

An investigation of academic clustering of athletes in BCS athletic departments

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Recent research and media attention has shown the pursuit of a quality education eludes many athletes and especially minority athletes (Fountain & Finley, 2009a; Lieber-Steeg, Upton, Bohn, & Berkowitz, 2008). A recently published study illustrated the extent of academic clustering among football teams in the Atlantic Coast Conference (Fountain & Finley, 2009a). The clustering was more pronounced among minority football players, particularly in General Studies programs. While white football players were over-represented in Business programs. Academic clustering occurs when more than 25% of a team shares one academic major (Case, Greer and Brown, 1987).

The wide gaps in Graduation Success Rates (GSR) between African-American football players and their white teammates on many Division I teams continues to be horrendous. The quid pro quo of the scholarship system is broken on many campuses. The pursuit of wins on the field, along with bare minimum compliance with academic progress rules has many athletic departments steering athletes toward “worthless” degrees in General Studies programs (Lieber-Steeg, Upton, Bohn, & Berkowitz, 2008).

Additional analysis of one BCS football program over a 9-year period indicated that players, primarily minorities, who began as “undecided” were far more likely to be in a clustered major by their third year of college (Fountain & Finley, 2009b). Further, the players who came in with higher rankings (by Scout.com) and those who would later appear on ESPN draft boards were very likely to have been enrolled in the most heavily clustered major. This research supported that football players who do not enroll in a specific major as freshmen are far more likely to end up in the clustered majors as upperclassmen.

The current research extended the analysis of academic clustering to include several fall sports (including cross-country, soccer, and volleyball). The goal was to obtain a large data set of academic majors from 30 BCS football teams in conjunction with obtaining an equally large data set of non-football athletes to analyze and compare clustering utilizing sport, gender, and race as variables. Overall results showed non-football athletes reported as Science Majors (+45% over football players), Education (+21%), and Liberal Arts (+21%). While football players were more prevalent in Social Sciences majors (+25%), Sport Management Majors (+23%), and General Studies Majors(+17%).