

Who or what are graduate(d) student athletes? Redefining a misunderstood subpopulation

Siduri Haslerig, Ph.D.

University of Oklahoma

After reading Columbus Dispatch's cover story "Battle of Brothers" about the upcoming collegiate football game in which my two youngest cousins—who are brothers—would face each other, I was annoyed. The article used the term "fifth year senior" to describe the elder brother, which struck me because it was juxtaposed with a description of his younger brother as a "third-year junior"—not only making a fifth year seem aberrant, but also transforming a purely athletic achievement (playing as a freshman) into a disingenuous testament to his academic progress. Yet, as a collegiate athlete under the purview of the NCAA, the elder brother *was* a "fifth-year senior" in his final year of eligibility despite having walked at graduation the year before, completing an internship, and starting coursework toward a graduate degree.

I share this personal vignette to highlight a direct conflict between the available terms for describing *graduate student athletes*. Given my cousin's achievements, the phrase "fifth-year senior" was misleading in a way that obscured his academic accomplishments and those of other student-athletes who had earned graduate student status in their academic lives. Instead, I refer to the population collectively as *graduate(d) student athletes* to encompass any National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I athlete who continued coursework (and playing) after earning a bachelor's degree "early" (i.e., before exhausting their athletic eligibility). In this research note, I review the context in which graduate(d) student athletes exist within the NCAA's Division I (DI). To this end, I discuss the regulations that created and enabled this population, the demographics of the population, the unique case of graduate transfer athletes, why it is important to consider graduate(d) student athletes in research, implications for future research in terms of areas of study, as well as ideas to better understand and name this special population of college athletes.

The graduate student and postbaccalaureate athlete population has been virtually invisible in both scholarship and popular discourse regarding student athletes and academic achievement (Haslerig, 2013; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). In aggregate, the NCAA's academic reforms have led to more college athletes graduating with remaining eligibility (Haslerig, 2013; Martin, 2008; NCAA, 2016b). Harrison, Lawrence, Bukstein, Janson, and Woodle (2010) called on researchers to "investigate scholar-athletes that project new paradigms, discourses, and representations about successfully balancing academics and athletics" (p. 239). In that spirit, I draw on the broad implications of my own previous research on graduate(d) student athletes in this note in order to situate this subpopulation in relation to larger debates regarding student athlete achievement (Haslerig, 2013, 2017; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). Although some may not see the need for studying graduate(d) student athletes because they are ostensibly academically proficient, I argue that we must resist the impulse to approach research as triage. Instead, we should learn from successful students in order to address low achievement (Harper, 2012).

Context for Graduate(d) Student Athletes

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a voluntary membership organization in which member institutions (universities) have endowed themselves with the power to regulate intercollegiate athletics, including the requirements all potential participants must meet in order to be eligible to compete athletically. The NCAA categorizes each institution's athletics program into one of three levels (i.e., Division I, II, or III) that are governed by different rules due to their member institutions' differing athletic and academic needs and goals, as well as the disparity between the level of competition within each division.

To maintain their eligibility, college athletes must comply with NCAA regulations regarding academic standards and progress-toward-degree (as well as those regarding other issues, such as amateurism). For example, once athletes enter higher education, they may compete in athletics for as many as four years, which must be exhausted within five years of beginning college.¹ A "redshirt year" is one year in college when they may practice with the team, receive a grant-in-aid, and continue course work, but are ineligible to compete. The depth and breadth of NCAA regulations can be dizzying; the NCAA Division I Manual for 2016-2017 is 414 pages, 32 pages of which are devoted to academic eligibility topics (NCAA, 2016a). These regulations establish the minimum a college athlete must do to avoid becoming academically ineligible to compete and are largely designed to increase the five-year graduation rate of college athletes (especially those in the revenue sports of football and men's basketball)². However, even college athletes who far exceed academic standards often have five years of scholarship eligibility. As a result, a college athlete who earns a bachelor's degree in four years or less may have a remaining year (or more) in which they are eligible to compete and receive an athletic scholarship. To avoid penalizing college athletes who excel academically, the NCAA permits college athletes who graduate with remaining eligibility to further their higher education with "postbaccalaureate studies," or by taking graduate courses and/or enrolling in a graduate degree program while continuing to compete. The NCAA does not distinguish between postbaccalaureate and graduate students, except for in the "graduate transfer rule," instead using the umbrella labels "postbaccalaureate" or the more recently adopted "postgraduate" to describe such athletes (NCAA, 2015, 2016a).

Based on a study of 89% of DI institutions, the NCAA (2015) estimated that 2,185 (2%) of the 2014 cohort of DI student athletes were graduate(d) student athletes. These numbers are even more striking in revenue sports. In the 2014 cohort, 3.8% of men's basketball and football players were completing postbaccalaureate coursework. Further, football players were overrepresented in the population of graduate(d) student athletes—whereas football players were 16% of all DI athletes, they accounted for 36% of graduate(d) student athletes. Although the graduate(d) student athlete population is small, it represents a critical mass and is rapidly increasing in revenue sports (in football as well as men's and women's basketball, the percentage

¹ These rules apply to all college athletes; however, the NCAA has the discretion to grant individual students a waiver allowing them an extra year of athletic competition. This waiver process is the exception and not the rule; most college athletes are limited to a maximum of five years of scholarship eligibility, so I will not go into depth about NCAA waiver processes.

² Hockey, baseball, and women's basketball are counted among "revenue sports" in some NCAA rules, but, in most cases, the term refers to football and men's basketball exclusively, especially when referenced in popular media or the research literature.

of postgraduates competing almost doubled between 2007 and 2014). This increase is due to a confluence of factors, including but not limited to: a) academic reforms that have led to more athletes graduating with remaining eligibility; b) revenue sports' being more likely to keep athletes on scholarship the full five years (or more, in the case of certain medical redshirts); and c) revenue sports increasingly keeping athletes on campus year-round and requiring summer enrollment. Yet the research literature tells us almost nothing about this category of academically successful college athletes. Their lived experiences deserve serious study, particularly as a rapidly growing subpopulation. Furthermore, the marked contrast between the degree attainment and commitment to academic excellence displayed by graduate(d) student athletes and the overall low academic achievement of revenue athletes (Mondello & Abernethy, 2000; Sander, 2009) underscores the relevance and timeliness of research on graduate(d) student athletes.

Graduate Transfer Athletes

Few NCAA regulations directly reference graduate student athletes; in most cases, graduate students and those taking postbaccalaureate coursework are treated as equivalent by NCAA bylaws. One exception to this equivalence is the "graduate transfer rule," which enables graduate student athletes to transfer and play immediately—provided they have remaining eligibility and their original institution releases them by not renewing their scholarship—exempting them from the standard regulation that college athletes in revenue sports must sit out athletic competition for a year after transferring.

The graduate transfer rule has gone through several iterations in the past decade. In 2006, the NCAA passed a proposal "2005-54," which permitted any college athlete who graduated with remaining athletic eligibility to transfer and enter graduate school at a different institution without sitting out a year. However, the rule was only in full effect for one season (college athletes transferring for the autumn of 2006 were the sole cohort to use it), because NCAA member institutions voted to overrule the regulation in 2007 with the justification that the rule would effectively create free agency amongst graduate student athletes and result in a second recruiting season. Shortly thereafter, the NCAA compromised by creating a waiver process, exempting graduate student athletes who were entering a graduate degree program that was not offered at their original institution from sitting out a year. In the summer of 2011, this waiver process was formalized into a rule so graduate student athletes wishing to transfer no longer had to apply for a waiver on a case-by-case basis, assuming they met the rule's criteria (Infante, 2012; Martin, 2008).

This rule has likely contributed more to the visibility of the graduate student athlete population than any other single factor. The graduate transfer rule made this population more visible both because it garnered positive coverage (*Sports Illustrated* writer Staples [2011] refers to it as "the best rule in college sports" and asserts it's "the only NCAA rule that actually rewards student-athletes for taking care of the 'student' side of the equation") and because athletes' graduate status is integral to a story that is considered newsworthy (the college athlete's transfer to a different team). As a result, athletes' graduate status was more likely to be covered explicitly. Even so, graduate transfers' academic achievement is routinely discussed as an aside or obliquely. For example, then-graduate transfer student Russell Wilson was described in an article as "a one-year transfer" (Thamel, 2011) and, aside from the description "smart enough to graduate from N.C.

State in three years,” neither his graduate student status nor use of the graduate transfer rule were mentioned in that particular article.

The distinctions between graduate-, graduated-, and graduate transfer student athletes are important, especially in terms of what each status may indicate about an athlete’s motivations to stay in school. For example, enrolling in a specific graduate program is more indicative of academic or career motivations than simply earning additional undergraduate credits, whereas transferring may suggest that athletics were a larger determinant than academic program in an athlete’s decision to pursue graduate coursework (NCAA 2015, 2016b). An NCAA (2015) report found that 62% of graduate student athletes at their original institution earned a graduate degree after at least 4 semesters, 12% were still enrolled in their graduate degree program, and 26% withdrew. In contrast, 39% of graduate transfer athletes withdrew, 51% completed their degree, and 10% were still enrolled. These numbers become more dramatic in DI revenue sports: for example in football, whereas 50% of graduate student athletes at their original institution earned a graduate degree within 2 years, only 28% of graduate transfers did so (NCAA, 2015). Nonetheless, all postbaccalaureate and graduate student athletes have succeeded in attaining a degree, and have done so before exhausting their NCAA eligibility. We need to study graduate(d) student athletes as a whole—including those who pursue graduate degrees, graduate coursework, or postbaccalaureate courses. There is much to learn from the degree attainment of the entire population and, conversely, the distinctions within the graduate(d) student athlete population are important for understanding how to help those eligible capitalize on their educational opportunities—whether that means pursuing graduate coursework while playing or not.

The Case for Studying Graduate(d) Student Athletes

Intercollegiate athletics in the U.S. has embraced the concept of the *student-athlete*, a phrase the NCAA adopted and incorporated into all written materials in the 1950s to ensure that athletic scholarships could not be interpreted as paid employment, wherein NCAA athletes might be eligible for Worker’s Compensation (Byers, 1995). In the ensuing decades, scholars and popular culture have interpreted the term through a revisionist lens, insisting it places “students first” literally in order to indicate and maintain the primacy of that role. Numerous scholars and commentators have debunked the rhetoric creating a false-equivalency between amateurism and maintaining student status (Mitten, 2000; Zimbalist, 2001); however, Sack and Staurowsky (1998) report that the educational establishment “has rallied around the myth” (p. 106) of amateurism promulgated by the NCAA. The importance of language for framing these debates leads me to eschew the term “student-athlete” in this research note in favor of naming this subpopulation accurately (as discussed in further length on p. 118).

The popular narrative that intercollegiate athletics provides college access opportunities for disadvantaged students is an adaptation of the American meritocracy myth (Bilberry, 2000; Eitzen, 2003). There are several arguments as to how this function is operationalized, including: a) giving students who might not otherwise be college-bound (including relatively large numbers of first generation, low-socioeconomic status, and students of color) a reason to aspire to college; b) recruiting these students; c) offering preferential admissions, including lowering academic admission standards for some student athletes and, according to proponents, scaffolding student

athletes who do not meet initial academic eligibility requirements so they have the opportunity to reach academic standards; and/or, d) providing financial support for college through athletic scholarships (Eitzen, 2003; Harrison, 2003).

However, maintaining the primacy of academics for student athletes has proved an elusive goal, especially at the most elite levels (Byers, 1995; Emerick, 1996; Mathewson, 2000; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982; Upthegrove, Roscigno, & Charles, 1999). Concerns that intercollegiate athletics may exploit student athletes in ways that violate legal rights abound. In fact, scholars have examined the issue of exploitation in intercollegiate athletics using legal principals and laws as wide-ranging as educational hindrance (Emerick, 1996; Martin, 2008), disparate impact (*Cureton v. NCAA*, 1999; Mondello & Abernethy, 2000; Rosen, 2000; Taylor & Traub, 2000), contract law and good faith (Ciccolella, Sharp, & Krueger, 2008; Davis, 1991; Johnson, 1985; *Ross v. Creighton University*, 1992), anti-trust (Mitten, 2000), and the most recent spate of cases involving player likenesses and unionization (*O'Bannon v. NCAA*, 2015; Tarm, 2015). Most courts and many scholars have considered the relationship between athletes and universities “contractual in nature” (Davis, 1991, p. 769; Johnson, 1985), a supposition useful when considering the question of universities’ obligations to student athletes.

The good faith doctrine regarding contracts “provides a means to imply an obligation that the university provide an educational opportunity to student-athletes” (Davis, 1991, p. 777). If collegiate football is a job they do but cannot be paid for, the question becomes, *what do student athletes get out of it?* The belief that student athletes work for higher education institutions can cut both ways—supporting the argument that athletes are entitled to the substantive educational opportunities that are ostensibly their compensation (Bukstein, 2016; Ciccolella et al., 2008; Davis, 1991; Johnson, 1985), or the belief that elite athletes should not reasonably be expected to achieve in realms other than sport (Anderson & South, 1993; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Zimbalist, 2001). These conflicting views are due to the perceived inherent conflict between achievement in the realms of athletics and academics (Harrison, 2003). Despite the fundamental fallacy of conflating amateurism with protecting student athletes’ status as students, amateurism creates an additional implicit obligation for institutions to ensure student athletes have meaningful access to education—because receiving an education, as well as a degree, is ostensibly the agreed upon payment for the work they do athletically. Furthermore, Davis (1991) argues that beyond institutions’ implicit “commitment to the educational and intellectual well being” (p. 780) of student athletes, the “intimate and pervasive involvement of athletic departments in decisions that significantly impact a student-athlete’s academic success justifies creating a duty that may not extend to other students” (p. 788). As such, the academic achievement and degree attainment of student athletes is essential to the integrity of the entire system of intercollegiate athletics (Byers, 1995; Davis, 1991).

The graduate(d) student athlete population is, by definition, a beneficiary of the credential owed in a good faith exchange between universities and athletes (Haslerig, 2017). Given the potential exploitation of college athletes, more than just a credential may be owed, however. Due to clustering into majors with dubious academic value and/or little applicability to athletes’ future goals (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011; Houston & Baber, 2017), “a degree may not constitute an accurate measure of whether student-athletes have obtained educational skills that will permit them to compete and earn a living” (Davis, 1991, p. 758). Thus, it is essential and ethical that student

athletes have the opportunity to leave college both with the skills, knowledge, and intellectual development *signified* by a college degree, and with the actual credential (Davis, 1991; Haslerig, 2013, 2017). The opportunity to earn a graduate degree may be a particularly effective way to accomplish the goal of a meaningful education (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). That being said, studying their lived experiences is crucial to determining whether it has indeed been a fair exchange.

The NCAA and member institutions have made substantial progress in improving academic outcomes for student athletes in revenue sports since the 1980s, during which time “the NCAA has consistently raised the academic requirements” (Mondello & Abernethy, 2000, p. 127). Examples include, but are not limited to, raising initial eligibility and academic requirements in order to ensure student athletes have the ability and preparation to succeed academically (a series of increases—most notably Prop 48 in 1983 and Prop 16, which was fully implemented in 1996³); mandating athletics departments to provide academic support services (in 1991); enforcing benchmarks such as student athletes declaring a major and making appropriate progress-toward-degree in order to remain academically eligible; and holding institutions accountable for student athletes’ academic success and graduation rates by penalizing those who fail to make academic progress with fewer athletic scholarships (Mondello & Abernethy, 2000). However, one factor limiting the success of NCAA reforms aimed at prioritizing and increasing college athletes’ academic achievement is the tendency to articulate and expect them to do only the minimum academically (Benson, 2000; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Mathewson, 2000). Mathewson (2000) described an inherent conflict of interest between NCAA eligibility requirements and the organization’s fundamental purpose—to protect the interest of intercollegiate athletics, not academics. Academic standards then function as an achievement ceiling instead of a floor, a “*de minimis* concept, which provides universities with substantial incentives to maintain, and discourages them from investing in or exceeding, the minimum eligibility requirements” (Mathewson, 2000, p. 85). In contrast to the *de minimis* concept, graduate(d) student athletes are evidence of college athletes who far exceed those minimums.

What’s in a Name?

The combined effect of these NCAA regulations—in concert with the national trend toward college students needing/taking more than the traditional four years to complete a bachelor’s degree—renders the quadrisection of a college career into *freshman*, *sophomore*, *junior*, and *senior* years insufficient for situating college athletes within the five-year NCAA eligibility system. According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Condition of Education 2016 report, “The 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in fall 2008 was 60 percent” (Kena et al., 2016, p. 235). Furthermore, only “forty-four percent of 2007–08 first-time bachelor’s degree recipients completed a bachelor’s degree within 48 months of their initial postsecondary enrollment, another 23 percent within 49–60 months, and an additional 9 percent within 61–72

³ Academic standards were initially lowered in the ‘70s (initial academic eligibility standards were abolished in 1972 and, in 1974, all freshmen were allowed into varsity competition in revenue sports). These changes created a nadir of academic achievement, leading to clear cases in which student athletes were exploited for their athletic ability at the expense of academics and the opportunity to earn a degree (Mondello & Abernethy, 2000).

months” (Cataldi et al., 2011, p. 3). In other words, a full 66% of *degree recipients* did not graduate within the traditional four-year timeline, and these statistics do not account for those who never earn a degree. Nonetheless, students who take more than the traditional four years to earn a bachelor’s degree are largely absent from media portrayals of college life (excluding the trope of the slacker-who-never-graduates), so negative stereotypes about students who take more time to earn a degree persist—unchecked by the statistical reality. Furthermore, college athletes may be particularly visible cases of “fifth-year seniors” given the absence of other examples, possibly making the mislabeling of graduate(d) student athletes even more stigmatizing.

At the national level, the term associated with this population’s status as athletes—and not with their role or status as students—is likely to be used, especially in the context of football media coverage. Various terms are used to differentiate college athletes’ class year, including using “redshirt” as a preface to a college athlete’s year, which denotes that the student entered college one year earlier than their current year on the team. For example, a “redshirt junior” is in his or her third year of competition (at most), but took a redshirt at some point in their college career, indicating they are in their fourth year of classes and have another year of athletic eligibility remaining. The following year, their fifth year in college and fourth year actively competing for the team, they will likely be labeled a “redshirt senior” or a “fifth-year senior” during media coverage of games, regardless of their academic standing. In the context of inherently time-bound careers in college athletics, these delineations make sense in clarifying the remaining length of players’ athletic eligibility; however, they also serve to reinforce negative stereotypes about athletes’ academic achievements by diminishing athletes’ academic standing.

There are inherent shortcomings in the terms frequently used to refer to *graduate(d) student athletes*. Because these athletes have graduated with their bachelor’s degrees, it is problematic to saddle them with a label that obscures their academic accomplishments (Haslerig, 2013). Given the dominant images of both college athletes and Black men—and especially of Black male college athletes—as academically at-risk, unmotivated, and disengaged (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Benson, 2000; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Oseguera, 2010), the “fifth-year senior” label is particularly loaded and problematic. The phrase renders invisible an entire population of college athletes who contradict prevailing stereotypes, and instead reinforces the trope of the “dumb jock.” Not only does it obfuscate the bachelor’s degrees these athletes have *already* attained and the advanced degrees many of them are working toward, it actually implies that they are academically *behind* because they *need* more than the traditional four years to earn a bachelor’s degree.

Conclusion

One unintended positive result from academic reforms aimed at raising the five-year graduation rate may be the critical mass of college athletes graduating prior to exhausting their athletic eligibility (NCAA, 2016b). For example, of the Division I college athletes who graduated in 2004-2005, 33.4% had remaining athletic eligibility (Martin, 2008). As a result, a college athlete who earns a bachelor’s degree in four years or less often has a remaining year (or more) in which s/he is eligible to compete and/or to receive an athletic scholarship. This has created a category of academically successful college athletes that existing research literature tells us very little about. There have been studies of academically successful college athletes (e.g., Martin & Harris, 2006;

Martin, Harrison, & Stone, 2010), including Oseguera's (2010) study that defined successful college athletes as having graduated, as well as a few studies nominally related to graduate student athletes. For example, Martin's (2008) legal article dealt with the graduate transfer rule, Mahiri and Van Rheenen's (2009) book explored the experiences and trajectory of college athletes who became academic scholars *after* their athletic careers, and Harrison et al. (2010) analyzed reactions to ESPN's article on Rhodes Scholar and football player Myron Rolle. Nonetheless, research has rarely explored the experiences of participants who are simultaneously college athletes and graduate students. Nor has research explored the larger phenomenon of college athletes who graduate with remaining athletic eligibility (Haslerig, 2013; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016).

Despite increased focus on the academic achievement of college athletes in both policy (Mondello & Abernethy, 2000) and research (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; NCAA, 2001; Purdy et al., 1982; Upthegrove et al., 1999), the population of graduate(d) student athletes remains under-examined. Much of the literature focuses on academic failure or uses deficit frameworks to explain the underperformance of subgroups of college athletes. In contrast, research that situates college athletes' behavior and motivation in interaction with socialization processes has the potential to recognize college athletes' agency, while also avoiding blaming the victim or absolving institutions of all responsibility for outcomes. Unfortunately, this research suggests that college athletes' college experiences often perpetuate academic failure (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1991, 1999; Benson, 2000; Comeaux, & Harrison, 2007; Fountain & Finley, 2009). Research must continue to explore college athletes' academic experiences in order to discover best practices for encouraging academic success (Martin & Harris, 2006; Martin et al., 2010) and to uncover how even successful college athletes may be harmed or shortchanged within the current system (Oseguera, 2010).

Research that acknowledges graduate and graduated student athletes is essential to a truly robust body of literature on the academic achievement of college athletes. Examining student athletes' academic trajectories and experiences of role conflict through in depth study of this unique population provides a new perspective from which to theorize and approach reform. This lens may reveal connections between theory, graduate student athletes' success, and applied solutions to the all-too-common academic struggles and failures of student athletes, especially those in revenue sports. Furthermore, scholarly consideration validates graduate(d) student athletes' identities and experiences, which is important in and of itself.

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