Chapter 5: High School & College Sports

# 5.1. Research faculty are not eager to study intercollegiate sports

Research faculty are not known for doing critical investigations of college sports. This made it surprising when Dr. Myles Brand, then president of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), invited scholars to the 2006 NCAA convention to discuss whether college sports were a legitimate topic for scholarly inquiry.

Sport sociologist, Jay Coakley was asked to lead off this discussion by explaining why university researchers have not done critical studies of the sports programs that constitute such a visible representation of their universities. The point of the presentation was that doing such research can be risky for a scholar’s career in higher education. In making this point, Coakley identified four factors that constrain faculty research on college sports and then recommended how the NCAA might minimize those constraints and create incentives for researchers to turn their attention to college sports. The following essay is an abridged version of his presentation:

## The Risky Business of Studying College Sports by Jay Coakley

Four factors inhibit critical research on college sports. These factors are located in the university, the community, traditional academic disciplines, and the NCAA.

## University Constraints

First of all, studying the immediate contexts of our everyday lives is challenging. We often take for granted the events and routines that frame our daily experiences and don’t see them as topics to be studied. Being immersed in these contexts makes it difficult to view them critically, especially when faculty achieve enough status to have a vested interest in maintaining them as they are. Studying valued traditions and rituals in our social worlds is especially challenging because research often exposes their inconsistencies, internal contradictions, and taken-for-granted ideological foundations.

Secondly, it is risky to study traditions and rituals that serve the interests of powerful people in our social worlds, including our campuses. As some of us know well, research can create quite a fuss when it exposes the problematic aspects of intercollegiate sports. This is why studies of intercollegiate sports, when they are done, tend to be historical and descriptive rather than critical and analytical. Most faculty members understand that is it risky to do research that threatens what is valued by powerful university administrators or influential university benefactors. Therefore, unless they are asked to study intercollegiate sports, most researchers won’t jeopardize their careers doing so when there are many other topics they can study. Why take the chance of doing research that could attract negative attention from the people who sign your paychecks, approve promotions and tenure awards, allocate university resources, or influence campus decisions with major donations?

Third, when researchers cannot design studies that directly serve athletic department needs, they’re not likely to gain access to useful data on intercollegiate sports, especially data on the experiences of athletes and the internal dynamics of teams and athletic departments. Relevant here is that many athletic departments are characterized by institutionalized suspicion. Although this suspicion is justifiable in some cases, it generally precludes collecting data from representative samples of athletes or teams. Furthermore, some teams have cultures organized around the belief that outsiders are not to be trusted because they cannot understand how the athletes give meaning to their experiences and to each other as members of sport-specific social worlds. These cultures are sustained partly by a vocabulary stressing that team members are “family,” and that survival and success depend on sticking together and providing mutual support in the face of a potentially hostile world. Further, people not in that world cannot know what it means to be part of a select group that is dedicated to a sport and willing to pay the price, make sacrifices, and play through pain for the sake of membership. Entering such a culture and gaining the trust of athletes is impossible without the consent of the head coach and assistants. This means that collecting valid and reliable data about intercollegiate sports requires administrative, athletic department, and coach support in addition to the interest and commitment of research faculty and their ability to develop a rapport with people who create and live within sport cultures – a rare combination indeed.

This point is not made to malign athletic departments or coaches. All of us know that it is risky to allow others to critically scrutinize our lives when their interests may not overlap with ours, reality television notwithstanding. Those who control access to data on intercollegiate sports realize that researchers are more interested in discovery and knowledge production than win-loss records and other athletic department priorities. Therefore, when coaches and athletic directors have the power to do so, they close their teams and athletes off to researchers, unless, of course, they commission a study in which the findings are reported only to them and never made public. This is not new and it’s the reason why public knowledge is grounded in research that focuses on the poor rather than the powerful, on employees rather than employers, and on lower-division undergraduate students in introductory courses rather than deans and administrators.

The validity and reliability problems created by restricted access to data certainly discourage many serious researchers from studying intercollegiate sports, apart from doing descriptive studies or those designed specifically to enhance player performance and team success. There are a few notable exceptions to this rule, including Patti and Peter Adler’s research summarized in their book, *Backboards and Blackboards:* *College Athletes and Role Engulfment* (1991)*.* But most exceptions, including the Adlers’ research, involve studies of single teams or small, unrepresentative samples of athletes; they may not be seen as credible by journal review boards, and they may elicit nasty public critiques when they’re published. Mounting a defense against these critiques is difficult when data are limited. In any case, these studies are not likely to earn the merit needed to maintain one’s status as a member of a research faculty.

## Discipline Constraints

Further limiting research on intercollegiate sports is the low priority given across nearly all academic disciplines to physical culture as a research topic. Knowledge production in U.S. universities has long been based on clear-cut mind-body distinctions. Unlike scholars in Asian cultures, where widely used approaches assume mind-body integration as the foundation for being human, U.S. scholars seldom acknowledge that human existence is embodied or that embodied activities, such as sports, ought to be studied seriously.

This intellectual climate has made physical education such an oxymoron that it has all but disappeared from the curriculum in many U.S. schools, from kindergarten to doctoral programs. There are a few universities where it has survived under the cover of kinesiology and human performance departments, but it is not viewed as academically legitimate by researchers who treat bodies as fleshy machines to be examined in laboratories part-by-disembodied-part. As a result, sports and other forms of physical culture remain risky topics for research, and there is little funding for those of us who think otherwise. As my colleagues have told me, “If you want to study athletes, do a proposal with faculty from the medical school.” As a result, there are few studies of the embodied student experience, on or off the field.

## Community Constraints

Another source of factors inhibiting research on intercollegiate sports is the local community, especially when powerful and influential people are boosters of intercollegiate sport programs and want them to grow, maintain near-perfect records, and attract more spectators. Many such boosters have long accepted the unsupportable ideology that sports build character and are essentially pure activities sullied only by a few “bad apples,” mostly in the form of undisciplined athletes and unscrupulous outsiders, such as agents or gamblers. This may lead them to help recruit coaches who can effectively control athletes but it doesn’t make them supportive of research that helps us understand the connection between intercollegiate sports and higher education.

Research that threatens the interests of these boosters invites attention that few scholars are prepared for or willing to confront. When this attention takes the form of critical attacks, it often harms a scholar’s career and turns their everyday life into a tedious exercise in self-defense. Defusing criticism with logic and data is difficult because it is usually infused with emotions and grounded in the personal interests of people who don’t see the point of asking critical questions about the things that provide them pleasure, prestige, and profit. Furthermore, unless a researcher has an established relationship with journalists, influential boosters can frame a public media discussion of issues in ways that put a scholar at a distinct disadvantage when trying to explain and defend a research project. When local media are networked with regional and national media, the stakes associated with media coverage increase, and defending one’s scholarly reputation can become a full-time job. After seeing noteworthy examples of this over the past two decades, why would scholars at any point in their academic careers risk studying intercollegiate sports, unless, of course, they can present results acceptable to all the non-academic stakeholders? But that’s no basis for quality research.

## NCAA Constraints

Finally, the NCAA is a source of factors inhibiting research on intercollegiate sports. As an organization, the NCAA is rightfully dedicated to representing the interests of its member institutions. In this capacity, it gathers massive amounts of quantitative data and has an able research staff that constantly analyzes the date to answer questions raised privately by NCAA committees. Some of these data appear in NCAA reports but they have limited usefulness for faculty interested in doing analytical research. Apart from working on an NCAA research project, research faculty can't gather data that would rival data already possessed by the NCAA, or within its reach on relatively short notice.

To understand the practical implications of this issue, imagine that a researcher pulled together a few resources to do a qualitative study of the post-university lives of thirty former Division-I athletes whose eligibility in football or men’s basketball expired before they graduated. Her resources are very limited, and she controlled expenses by including only former athletes who live in two metropolitan areas that are less than a two-hour drive from her office, making interviews easier and cheaper. She and her graduate assistant work hard to collect valid and reliable data through in-depth interviews, and their analysis identifies a clear pattern: that is, chronic career problems occur frequently among athletes who received no post-eligibility support from their university and athletic departments as they attempted to complete their degrees. The former athletes were unemployed for significantly more months and had lower incomes and lower status jobs than peers who spent a similar number of years in college. Imagine too, that this finding is reported in a widely read newspaper article that sparks many letters to the editor. Journalists call her and ask for details that she cannot provide without violating the privacy rights of the young men in her study. When she responds in general terms, subsequent letters question her credibility and suggest that she has personal reasons to put college sports in a bad light, or they accuse her university of being guilty of using and then losing athletes in revenue-producing sports.

What if the NCAA has previously unreported data showing that former athletes, on average, have relatively favorable career success rates? Would they, in the interest of their member institutions call a press conference and present data that contradict her study? If they did this, would others use those data to discredit her research and raise questions about her status as a scholar?

This scenario may sound far-fetched, but the point is that the NCAA is unwittingly and unintentionally positioned to inhibit research on intercollegiate sports. This is mostly because academic researchers do not know if the research questions they want to ask have already been asked and answered privately by NCAA researchers working with internal committees, or if data have already been collected by the NCAA and could be presented in forms that would be widely defined as more credible than studies done by individual research faculty.

This scenario is not presented to question the motives of NCAA research staff or the integrity of NCAA officers obliged to act in the service of their members. It is presented only to highlight the politics of research, an issue that evokes interest from any of us sensitive to the hazards of investigating issues that concern powerful others who possess resources and a position of influence that no individual scholar can match. This doesn’t mean that research faculty cannot effectively work with NCAA staff on particular NCAA-sponsored projects – something suggested later in this test; nor does it mean that the NCAA is not interested in certain types of research done by academic scholars. However, it does mean that research faculty with a mandate to produce knowledge, often by asking critical questions about the world, and NCAA researchers with a mandate to ask questions consistent with the organization’s mission and the interests of member institutions, have goals that often differ. This is not a minor point.

## Minimizing Constraints and Creating Incentives

In light of constraints faced by research faculty, it’s not surprising that in-depth studies of intercollegiate sports are relatively scarce despite former President Brand’s observation that college athletics has a profound impact on millions of people. It’s not an exaggeration to say that doing independent, critical research on intercollegiate sports can be a high-stakes exercise. It triggers responses from powerful people who are motivated by strong emotional, ideological, and financial interests in the status and public perception of sports teams and programs.

These constraints are not listed in the Knight Commission study of Faculty Perceptions of Intercollegiate Athletics, but they can be used, in part, as explanations of the findings presented in the commission’s report. For those who don’t know, this report is based on a survey of 2000 tenured and tenure-track faculty members at twenty-three NCAA Division I universities that are in the Football Bowl Subdivision. The sample was intentionally drawn to over-represent faculty involved in campus governance and experienced in teaching athletes in their courses. In other words, these are faculty *most likely* interested in and concerned about intercollegiate sports on their campus.

The survey was designed by researchers at The University of Michigan’s Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education. Its goal was to identify faculty beliefs and concerns about intercollegiate sports, faculty satisfaction with the athletic programs on their campus, faculty willingness to participate in efforts to rectify problems they perceive in those programs, and an overall sense among faculty of the possibility for meaningful changes in the athletic program on their campus.

In summary, the data from this study indicate that faculty see intercollegiate sports as an auxiliary enterprise on their campus, tied as much to the entertainment industry as to education. They are generally dissatisfied because they lack knowledge about intercollegiate programs and have no control over decisions related to athletic departments. They are interested in intercollegiate sports and the athletic department on their campus but perceive them to be a low priority faculty governance issue. Overall, faculty also believe that campus administrators do not want their input on matters related to intercollegiate sports and that current decision-making structures have no clearly defined role for faculty involvement. As a result, they are generally disengaged from sports on their campuses.

The authors of the Knight Commission report suggest that a lack of knowledge about key athletic department policies and practices is the major factor constraining faculty engagement with intercollegiate sports. To the extent that this is true, the first and most important strategy for stimulating research on intercollegiate sports is to institutionalize the dissemination of information about the athletic department, sports teams, and athletes to the faculty. This type of transparency can be managed to respect the privacy rights of individuals involved, but it must be done so that faculty acquire a knowledge foundation upon which to propose, initiate and complete quality research on intercollegiate sports. Additionally, this strategy should be planned in ways that provide research faculty with some form of access to data collected by the NCAA. Again, this can occur in many ways, but there’s an urgent need for NCAA officials and research staff to meet with faculty representatives to discuss how this can occur so that faculty knowledge of research possibilities is established at the same time that individual privacy rights are respected.

The second strategy for reducing constraints is to provide research grants. Researchers are very predictable actors: they follow data and live on grants. Without data access and grant support, they wither and are eventually trimmed from the academic vine. At present, most research on intercollegiate sports is self-funded by those willing to risk that it won’t be a waste of their resources or compromise their careers. But these studies seldom involve large enough samples or data sets to make major contributions to knowledge or policy decisions. Consequently, some people might say that they lack the quality and objectivity that is often attributed to research based on adequate funding and data. To combine possible funding with the rising tension between perceived academic and athletic department needs would certainly make more faculty across many disciplines willing to propose and initiate research. If they had support, they could do studies that are methodologically sound and able to withstand the critical scrutiny of everyone from local boosters and sportswriters to journal review boards and promotion & tenure committees.

We’ve heard from President Brand that simply sponsoring a conference and inviting scholars to submit manuscripts does not elicit enough quality research papers to fill a conference program. But if there is a genuine interest in fostering quality research, there’s a need to present concrete forms of support that reaffirm public statements. Funding is one form of support; access to data is another; and yet another is to lobby the presidents, top academic officers, athletic directors, and coaches in NCAA member institutions to facilitate research and cooperate with researchers.

A third strategy for fostering research is to commission brainstorming/focus groups consisting of faculty, athletic directors, coaches, athletes, and journalists so each group can identify and prioritize research topics from their perspectives. Collating these topics into one or multiple lists would stimulate research projects and enable researchers to document the need for the studies they propose in grant applications. Funding agencies often consider the relative importance of research topics when awarding grants, so lists of systematically prioritized topics would help researchers obtain the support they need to do quality research.

A fourth strategy would be to do a study of the experiences of faculty, academic support personnel, and others who have experienced negative consequences when raising issues about intercollegiate sports. If we knew more about the patterns of their experiences, we might be able to assist campus administrators in efforts to produce more transparency in programs related to athletics. For example, maybe the NCAA needs an independent individual who can advocate the interests of scholars and other university personnel concerned enough about issues of academic integrity to do research and to identify problems.

## Conclusion, But Not the End

There are real and important conflicts between the culture and goals of academic faculties and the culture and goals of most athletic departments. As far as careers and paychecks go, the definitions of merit in these two realms are very different. Ideas and beliefs about learning and teaching as well as the processes through which learning and teaching occur are very different. Academic faculty question the educational relevance of sports because athletic departments and teams don’t use traditional curricula or processes of evaluation that document learning and teaching in terms allowing them to see “education in operation.”

Athletic department administrators and coaches feel that faculty do not understand what and how they teach and cannot do research that would assist them in meeting the expectations that dominate their lives. The width of the academia-athletic department culture gap varies from one institution to another, but it’s a rare campus, even in the NCAA Division III category, where the gap is narrow enough to allow regular, constructive, and policy-informing communication.

The scholarly colloquium and the faculty advisory group that were independently created with funding approved by NCAA president Myles Brand were short-lived. After Brand died in 2009, the new administration of the NCAA told the faculty advisory group that it was too expensive to maintain, even though revenues were increasing for the organization. In the face of multiple lawsuits and the possible implosion of the entire organization, it was clear that critical research was not welcome and faculty were not viewed as helpful advisors.

# 5.2. A brief history of NCAA academic reforms

## NCAA Reform Timeline:

* **1983** - NCAA passes Proposition 48 setting, for the first time, minimum standards for first-year athletes to be eligible to play on any Division I team.
* **1986** - Proposition 48 takes effect. First-year students are eligible to participate in sports at a Division I school only if they have a 2.0 GPA in 11 core subjects in high school and a score of 700 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or 15 on the American College Test (ACT). Proposition 48 permits students who meet only one of the requirements (SAT/ACT score or a 2.0 GPA in core courses) to be accepted at college and given athletic aid if they graduated from high school with a 2.0 GPA in all their courses. But these partial qualifiers are not permitted to work out with their teams during their first year, and they have to forfeit one year of athletic eligibility, which means they can play for only three years instead of the normal four years.
* **1990** - U.S. Congress passes a law requiring all colleges to make public their athlete graduation rates starting in 1991; this was known as the “Student Right-to-Know Act.”
* **1991** - USA Today and major media companies publish data on athlete graduation rates; this creates an embarrassing situation for many universities with low rates.
* **1991** - The Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics publishes its report, "A New Model for Intercollegiate Athletics." The report emphasizes that
* university presidents must control big-time sports, and that intercollegiate programs must have academic and financial integrity.
* **1993** - NCAA boosts Proposition 48 initial-eligibility requirements to a 2.5 (not 2.0) high school GPA in 13 (not 11) core courses and a minimum score of 68 (not 60) on the new ACT scale, or 820 (not 700) on the new SAT scale.
* **1994** - Passage of the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act requiring all institutions of higher education that receive certain forms of federal support and have an intercollegiate athletic program to provide annual reports on gender and resource allocation. This federal requirement enables the government and other interested parties to monitor gender equity and enforce compliance.
* **1996** - New initial-eligibility requirements take effect. All high school students wishing to play sports at Division I or II schools must register and be certified by an NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse. An index of GPA and test scores is used to determine "qualifiers" and partial qualifiers." The lower the GPA is, the higher the test scores must be. For example, a student with a 2.0 high school GPA must score an 86 on the ACT or 1010 on the SAT to be fully eligible; a student with a 2.75 GPA needs a 59 on the ACT and a 720 on the SAT. Students failing to meet the standards cannot play in games, practice with a team, or receive athletic grants during their first year, although they can get need-based financial aid.

## Other NCAA changes in the 1990s

* Universities were no longer allowed to have dormitories exclusively for athletes
* Training table for athletes was limited to one meal a day
* New limits were placed on the length of seasons and the number of hours teams are allowed to practice during a week
* New definitions of "academic progress" were formulated and universities were required to use them each year to determine student-athlete eligibility for that year
* Degree completion grants were established for selected students who had completed athletic eligibility and remained 30 or fewer hours away from graduation
* Athletic departments were required to conduct annual exit interviews with student-athletes as part of a team-by-team self-assessment process
* Junior college transfers must have 48 credits and a two-year degree to be eligible.

## Reforms, 2000-2015

* **2003** – The *Progress Toward Degree* regulations were modified so that athletes had to meet minimum GPA standards and complete 40% of their degree requirements by the end of year two, 60% by end of year three, and 80% by end of year four.
* **2004** – The *Academic Progress Rate* (APR) was established to measure how all scholarship athletes on a particular sport perform term by term during a school year. It is a composite team measurement based upon how individual team members do academically. This went beyond rules for the eligibility of individuals and established a minimum success rate for teams thereby creating pressure on the schools to be more proactive in promoting academic success. Failure to meet the minimum APR standard results in loss of scholarships for a team; successive failures result in restrictions on scholarships and practice time for a team, loss of eligibility to play in post-season tournaments, and eventual restrictions on membership in the NCAA.
* **2005** - The *Graduation Success Rat*e (GSR) was established for Division I schools. This rate takes into account athletes who leave a school in good academic standing and those who transfer in and graduate.
* **2012** – The minimum APR standard increases so that teams must increase their academic progress rate to avoid sanctions.
* **2013** – The minimum APR standard increases again so that teams must increase their academic progress rate to avoid sanctions.
* **2015** – The minimum APR standard increases a third time so that teams must increase their academic progress rate to avoid sanctions.

The increases in the minimum APR standard puts increased pressure on teams to boost their academic performance if they wish to play in post-season tournaments. This is useful, but it also leads teams and athletic departments and even universities to seek ways to increase the grades of athletes on particular teams.

In some cases (we don’t know how many) this has pushed individuals to cross ethical lines in desperate efforts to make sure that teams remain eligible for post-season play and the increasingly large financial benefits that come with postseason games.

Enforcing the spirit of the APR is difficult unless people inside universities or investigative journalists blow the whistle on people engaged in or supporting academic cheating to boost athletes’ grades. But the personal cost of blowing the whistle can be great because many people see this as an attack on the university rather than simply exposing wrongdoing.

# 5.3. School–community relations

Interscholastic sports programs do two things in the realm of school-community relations: they attract attention, and they provide entertainment. In other words, interscholastic sports help make the school a part of community life, and they help bridge the gap between "town and gown" that exists in some communities. One of the only times people who do not have school-aged children hear about the local high school or college is when there is a news story about one of its sports teams. Even for some of the parents of students, the fates of varsity teams may be more important than the fates of academic programs. Sports are an easy connecting point with schools and they may become "identity pegs" for significant numbers of people in a local community. Through sports, people can maintain an interest in their local high school or college without having to know about all the complex dimensions of academic life.

It is easy to see that sports can connect schools to communities, but we do not know if these connections benefit academic programs or the achievement of educational goals. Benefits are most likely in small towns, where local attachments to high schools are strongly reinforced by school teams. In the case of larger high schools in metropolitan areas, and universities with big-time sports programs, people may attend games and read team scores in the paper, but their attachments to the schools themselves seldom go beyond occasional attendance at games.

Do high schools and universities have an obligation to provide community entertainment through sports? It is difficult to argue this case, even though some communities seemingly have become dependent on school sports for weekend enjoyment. When varsity sports are defined as entertainment, the needs of student-athletes and students in general often become secondary to the need to put on a good show. This has happened in a few high schools and more than a few intercollegiate programs around the United States, and it usually subverts the achievement of educational goals.

# 5.4. Ethnicity and sports participation among high school girls

The U.S. Department of Education collected data on the ethnic minority backgrounds of girls who played on high school sports teams in 1990 and 2002. The data in these two studies can be compared to see if a particular group has representative participation rates over time.

The data in the following table indicate that the participation of white girls increased more than the participation of girls with other ethnic backgrounds over the 12-years between the studies. Most important in the table below are the figures in the fourth column indicating that Native American and Asian girls have experienced little or no increases in participation over the 12 years. Does this lack of increase represent a problem? Is there a systematic form of exclusion that disproportionately affects girls in these categories? In the case of Asian girls, is the absence of an increase related to immigration and the proportion of first-generation students in schools? Is poverty a factor for either or both of these categories of girls?

Are these girls missing out on particular benefits of sport participation that are not being produced through other means, such as physical fitness, identification with the school, opportunities to be noticed and have their interests advocated by adults? These are questions that await research. Do you have any hypotheses to explain the patterns?

**Increases in Varsity Sports Participation, US Sophomore Girls by Ethnicity, 1989-90 to 2001-02.**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **ETHNIC**  **GROUP** | **1989-90**  **Participation Rate** | **2001-02**  **Participation Rate** | **Percentage *INCREASE***  **over 12 Years** |
| **White** | 44% | 56% | **27%** |
| **Hispanic (any race)** | 29% | 36% | **24%** |
| **Black** | 38% | 47% | **24%** |
| **Native American** | 38% | 40% | **5%** |
| **Asian** | 36% | 36% | **0%** |

**Source:** Based on data collected by the U.S. Department of Education and analyzed by Sylwester (2005).

**NOTE:** Research by Don Sabo and Phil Veliz shows that current sports participation and attrition rates follow the same patterns identified in the studies summarized in this reading. However, participation increases for all groups leveled off after 2000.

# 5.5. Conformity or leadership in high school sports

Too many high school programs are organized to emphasize obedience rather than responsibility. This is counterproductive to the stated goals of interscholastic sports because the educational benefits of sport involvement are greatest when athletes themselves make decisions affecting the nature of their sport participation.

This does not mean that athletes do not need guidance; they do. But they also need opportunities to become independent, autonomous young adults. Autocratic coaches with rigid, externally imposed sets of rules reduce these opportunities and perpetuate immaturity and dependence-even though they may win games.

One recommendation is that student-athletes in most high schools should be more involved in decision making for their teams. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Sports are ideal settings for students to learn responsibility through decision-making. For example, team members should be involved in the development of team rules and enforcement policies, they should be asked to play a role in developing team strategies, plays, and game plans, and they should have opportunities to voice their thoughts during games, meets, and matches at appropriate times.

* Why should adult coaches make all the decisions on student sports teams? How does that build responsibility?
* Ideally, the goal of every coach should be to prepare his or her team to be self-coached at some point during the season.
* What would happen if coaches had to allow players to coach themselves for the last two games of the season?
* Having such a requirement would force coaches to build real leadership among players.

Athletes also should be involved in the evaluation of coaches and sports programs. Internships should be organized to enable senior athletes to serve as assistant coaches, or as coaches for junior varsity and junior high school teams. This would give them opportunities to handle many different tasks and get management experiences in the process.

Varsity sports should be based on the principle that responsibility grows out of making decisions and living with the consequences of those decisions. Responsibility is learned, not implanted in a young person’s character by the commands and warnings of adults in positions of authority. Unfortunately, many varsity sports are organized to teach conformity and obedience instead of responsibility and independence. This should be changed carefully so that sports can become more clearly educational.

# 5.6. Academic detachment among college athletes

Research by sociologists Patricia and Peter Adler (1991, 1999) helps to put these data in context. After five years of observing, interviewing, traveling with, and hanging out with athletes and coaches for a big-time college basketball team, the Adlers concluded that playing on such a team and being seriously involved in academic courses seldom go hand in hand. The young men on the team began their first year of coursework with optimism and idealism because they expected their academic experiences to contribute to their future occupational success. However, after one or two semesters, the demands of playing basketball, the social isolation that goes along with being an athlete, and the powerful influence of the team culture drew them away from academic life.

The men discovered that selecting easier courses and majors was necessary if they were to meet coaches’ expectations. Fatigue, the pressures of games, and over forty hours a week devoted to basketball kept them from focusing seriously on academic tasks. Furthermore, nobody ever asked them about their academic lives; attention always focused on basketball, and few people expected these young men to identify themselves as students or give priority to coursework. Racial ideology and stereotypes accentuated this social dynamic as many people assumed that young Black men playing basketball had no interests or abilities other than their sport.

When these young men received positive feedback, it was for athletic, not academic, achievement. Difficulties in their courses often led them to view academic life with pragmatic detachment— that is, they didn’t become emotionally invested in coursework and they chose classes and arranged course schedules that enabled them to meet the demands of their sport. They knew what they had to do to stay eligible, and coaches would make sure their course schedules kept them eligible. Gradually, most of the players detached themselves from academic life on the campus.

Academic detachment was supported in the team culture. These young men were with one another constantly—in the dorms, at meals, during practices, on trips to games, in the weight room, and on nights when there were no games. During these times, they seldom talked about academic or intellectual topics, unless it was in negative terms. They encouraged cutting classes, and they joked about bad tests and failing papers. They provided each other with support for their identities as athletes, not students.

Academic detachment did not occur for all team members. Those who managed to balance their athletic and academic lives were the ones who entered college with realistic ideas about academic demands, had parents and peers who were familiar with academic demands in college, and entered the university with solid high school preparation and the ability to develop

relationships with faculty and other students. These relationships were important because they emphasized academic achievement and provided support for academic identities.

The Adlers also found that the structure of bigtime intercollegiate sports worked against maintaining a balance between athletics and academics. For example, as high-profile people on campus, these young men had many social opportunities, and it was difficult for them to focus on coursework instead of their social lives. Road trips to away games and tournaments took them away from classes for extended periods. They missed lectures, study groups, and tests. Their tight connections with fellow athletes isolated them from the academic life of the university.

Unlike other students, these young men generated revenue and publicity for the university, the athletic program, and coaches. Academic detachment was not a problem for the school as long as the young men did not get caught doing something illegal or resist the control of their coach. It became a problem only when it caused them to be ineligible.