

# Academic Motivation and the Student Athlete

Herbert D. Simons    Derek Van Rheenen    Martin V. Covington

*The researchers in this large-scale study of Division I athletes examined the achievement motivation of 361 university student athletes. The relationship of motivational orientation to academic performance and identification was investigated using a paper and pencil Likert-type scale instrument based on self-worth theory. Fear of failure and the relative commitment to athletics was found to play important roles in the academic motivation of both revenue and nonrevenue student athletes.*

University student athletes present an apparent motivational contradiction. Most are highly motivated to succeed in the athletic domain, having been selected to participate in intercollegiate athletics because of their proven ability and desire to succeed. However, many of the most visible student athletes seem to lack such motivation in the classroom. Although these individuals are expected to maintain their athletic motivation at the university, they are likewise expected to demonstrate a similar motivation to succeed in the classroom. The maintenance of this academic motivation and achievement is made more difficult because of the institutional demands of their sport. Student athletes are required to devote upwards of 25 hours per week when their sport is in season, miss numerous classes for university-sanctioned athletic competitions, and deal with fatigue and injuries as a result of their athletic participation. These factors detract from the realistic likelihood of academic success, which in turn affects their academic motivation to succeed. (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 1989). Negative stereotypes about athletes' lack of academic ability only add to these motivational difficulties (Dundes, 1996; Edwards, 1984).

Athletic success requires an individual to work hard, be self-disciplined, exhibit perseverance and determination, be able to concentrate,

stay focused, and so forth. These qualities, if transferred to the academic domain, would seem to be important for academic success. A good deal of variation was found among student athletes in their willingness and success in making this transfer. In general, revenue athletes (football and men's basketball) seem less willing to make this transfer and show an apparent lack of academic motivation (Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1997). This perceived lack of motivation is often reflected in a general disidentification with school and reduced academic performance (AIR, 1989; Snyder, 1996; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1992).

On the other hand, female and nonrevenue athletes (those who played sports other than football and men's basketball) seem more willing and able than revenue athletes to make this transfer, as demonstrated by their superior academic performance. Studies have consistently shown that female student athletes are superior to male student athletes and that nonrevenue athletes are superior to revenue athletes in high school GPAs, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, as well as college GPAs (AIR, 1989; Purdy, Eitzen & Hufnagel, 1985; Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1997).

Differences in intrinsic motivation, external rewards, and social influences favoring athletics provides some of the explanation for this seeming paradox. Adler and Adler (1991) have shown, in their longitudinal study of a Division I men's basketball team, how the pressures and rewards associated with school, sport, and peer culture lead student athletes to allow intercollegiate athletics to engulf their lives at the expense of their academic identification. The self-worth theory of achievement motivation (Covington, 1992; Covington & Beery, 1976) provides a motivational explanation that can contribute to our understanding of this discrepancy between academic and athletic motivation.

---

Herbert D. Simons is Associate Professor of Education; Derek Van Rheenen is a lecturer of Education; Martin V. Covington is Professor of Psychology, each at the University of California, Berkeley.

Self-worth theory builds upon the work of Atkinson (1964) and Weiner (1974). In his need achievement theory, Atkinson postulated that the motivation to achieve is a learned drive that is the result of two opposing forces: the need to approach success and the need to avoid failure. These drives are fueled by hope and pride for those who desire to approach success and shame and humiliation for those attempting to avoid failure.

Weiner reinterpreted Atkinson's theory by focusing on rational cognitive thought processes rather than emotions as providing motivation for achievement. He proposed attribution theory, which focuses on people's beliefs about the causes of their successes and failures. According to attribution theory, those individuals who are motivated to achieve success attribute failure to insufficient effort and success to ability and effort. These attributions, which are under the individual's control, lead to greater effort following both successes and failures. On the other hand, failure-avoiding individuals attribute failure to lack of ability and they attribute successes to luck, chance, and so forth. Because these reasons are not under their control, neither successes nor failures provide motivation to expend greater effort in attempting future tasks.

Self-worth theory further elucidates these previous conceptions of achievement motivation. According to Covington (1992), self-worth theory "assumes that the search for self-acceptance is the highest human priority, and that in schools self-acceptance comes to depend on one's ability to achieve competitively" (p. 74). Self-worth is determined by an individual's own, and others', perceptions of one's ability, perceptions that are mainly tied to successful achievement. Success indicates competence or ability and thus enhances one's self-worth. In competitive situations, where few succeed, the first priority for those who fear they may not be successful is the avoidance of failure and its implication that one lacks ability or competence. Trying hard and failing leads to the questioning of one's ability, which in turn diminishes self-worth. On the other hand, failure following a lack of effort does not reflect negatively on one's ability and self-worth as this lack of effort

provides an excuse for failure that leaves the perceptions of ability and self-worth intact. This lack of effort can be disguised and rationalized by self-handicapping excuses such as procrastination, test anxiety, last-minute or inadequate study, and so forth.

On the basis of this analysis, Covington has proposed and empirically validated (Covington & Omelich, 1991) a quadripolar motivational typology based on the dual achievement dimensions postulated by Atkinson—the motivation to approach or strive for success and the motivation to avoid failure. Covington has proposed four motivational types, classified in accordance with their scores on each of these two dimensions. He has called these four motivational types: Success-Oriented, Overstrivers, Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors. According to this expanded model, Overstrivers and Failure-Acceptors represent hybrid combinations of the relatively orthogonal approach and avoidance dimensions originally postulated by Atkinson. The following overview of these four types suggests that academic motivation among student athletes may be a salient factor in predicting both academic performance and identification.

Success-Oriented students score high on measures of approaching success and low on failure avoidance. These students are highly motivated to succeed without being afraid of failing. They have a strong sense of self-worth, believe they have the ability to compete academically, have good study skills, are able to accurately judge the difficulty of tasks, and therefore expect to succeed and take pride in their academic achievements. They tend to be intrinsically motivated and they work hard and efficiently to become successful students. These students have a history of strong academic performance which reinforces their feelings of self-worth and gives them confidence in their ability to succeed academically. When they do sometimes experience failure, they attribute it to factors they can control such as inadequate study. They may experience guilt because they did not put in the necessary effort. Because they are confident in their ability to succeed, the guilt arising from failure spurs them on to more effort in the future.

Failure-Avoiders score low on their motivation to approach success and high on avoiding failure. These students often have a low self-worth due to a history of academic failure. As a result, they may develop a maladjusted motivation, focusing more on the avoidance of failure than on striving for success. These students are negatively motivated by the fear of failure and the anticipation of shame in response to a failed effort. To avoid the shame and scrutiny of apparent low ability, the individual limits the effort expended. Rather than openly limiting effort, they often engage in self-handicapping behaviors such as procrastination, handing in assignments late, test anxiety, and so forth, that provide an excuse for poor performance. They rationalize that these are the factors that kept them from succeeding, rather than low ability, thus protecting an already tenuous sense of self-worth.

Overstrivers score high on both measures of approaching success and avoiding failure. Their fear of failure leads them to strive very hard to succeed, which they often do. Essentially, these students avoid failure by succeeding. They work extra hard and have good study skills. They have a higher but more fragile sense of self-worth than the Failure-Avoiders. Their success is precarious because small setbacks can have lasting effects. Because of the emotional significance of failing, they often experience test anxiety.

Failure-Acceptors score low on both measures of approaching success and avoiding failure. These students are not particularly attracted to success, but neither are they concerned about failing. They have a history of failing, have a low sense of self-worth and are not very confident of their ability to succeed academically. They do not try very hard and exhibit some of the same self-handicapping behaviors and excuses as the Failure-Avoiders. However, they are not really interested in academics and may have given up entirely on the academic enterprise. Failure Acceptors may have at one time been Failure Avoiders whose history of continued academic failures produced a learned helplessness (Coyne & Lazarus, 1980; Miller & Norman, 1979) that led them to give up entirely on the goal of successful academic

performance. The purpose of this study was to employ self-worth theory to explore the academic motivation of student athletes. It was hypothesized that a fear of academic failure and the relative commitment to athletics was found to play important roles in the academic motivation of both revenue and nonrevenue student athletes.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants in this study were 361 intercollegiate student athletes enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley during the 1993-1994 academic year. Participants were those student athletes who attended team meetings arranged between the authors of this study and the coaches of 22 Varsity teams. Almost two thirds of those surveyed were male (63.3%). The male student athletes participated in 11 sports, inclusive of football, basketball, baseball, track and field, cross country, soccer, swimming, water polo, tennis, gymnastics, and golf. The female student athletes (36.7%) participated in 11 sports, inclusive of basketball, softball, track and field, volleyball, cross country, soccer, swimming, tennis, crew, gymnastics and field hockey. Of the student athletes, 20.8% participated in revenue sports, whereas 79.2% participated in non-revenue sports. All of the revenue athletes were male. Of the nonrevenue athletes, 53.5% were male. At the time of the study, 30.5% of the participants were freshmen, 26.3% sophomores, 26.4% juniors, and 16.8% were seniors. Junior college transfer students comprised 8.4% of the participants. The ethnic distribution of the participants in the survey was Caucasian (68.2%), African American (14.3%), Asian American (8.6%), Mexican American/Latino (3.8%), Native American/Alaskan Native/Pacific Islander (3.3%), and Other (1.8%). The participants' SAT verbal scores had a mean of 489.28 with a standard deviation of 95.89. The participants' SAT math scores had a mean of 586.53 with a standard deviation of 103.15.

### Measures

An instrument was constructed which consisted of 300 Likert-type scale items that measured the

cognitive, noncognitive and background factors affecting the dual achievement domains of intercollegiate academics and athletics. Motivational, academic, demographic and athletic status variables were studied. Participants were asked to rate the items on a 5-point scale, from 1 (*not very true of me*) to 5 (*very true of me*).

### Procedures

As part of a larger study (Simons et al., 1997), each team member completed a paper-and-pencil survey, which focused on academic and athletic attitudes and motivation. The surveys were completed during a scheduled team meeting. The full survey took about 40 minutes to complete.

**Background factors.** Background factors included demographics and revenue/nonrevenue sport status. The demographic measures of the survey included self-reported gender, ethnicity, and social status. Ethnicity was recoded into African American and non-African American. Non-African American included Caucasian and other minorities such as Asian American, Mexican American/Latino, and so forth. Social status was measured by a scale of student's mother's educational level. Preliminary analysis showed that mother's education was a better predictor of academic performance than either father's education or participants' self-reported social status. The categories were (a) None or some high school; (b) High school diploma; (c) Some college; (d) College BA degree; or (e) Graduate degree (MBA, PhD, MD). Sport played was treated as a dichotomous variable of revenue and nonrevenue. Revenue included men's basketball and football. Nonrevenue included all other sports.

**Cognitive factors.** Cognitive factors included academic performance and study. The academic data obtained from official academic records included high school GPA, SAT math and verbal scores, and cumulative university GPA.

Metacognitive study strategies are the conscious strategic deployment of cognitive resources for studying. An 11-item Likert-type scale measured several metacognitive study strategies, including comprehension monitoring, determining task difficulty, main idea comprehension, memory strategies, employing back-

ground knowledge, and self-questioning. The scale included items such as: (a) I spend more time on the difficult course material when studying for a test; (b) I study differently for different types of exams (essay, multiple choice, and so forth); (c) I make up questions to help focus my reading; (d) When I read I look for the important ideas. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .58.

Problems associated with reading and studying problems were measured by a 9-item Likert-type scale. The scale included the items such as (a) I often read a chapter and afterwards don't know what I have read; (b) I have trouble taking good class notes; (c) I read too slowly; Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .61.

**Motivation.** Motivational factors included the Approach success-Avoid failure Achievement Questionnaire (AAAQ), Academic Self-worth, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), and Self-Handicapping Excuses.

The AAAQ consists of 36 Likert-type scale items that measure the two basic need achievement dimensions: the tendency to approach success and to avoid failure (Covington & Omelich, 1991). The approach scale was composed of 21 items consisting of five subscales: (a) Risk-Taking Propensity; (b) Realistic Goal Setting; (c) Intrinsic Engagement; (d) Persistence; and (e) Self-Confidence. The median score was 74. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .73. The avoidance scale, was composed of 13 items consisting of four subscales: (a) Unrealistic Achievement Standards; (b) Fears About Failure; (c) Doubts About One's Ability; and (d) Disposition Toward Self-Criticism as Opposed to Self-Reward. The median score was 38. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .77. The median split of each dimension was used to form the four motivational types. Success-Oriented individuals were above the median (74) on approach and below the median (38) on failure avoidance. Overstrivers were above the median on approach and above the median of failure avoidance. Failure Avoiders were below the median on approach and above the median on failure avoidance whereas Failure Acceptors were below the median in approach and failure avoidance.

Self-worth theory posits that achievement motivation is best understood in terms of attempts by individuals to maintain a positive self-image of competency, particularly when risking competitive failure. A six-item Academic Self-worth scale was composed of three items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem measure (Rosenberg, 1965) and three items specific to academic achievement at Berkeley. The three items from the Rosenberg scale were: (a) All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure in school; (b) I feel that I do not have much to be proud of as a student; and (c) On the whole I am satisfied with myself as a student. The three items developed for the current study were (d) Do you think you have the ability to succeed academically here at UC Berkeley?; (e) Compared to the average UC Berkeley student, how would you rate your overall academic ability?; and (f) Do you think you deserved to get into UC Berkeley? Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .90.

Intrinsic motivation is defined as an individual's propensity to approach a task for its inherent challenge and interest. Four Likert-type scale items taken from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich, 1991) were selected to measure an individual's intrinsic goal orientation in the academic domain. These four MSLQ items were: (a) The most satisfying thing in a course is trying to understand the content as thoroughly as possible; (b) I prefer course material that really challenges me so I can learn new things; (c) When I can, I choose assignments that I can learn from even if they don't guarantee a good grade; and (d) I prefer course material that arouses my curiosity, even if it is difficult to learn. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .60.

Extrinsic motivation is defined as an individual's propensity to approach a task to gain external rewards. Four Likert-type scale items taken from the MSLQ (Pintrich et al., 1991) were selected to measure an individual's extrinsic goal orientation in the academic achievement setting. The four MSLQ items were: (a) My main concern in my classes is getting good grades; (b) I want to get better grades in school than most other students get; (c) I want to do well in school

because it is important to show my ability to others; and (d) Getting good grades is the most satisfying thing in school for me right now. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .64.

Self-handicapping excuses are maladaptive motivational responses to challenging achievement tasks that serve to protect an individual's perceived low self-worth by providing excuses for poor academic performance. A 6-item Likert-type scale measured the tendency to report excuses for lowered levels of academic effort and performance. The items were: (a) If I worked harder I would get better grades; (b) I don't have enough time to study because my sport takes up so much time; (c) I'm so disorganized that I don't get all my work done; (d) My social life interferes with my studying; (e) If my courses were more interesting, I would get better grades; and (f) I would do much better on tests if I didn't get so nervous. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .60.

*Athletic-Academic Relationship.* The Athletic-Academic Relationship included the Athletic-Academic Commitment and Exploitation scales. Student athletes are expected to fill two roles, that of an athlete and a student. They vary in the degree of commitment to these roles and are often in conflict. The relative degree of commitment to athletics and academics was measured by a four-item Likert-type scale. The items included: (a) I study only hard enough to stay eligible to play my sport; (b) I care more about sports than school; (c) I put more energy into sports now because I know I've got the rest of my life to get a college degree; and (d) It is more important for me to succeed in sports than to do well in school. The higher the score on this variable, the stronger the commitment to the athletic role. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .79.

Student athletes are required to put a great deal of time and effort into their sport which brings prestige to the university, revenues from athletic events, and donations to the university by alumni. A 7-item Likert-type scale measured the degree to which student athletes believe they are exploited by the university for their athletic participation. The scale included items such as: (a) Sometimes I feel that I am being taken advantage of as an athlete; (b) I feel that the

TABLE 1.  
Motivational Types by Cognitive and Noncognitive Variables for all Subjects

| Variable                  | Success-Oriented   | Overstrivers       | Failure-Avoiders    | Failure-Acceptors   | F     | p     |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------|-------|
| University GPA            | 2.97               | 3.10               | 2.67 <sup>a</sup>   | 2.73 <sup>a</sup>   | 11.54 | ≤ .01 |
| Athletic—academic com     | 7.10               | 6.57               | 9.17 <sup>a</sup>   | 9.43 <sup>a</sup>   | 8.85  | ≤ .01 |
| Exploit                   | 16.22              | 16.00              | 20.47 <sup>a</sup>  | 19.59 <sup>a</sup>  | 10.11 | ≤ .01 |
| Academic self-worth       | 30.79 <sup>b</sup> | 28.21              | 24.09 <sup>c</sup>  | 26.61 <sup>d</sup>  | 32.10 | ≤ .01 |
| Self-handicapping excuses | 16.81 <sup>c</sup> | 18.80              | 20.25               | 19.68               | 18.08 | ≤ .01 |
| Intrinsic motivation      | 14.61              | 15.36              | 12.54 <sup>a</sup>  | 12.31 <sup>a</sup>  | 28.23 | ≤ .01 |
| Extrinsic motivation      | 12.65              | 14.97 <sup>b</sup> | 13.37               | 11.00 <sup>c</sup>  | 20.46 | ≤ .01 |
| Study problems            | 17.97 <sup>c</sup> | 21.92              | 24.80 <sup>b</sup>  | 21.80               | 29.53 | ≤ .01 |
| Study strategies          | 40.57              | 40.39              | 36.32 <sup>a</sup>  | 36.40 <sup>a</sup>  | 19.41 | ≤ .01 |
| SAT verbal                | 511.68             | 530.00             | 456.72 <sup>a</sup> | 451.54 <sup>a</sup> | 10.78 | ≤ .01 |
| SAT math                  | 611.30             | 624.04             | 563.04 <sup>a</sup> | 547.89 <sup>a</sup> | 7.61  | ≤ .01 |
| High school GPA           | 3.57               | 3.69               | 3.34 <sup>a</sup>   | 3.25 <sup>a</sup>   | 6.70  | ≤ .01 |
| Social status             | 3.83               | 3.66               | 3.50                | 3.44                | 2.45  | ≥ .05 |

<sup>a</sup> Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors significantly different ( $p \leq .01$ ) from Success-Oriented student athletes and Overstrivers.

<sup>b</sup> Type significantly greater ( $p \leq .01$ ) than the other three types.

<sup>c</sup> Type significantly lower ( $p \leq .01$ ) than the other three types.

<sup>d</sup> Failure-Acceptors significantly different from the Failure-Avoiders ( $p \leq .01$ ).

University cares more about me as an athlete than as a student; (c) Sometimes I feel that I am the property of the University. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .75.

The design of the study involved assigning the participants into the four motivational types on the basis of their scores on the AAAQ. The four types were compared in separate analyses of variance on each variable in this study. Posthoc comparisons were conducted using the Tukey test. In a second analysis, the percentage of students falling into each motivational type was compared across subgroups of participants as well as compared to the general non student athlete population.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results of the analyses of

variance (ANOVAs) comparing the four motivational types on the variables in this study. All variables had significant  $F$  tests at the  $p = .01$  level or below, indicating significant differences between the motivational types on these variables. Tukey posthoc tests showed a number of significant differences between pairs of motivational types.

Overall, these findings show important differences between the Success-Oriented student athletes and Overstrivers on the one hand and Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors on the other. In general, the Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors were poorer academic performers than the Success-Oriented student athletes and Overstrivers. Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors were more committed to the athletic role than the other two types and did not

believe that they received enough from the university to compensate for their commitment. This may be another rationalization for their lack of academic effort. Other findings suggest that more of a commitment to athletics, less intrinsic motivation, less academic self-worth, and more self-handicapping excuses all play a role in producing lower academic performance. Academic self-worth was lower for Failure-Avoiders than Failure-Acceptors, suggesting that protection of self-worth plays a more important role for the Failure-Acceptors.

The distribution of nonathletes, athletes and subgroups of athletes in the four motivational types are shown in Table 2. Overall, athletes were not significantly different from nonathletes (chi-square = *ns*). However, females were significantly different from males: chi-square (3, *N* = 333) = 9.94, *p* = .01. Males had a larger percentage of Failure-Avoiders and a smaller percentage of Failure-Acceptors. Additionally, revenue athletes were significantly different from nonrevenue athletes: chi-square (3, *N* = 333) = 8.25, *p* = .05. Revenue athletes had a larger percentage of both Failure-Acceptors and Failure-Avoiders and a smaller percentage of Success-Oriented athletes than the nonrevenue athletes. The male nonrevenue athletes were not significantly different from the female non-

revenue athletes: chi-square (3, *N* = 268) = 6.86, *p* = .05. However, more Failure-Acceptors were found in the male group. The comparison of African American with nonAfrican American student athletes showed that proportionately more Failure-Avoiders and fewer Success-Oriented student athletes were found in the African American group. However, the differences between the two groups were not statistically significant: chi-square (3, *N* = 333) = 2.81, *p* = .05. There were no significant differences between the four motivational types in social status, *F*(3, 326) = 2.45, *p* = .05.

### Discussion

The results of the analysis of this motivational typology provides support for the validity of the self-worth model as applied to Division I student athletes. The differences between these motivational types on the cognitive and noncognitive variables are consistent with the theory's essential premise concerning approach and avoidance. Both Success-Oriented student athletes and Overstrivers, who are highly motivated to succeed academically, demonstrated higher academic performance in high school and at the university than Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors. Success-Oriented student athletes and Overstrivers also exhibited better metacognitive

TABLE 2.  
Percent of Motivational Types by Subgroups

| Student Group                             | % Success-Oriented | % Overstrivers | % Failure-Avoiders | % Failure-Acceptors |
|---|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Nonstudent athletes ( <i>n</i> = 500)     | 31.1               | 20.6           | 28.5               | 19.8                |
| Student athletes ( <i>n</i> = 335)        | 29.9               | 19.4           | 31.9               | 18.8                |
| Male student athletes ( <i>n</i> = 209)   | 26.8               | 17.7           | 32.1               | 23.4                |
| Female student athletes ( <i>n</i> = 124) | 35.5               | 22.9           | 31.5               | 10.5                |
| Male nonrevenue ( <i>n</i> = 153)         | 31.2               | 17.4           | 29.2               | 22.2                |
| Nonrevenue ( <i>n</i> = 286)              | 33.2               | 19.8           | 30.2               | 16.8                |
| Revenue ( <i>n</i> = 75)                  | 16.9               | 18.5           | 38.5               | 26.2                |
| African American ( <i>n</i> = 45)         | 22.2               | 17.8           | 40.0               | 20.0                |
| Non-African American ( <i>n</i> = 288)    | 31.3               | 19.8           | 30.6               | 18.4                |

study strategies and were more intrinsically motivated. Success-Oriented student athletes scored the highest in academic self-worth, the lowest in self-handicapping excuses, reading and study problems. Overstrivers scored higher in their motivation to avoid failure than the Success-Oriented student athletes; they likewise reported more reading and study problems and lower academic self-worth. Failure-Avoiders are strongly motivated to avoid failure at the expense of striving for success; they exhibit the characteristics expected of this motivational type: lower academic self-worth, high self-handicapping excuses, higher reading and study problems, lower metacognitive study strategies, and less intrinsic motivation, all of which lead to lower academic performance. Failure-Acceptors are neither motivated to succeed academically nor are they trying very hard to avoid failure. As such, they are not high on failure—avoiding variables such as self-handicapping excuses, study problems, and extrinsic motivation when compared to the Failure-Avoiders.

Two noncognitive variables, athletic—academic commitment and exploitation, shed some light on the academic motivation of student athletes. Both variables were higher for Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors than Success-Oriented student athletes and Overstrivers. Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors were more committed to the athletic role and believed they were more exploited by the university.

For all of the participants, athletic—academic commitment was negatively correlated with university GPA ( $r = -.50$ ). The more commitment to the athletic role and the less to the academic role, the lower the university GPA. The nature of intercollegiate athletics, especially at Division I schools, puts pressure on student athletes to strengthen their athletic commitment at the expense of their academic commitment. This in turn lowers academic performance (Adler & Adler, 1991; Simons et al., 1997).

Many student athletes, especially revenue scholarship athletes in Division I schools, are recruited to the university mainly because of their athletic ability. This athletic ability has been developed and rewarded by parents, coaches, and peers over time, often as far back as elementary

school. Thus, these student athletes come to the university with a strong athletic ability and commitment. Their academic ability and commitment may be more variable depending upon their academic ability, history of academic successes and failures, and the influences of their parents, siblings, teachers, and peers. At the university, student athletes face strong time and energy pressures from their athletic participation, as well as other less tangible factors that may put athletics in conflict with academics and enhance athletic commitment and diminish academic commitment.

Participation in intercollegiate athletics requires a substantial commitment of time and energy. While a sport is in season, student athletes generally spend between 20 and 30 hours per week, attending meetings and practices, playing games at home and on the road, and in individual weight training sessions. Depending upon the sport, and the coach's expectations or requirements, the time demands during the off-season can also be considerable.

Because athletic participation is physically strenuous, there exists the problem of fatigue that makes concentration during studying more difficult. In addition to the pain and physical discomfort that may interfere with full concentration while studying or attending class, extra time is required for the rehabilitation of both minor and major injuries.

Student athletes often decide in favor of athletics when there exist conflicts between the demands of athletics and academics (Adler and Adler, 1991; Simons et al., 1997). Missing a practice or part of a practice because of an unexpected academic commitment is generally frowned upon. Although a coach is prohibited under National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) regulations from requiring a student athlete to miss an unexpected academic commitment that conflicts with practice, the coach's potential disapproval weighs heavily in the student's eyes. Because coaches possess the power to decide which athletes will play or start in the games, many student athletes believe, correctly or incorrectly, that they will be penalized by their coaches for choosing academic commitments over athletic ones. The athletes

themselves are likewise reluctant to miss practice, as it may interfere with their athletic skill development, which will also place them at risk of losing a starting position. As the team often represents the central peer group for the student athlete, peer pressure to favor athletic demands over academic ones plays a strong role.

The athletic culture that student athletes inhabit informs them in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that athletics takes priority over academics. For many, staying minimally eligible to compete in their sport is the primary goal. For both Division I and II colleges and universities, athletic eligibility requires a minimum college GPA of 2.0 and completion of at least 24 semester units per academic year. The verbal shorthand for this mind-set is that "a C gets a degree," an expression vocalized by those student athletes most interested in remaining eligible and least committed to the academic role.

The motivation to succeed academically is further weakened by well-publicized accounts of athletes leaving school early to launch lucrative professional careers. For these few athletes, receiving a degree has been eliminated as a prerequisite for economic success and security. The fact that only a minuscule percentage of student athletes are able to enter the professional ranks appears to have little effect on dampening many student athletes' belief that they can and will become professional athletes.

Although some accommodations are made for the special demands on student athletes, such as early course enrollment, special advising and extra help in the form of tutoring and review sessions, the belief among students and faculty is that these special privileges are undeserved and that student athletes are really just athletes and are not serious students.

The belief that these individuals are being exploited by the university for their athletic ability may provide a rationalization for lower academic effort. When the combination of lower academic preparation and a greater commitment to athletics leads to poor academic performance, the student athlete may then blame the mandated athletic demands for his or her poor performance rather than his or her own lack of academic effort. Feelings of resentment emerge when student

athletes believe that the university is using their athletic ability without providing the support necessary for them to become successful students. The inevitable result is poorer academic performance, as our data indicates. The fact that more Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors are found in the revenue sports suggests that these athletic pressures are more pronounced in the revenue sports. Female and nonrevenue athletes seem more able to resist the athletic pressures and put the necessary time and energy to be successful academically.

Although no differences were found between Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors in athletic-academic commitment or university GPA, there may well be two different mechanisms at work which influence their greater commitment to athletics. For Failure-Avoiders, the fear of failure is the salient motive, but Failure-Acceptors have a lack of interest in academics altogether.

The Failure-Acceptors are mainly interested in playing their sport, which provides a strong if not primary motivation for coming to the university. They willingly accept the athletic demands and devote most of their time and effort to athletics. They are not especially motivated to avoid failure except as it affects their academic eligibility. Their only academic motivation is to remain minimally academically eligible to play their sport. This relative lack of motivation to achieve academically does not appear to be due to a fear of failure, for when compared to Failure-Avoiders, Failure-Acceptors are higher on academic self-worth—a variable associated with failure avoidance. They also show lower extrinsic motivation than Failure-Avoiders, suggesting that external academic motivators such as the striving for grades to demonstrate academic ability is less important for them because their interest and motivation lies elsewhere, that is sports. Self-handicapping excuses for these student athletes are employed more as an explanation for reduced academic effort than as a means of protecting self-worth. These excuses are used to conceal their lack of interest in academics, which cannot be expressed publicly. The belief that they are exploited provides an additional rationalization for lack of academic effort. The Failure-

Acceptors can be said to be truly academically unmotivated. They are, however, extremely motivated in the athletic domain.

For Failure-Avoiders on the other hand, the fear of failure plays a much stronger role in leading them to put forth less academic effort and develop a greater commitment to athletics. Compared to Failure-Acceptors, they show a lower academic self-worth (lowest of all four types). The time and energy demands of athletics provide another excuse for lowered academic effort. They exhibit higher extrinsic motivation and reading and study problems than Failure-Acceptors. All these are associated with their fear of failure. They work to avoid failure by putting in less academic effort and rationalize this reduced academic effort by employing self-handicapping excuses along with the claim that they are being exploited by the university. For Failure-Avoiders, then, this need to protect their academic self-worth reinforces the commitment to athletics and diminishes their commitment to school. The Failure-Avoiders cannot be said to be unmotivated in the academic domain. Instead, they are maladaptively motivated to avoid failure rather than to achieve success. Like Failure-Avoiders, they are highly motivated in the athletic domain.

The correlational nature of the data does not allow causal inferences about the nature and development of the relationship of academic and athletic commitment for Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors. These findings do not make it clear whether the pull of athletics induces Failure-Acceptors and Failure-Avoiders to neglect academics or whether past academic failure produces more emphasis on athletics as they diminish academic effort. The relationship is likely cyclical. On the one hand, academic failure can lead to more interest and effort in athletics as the devotion of more time and energy to athletics leaves less time and interest in building academic skills. This in turn may lead to more academic failure and more devotion to athletics and so forth. Alternatively, superior athletic ability is recognized, encouraged and rewarded by adults and peers, which leads to less interest and effort in academics and the resultant academic failures.

Because sports are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivating, athletics probably provides the original impetus for both Failure-Acceptors and Failure-Avoiders to reduce academic effort. For Failure-Avoiders, academic failures play an added role. For Success-Oriented and, to a lesser extent Overstrivers, the strong pull of athletics is balanced by strong academic motivators that may come from parents, teachers, and peers, and from their early academic successes that help them develop a strong academic self-worth.

Although these results show that student athletes are distributed across motivational types in the same proportion as nonathletes, the smaller percentages of Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors for females and nonrevenue athletes supports the key role of athletic commitment. Females had higher academic commitment than the revenue males,  $t(143) = -3.97, p = .01$ , and lesser belief that they were exploited,  $t(142) = -7.31, p = .01$ . Likewise, nonrevenue athletes had a stronger academic commitment,  $t(231) = -3.00, p = .01$ , and a weaker belief that they were exploited  $t(228) = -7.42, p = .01$ .

Female athletes are less likely to come to the university primarily to play sports because of the lack of extrinsic rewards and the limited possibility of a professional athletic career. The greater emphasis that females place on academics is also shown by the higher percentage of Success-Oriented student athletes. When comparing females to revenue males, the more positive academic motivation of females is reflected in females' higher high school GPAs,  $t(144) = 3.90, p = .01$ ; SAT verbal scores,  $t(145) = 4.00, p = .01$ ; SAT math scores,  $t(145) = 2.89, p = .01$ ; and university GPAs,  $t(162) = 5.26, p = .01$ .

Revenue athletes are the most highly recruited and receive more extrinsic rewards, recognition, and social support than nonrevenue athletes. For many, this can lead to more time and effort devoted to athletics and thus a stronger commitment to athletics than to academics. Revenue athletes who are Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors are the ones most likely to exhibit the discrepancy between their athletic and academic motivation. These two groups should

be of most concern to educators. They are more at risk for academic failure.

To counteract these pressures, educators need to play a more prominent role in the lives of student athletes to help them see that they can succeed academically as well as athletically. In the precollege years, educators need to pay special attention to the academic needs of students who are identified as gifted athletes to balance the attention they receive for their athletic exploits. Teachers and administrators in these schools should work more closely with coaches, who play a large role in student athletes' lives, to enlist their help in emphasizing academics as well as athletics. Raising the minimum academic standards for athletic participation is one policy that provides strong extrinsic motivation to work hard academically.

At the college level, athletic administrators and coaches tend to be isolated from the intellectual life of the campus. Student athletes may also feel isolated from the other students as they spend so much time and energy participating in athletics with their athletic peers. Efforts need to be made to help student athletes see themselves as legitimate students as well as athletes.

College staff and faculty, with the cooperation of the athletic department, need to be more involved in the lives of student athletes. Faculty and academic staff need to be more involved in the athletic recruiting process so that student athletes will feel they are valued as students as well as athletes. Academic tutoring and other support services for student athletes are typically part of the athletic departments, which makes them potentially susceptible to the pressure to put athletics first. These services should be separated from the athletic department and be administratively part of academic support

so that they will have some independence from the athletic department and be able to represent the academic interests of the student athlete when the inevitable conflicts arise between athletic commitments and academic ones. Early intervention for student athletes at risk of simply majoring in eligibility is also important before they decide that academics is too difficult or not important enough to pursue.

Coaches are the major adult role models for student athletes as they spend a significant amount of time with their athletes. Coaches need to see their student athletes' academic performance as part of their overall responsibility. They should be rewarded for the successful academic performance of their student athletes. Coaches also need to have more understanding of the academic demands on their athletes. They could go to some of their student athletes' classes, attend lectures, look over assignments, and so forth. More interaction with the faculty through forums, lectures, and other activities would help them to see themselves as more a part of the academic community.

As educators, we believe that academic and athletic representatives of universities must make a concerted effort to provide a more balanced picture of college life to student athletes, especially for Failure-Avoiders and Failure-Acceptors. These efforts will require the systematic involvement of faculty, academic, and athletic support staff to make clear to student athletes that they show academic, and not merely athletic, potential.

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Herbert D. Simons, Education Department, University of California, Berkeley, CA; [herbs@socrates.berkeley.edu](mailto:herbs@socrates.berkeley.edu)