend a college or university. Reynolds et al. (2012) focused their study on African American student-athletes using the variables of family structure, socioeconomic status, and sex to examine the relationship of these variables on academic performance. Family structure plays a great role in the life of student-athletes, but it does not define their career aspirations. Family structure is another demographic variable that significantly impacts the academic preparation of minority students. For example, Black children are significantly less likely than other children to be living with two married parents. Athletes who come from two-parent homes and those who come from single-parent homes have the same or equal chance of becoming successful in the classroom. Socioeconomic status can play a very valuable role in the growth of student athletes' academic performance and athletic endeavors. The socioeconomic statuses of student athletes are reflected by their families' income situation. Certain levels of socioeconomic status have affected the achievement gap in education. A great number of African American student athletes indeed come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, other African American student-athletes have attained high socioeconomic levels in recent decades. Title IX opened the doors for new women's sports teams. Over 30 years ago, fewer than 30,000 female athletes competed at the collegiate level. In 2003, there were approximately 150,000 collegiate female student athletes. As Title IX celebrates its 40th anniversary, women now account for 41% of all intercollegiate athletics (Clopton, 2012).

Reynolds et al. (2012) used the Morris Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Student Athletes' Motivation toward Sports and Academics Questionnaire (SAMSAQ), and a demographic survey. The Morris Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale consists of 10 items, each of which is rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) was used to measure levels of motivations of student-athletes (Rosenberg, 1965). The SAMSAQ was developed to measure academic and athletic motivation of student-athletes. Research on the demographic variables of African American student-athletes related to gender, family structure, and socioeconomic status revealed that female student athletes are progressing and working harder than they have before to meet the rigor of both their academic performance and athletic responsibilities. The demographic variable of family structure had a significant linear relationship with academic performance along with gender and socioeconomic status.

Live on Campus

Student-athletes should be encouraged to live on campus at least the first 2 years of college (Bowen & Levin, 2003).

Student-athletes have many goals and time constraints involving academic, social, and athletic demands. Living on campus will allow student-athletes to spend more time on campus. The idea of spending time on campus will increase the likelihood of student-athletes engaging with their peers, faculty, and staff (Purdie & Rosser, 2011). Student-athletes should be encouraged to live on campus with non-athletes (Bowen & Levin, 2003). According to Alder and Alder (1991), athletes who manage to balance their athletic and academic lives usually have a solid group (i.e., educationally supportive individuals who are concerned about the athletes future) of parents and friends who actively supported academic success within the university (Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1999). On-campus students were more likely to return to college the following year, were more likely to persist at college until they graduated, had a higher degree of satisfaction with their college experience, participated in more extracurricular activities on campus, and had more interpersonal, informal interaction with faculty and peers. NCAA rules prohibit special housing arrangements for student-athletes such as residence halls occupied solely by student-athletes or residential hall blocks if such policies are not in place for students in the general campus population. Throughout a collegiate career, athletes prepare their body and mind to meet the challenges of competition as well as their academic requirements. In large and small institutions alike, the demands for athletic performance can place academics as an inferior component of a student-athlete's college experience. This growing gap between college athletics and educational values is a major issue. The future of university athletics must require athletes, parents, coaches and administrators to work together in providing the proper learning and living environment to ameliorate an athlete's success (Snyder, 2009). The NCAA encourages that student-athletes make up no more than 50% of a residence hall's occupants. The recommendation here is for the percentage of student-athletes who make up a single residence hall to be as low as possible to increase opportunities to interact with their peers who are not student-athletes.

METHODS

The data for this study were collected through purchase from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) organization. Data was collected based on the HBCUs that were located in the southern region. Results were collected to analyze data for student-athletes who participated in the study in the year 2012. The NSSE measured two critical features of the collegiate experience. First, it measured the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educational activities. Second, the NSSE measured how the institution facilitated its resources and organized curriculum and other opportunities for student learning. NSSE annually collects information at hundreds of 4-year colleges and universities about first-year and senior students' participation in programs and activities that institutions provided for their learning and personal development.

Participant Population

For this study, secondary data were used from the NSSE. The population of student-athletes for this study was taken from the 82 HBCUs located in the southern region. The student-athletes were examined through their preferences of type of current living arrangements while enrolled in school. The population of the study was approximately 225, which was large enough to produce significant results that determined validity of the research questions. The participants of the study were not prescreened in any way or required to sign any consent form. Participants remained anonymous due to the nature of this study and use of secondary data. The participants of the study did not receive any compensation for their services. The characteristics of the participants were varied. The age range of the participants was between 18 to 24 years old. The sex specification of the participants consisted of both male and female students. The majority of the ethnicity of the participants were African American students.

Variables

As described previously, the variables of the study were academic performance, the number of hours spent preparing for class, the number of hours spent on cocurricular activities, and type of current living arrangements while enrolled at the institution. There are many variables that are considered when evaluating student-athlete academic performance in higher education. The independent variables of the current study were type of current living arrangements, number of hours spent preparing for class, and number of hours spent on cocurricular activities. The dependent variables of this study included athletic participation and academic performance. The analysis of this study was examined through the results of senior year student-athletes from the 82 HBCU

institutions located in the southern region during the 2012 academic year.

Statistical Design

The Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 21 was used to analyze the data of the study. The values from NSSE and the coded designs of the independent variables were entered into the statistical software program. The results were given after numerous different statistical designs had been run to test the research questions.

- **Research Question 1.** Descriptive statistics (Mean, Median, and Mode) and a two-way chi-square were used to determine relationships of academic performance and hours spent during the week studying of student-athletes at HBCUs.
- **Research Question 2.** Descriptive statistics (Mean, Median, and Mode) and a two-way chi-square were used to determine relationships of academic performance and cocurricular activities of student-athletes at HBCUs.
- **Research Question 3.** Descriptive statistics (Mean, Median, and Mode) and a two-way chi-square were used to determine relationships of academic performance and living arrangements of student-athletes at HBCUs.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to (a) address academic performance of student-athletes at the selected HBCUs (b) recognize factors that are influencing academic performance of student-athletes at HBCU institutions, and (c) recommend strategies and programs for improved student-athlete academic performance at these institutions. HBCUs are often regarded, as a group, as low-performing institutions and much of this perception stems from comparisons of graduation rates between HBCUs and non-HBCUs (Richards & Awokoya, 2012). The understanding of Black student-athletes within higher education has been filtered through data and studies primarily focused on Blacks at predominantly White and NCAA-affiliated higher education institutions (Horton, 2015). Black student-athletes versus their peers often times rely on athletics as an avenue to access higher education and for future earnings.

The relationships were examined through the number of hours spent during the week preparing for class and student-athlete academic performance, the number of hours spent during a typical week in cocurricular activities and student-athlete academic performance, and the type of living arrangements and student-athlete academic performance. On-campus students were more likely to return to college the following year, were more likely to persist at college until they graduated, had a higher degree of satisfaction with their college experience, participated in more extracurricular activities on campus, and had more interpersonal, informal interaction with faculty and peers. The future of university athletics must require athletes, parents, coaches, and administrators to work together in providing the proper learning and living environment to meliorate an athlete's success (Snyder, 2009).

The NCAA encourages that student-athletes make up no more than 50% of a residence hall's occupants. High-achieving Black male student-athletes in Martin et al's (2010) study reported that coaches prioritized athletic accomplishment over academic engagement and discouraged participation in activities beyond their sport of choice (Harper et al., 2013). Student-athletes at larger institutions, mainly predominantly White institutions, have athletics integrated into their daily lives on campus and are submerged in an athletic subculture. Student-athletes tend to be extremely isolated from the larger community and their social lives are dominated by interactions with other student-athletes (Henry & Closson, 2010).

Number of Hours Spent Preparing for Class

A two-way chi-square test was used to examine the relationship between the two categorical variables, number of hours spent preparing for class and academic performance. The test compared the observed frequencies or proportions of the cases in each category, with the values that would be expected if there were no association between the two variables being measured. The two categorical variables of the test were independent. The analyzed results derived from Question 1 comparing the number of hours spent during the week preparing for class and academic performance from the two-way chi-square test indicated no significant relationship. A total of 225 student-athletes was identified from the NSSE survey in 2012. Of the 225 student-athletes identified, 223 were valid

responses with a 99.1% validation rate and 0.9% indicating missing. Data were analyzed for a sample of 223 (n = 223) useable responses.

Number of Hours Spent on Cocurricular Activities

A two-way chi-square test was used to examine the relationship between the two categorical variables, the number of hours spent during the week on cocurricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.) and academic performance. The statistical test compared the observed frequencies of proportions of the cases in each category with the values that would be expected if there were not any association between the two variables being measured.

The comparison of academic performance (What have most of your grades been up to now at this institution?) and the number of hours spent during the week participating in cocurricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.), which was the cross-tabulation, yielded a 95% confidence interval. The Pearson Chi-Square value was 26.790 and the p-value was (.967), which was greater than or equal to .05. Therefore, with the p-value (.967), it was concluded that the variables remained independent in the population and that there was not any statistical relationship between academic performance and the number of hours spent during the week participating in cocurricular activities of male and female student-athletes at HBCUs.

Type of Current Living Arrangements

A two-way chi-square statistical test was used to examine the relationship between the two categorical variables, type of current living arrangements (on-campus, off-campus, fraternity or sorority house) and academic performance (What have most of your grades been up to now at this institution?). The two-way chi-square test compared the observed frequencies or proportions of the cases in each category. The values from the test would be expected if there was no association between the two variables measured. With both of the categorical variables of the test being independent, the analyzed results derived from Research Question 3 comparing the type of current living arrangements and academic performance from the two-way chi-square test indicated a significant relationship. Data were analyzed from a sample of (n = 223) useable responses.

The comparison of academic performance (What have most of your grades been up to now at this institution?) and the type of current living arrangements now while attending college (dormitory, fraternity or sorority house, or residence off-campus) yielded a 95% confidence interval. The Pearson Chi-Square was 39.722 and the p-value was (.023), which was less than or equal to .05. With the indicated p-value (.023), it was concluded that the variables were dependent in the population and there was a significant relationship between academic performance and the type of current living arrangements while attending college of male and female student-athletes at HBCUs.

CONCLUSIONS

Number of Hours Spent Preparing for Class

The first research question examined analysis of the factor of the number of hours spent during the week preparing for class and its effects on academic performance. Findings from the two-way chi-square analysis indicated that the majority of the student-athletes spent 1-5 hours per week or 6-10 hours per week preparing for class. Of the 55 student-athletes who spent 1-5 hours per week, 38% self-reported their grades ranging between A or A-, 52% self-reported their grades between B- and B+, and 9% self-reported their grades being between C and C+. The student-athletes who indicated they spent between 6-10 hours per week preparing for class reported 44% had grades of A and A-, 50% received grades between B+ and B-, and 5% self-reported their grades of C and C+.

Number of Hours Spent on Cocurricular Activities

Student-athletes need and should aspire to want to be involved in other activities on campus other than their sports participation. Studies have shown that students who are engaged, academically and socially, are more developed and persistent students. Of the 49 student-athletes that indicated participation in cocurricular activities 1-5 hours per week, 40% self-reported grades ranging from A to A-, 53% self-reported grades between B+ and B-, and 6% indicated they attained grades between C+ and C. The 43 student-athletes out of 223 who reported they participated

in cocurricular activities 6-10 hours per week, the majority of the student-athletes self-reported attaining grades between B+ and B-.

Type of Current Living Arrangements

There were 90 student-athletes who indicated they lived in on-campus housing while attending college. Fifty-seven percent of those student-athletes self-reported that most of their grades were A and A- at the institution. There were 125 student-athletes who indicated they lived off campus, either within walking distance or farther than walking distance, while attending college. Twenty-eight percent of the reported student-athletes indicated most of their grades were A- and A. There was only one student-athlete who reported living in a fraternity or sorority house while attending college.

It is important to note the 57% of student-athletes who indicated they lived in on-campus housing while attending college self-reported that most of their grades were A- and A, higher than any of the other living arrangement categories. These findings clearly show that student-athletes who live on campus perform better than those who live off campus or in some other form of housing at the institution. These findings are not astonishing about student-athletes. Previous research has indicated students who are not athletes who live on campus perform better academically than others.

Implications for the Educational Community

The findings from this study indicate that the number of hours spent during the week preparing for class and the number of hours spent during a typical week on cocurricular activities had a small amount of impact on the academic performance of student-athletes in the study. Findings do indicate that the type of living arrangements of student-athletes at HBCU institutions affect academic performance consistently and it should be recommended that HBCU institutions' athletic departments put in place guidelines for freshman student-athletes to continue live on campus throughout their four to five years of matriculation to graduation. Furthermore, these findings could benefit institutions that stress the importance of academic performance amongst student-athletes enrolled and elevate the graduation rates of HBCU institutions that in previous years have been identified by having lower graduation rates than PWI institutions. Nevertheless, before making decisions based on these findings, institutions should conduct further research to investigate the impact of intercollegiate athletics on student retention and student engagement of student-athletes.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study considered the reactions of senior student-athletes at HBCUs. Future research should be done on freshman student-athletes' responses to academic performance and amount of time preparing for class, time spent participating in cocurricular activities, and type of living arrangements to allow for a comparison of freshman to senior year. Further research could be considered to examine the same variables and gain analysis based on sport-by-sport comparison. Lastly, researching the factors that influence academic performance of student-athletes can encourage institutions to provide a wider spectrum of student support services to not only student-athletes, but traditional students also.

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