

Academic Success of Collegiate Athletes and Social and Emotional Learning

Rebecca Romine, EdS
Belhaven University

Abstract: Student-athletes represent a unique sub-population of college students with several competing responsibilities to fulfill. While institutions of higher education have historically used standardized test scores and grade point averages as indicators of students' academic success, there have been recent shifts to include non-cognitive, social, and emotional factors in predictive models. Social and emotional skills can be developed. Research has shown that implementing social and emotional learning curriculum has positive impacts on academic achievement, student attitudes about learning, and the creation of prosocial behaviors. These benefits contribute to increased student persistence, retention, and graduation rates. While the connection between socioemotional learning and academic achievement is well documented, there is a lack of research and practical application of this type of learning curriculum in higher education for collegiate student-athletes. Advisors, academic support personnel, coaches, and athletic administrators who understand student-athlete's social and emotional capabilities can use this understanding to help develop student-athletes holistically. Breaking down siloed, departmental operations within higher education and sharing information to work collaboratively for the good of student-athletes can lead to higher academic achievement, better on-field performance, and graduates with the necessary soft skills to succeed in a competitive job market.

Keywords: Student-athlete, social and emotional learning, academic success, intercollegiate athletics

Factors Impacting Academic Success in College Athletes

Collegiate student-athletes represent a unique sub-population of all college students. They could even be described as non-traditional students due to the environmental pressure they face and the fact they are a minority population on many campuses (Ting, 2009). In addition to facing the same academic demands all college students face, student-athletes also contend with the demands of their sport. Many student-athletes devote up to 40 hours per week to various athletic demands, including practice, strength and conditioning, competition/traveling, film review, and injury prevention and rehabilitation (Simons et al., 2007). The combination of the academic and athletic responsibilities that student-athletes face often leaves little time to have a job (on campus or off campus), which can add financial stress to their already full plates. Such a high level of responsibility can make it difficult to adjust to the demands of college for student-athletes.

Academic Success in College Athletes

Historically, high school grades have been viewed as the best predictor of freshman student-athlete collegiate success, while standardized test scores (e.g., ACT and SAT scores) are seen as the next best available predictor (McArdle et al., 2013). There is a growing belief among support staff that these metrics alone are not sufficient to provide adequate academic support measures for student-athletes. Prior academic and standardized test performance does not account for the many factors that have been shown to affect academic success and persistence. Ting (2009) used the Non-Cognitive Questionnaire to address how perception, motivation, and adjustment are related to student-athletes' first-year success. Results showed students with a higher self-concept and a preference for long-term goals achieved higher grade point averages (GPAs) than their peers.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) created the Graduation Risk Overview (GRO) model in 2009 as a voluntary tool to help academic administrators assess individual student-athlete's academic risk. The model used data on academics, the role of academics, transfer status, the student-athlete's personal life, and sport (Johnson, 2013). Student-athletes who identify more as an athlete than as a student often do not have the same levels of motivation for their academic endeavors as they do for their athletic pursuits. This creates challenges for advisors and other support personnel. Transfer student-athletes face additional challenges from their peers who enroll at an institution as freshmen. As a result, they have a higher level of associated risk. Basic factors such as distance from home, scholarship level, and sports affiliation also impact a student's risk level under the GRO model.

Numerous assessments can be administered to student-athletes to provide support personnel and athletics staff with additional insight into student-athlete's abilities and beliefs. For example, the Learning and Studies Strategies Inventory (LASSI) provides insight into the skills, will, and self-regulation of strategic learning. The skills component of the assessment focuses on information processing, selecting main ideas, and testing strategies. The will component measures students' attitudes, motivation, and anxiety. The self-regulation component measures concentration, time management, self-testing, and study aids (Cleveland State University, 2022). From baseline results, support staff can determine where students might need additional assistance to achieve their full potential.

While metrics such as GPA and standardized test scores can provide coaches, advisors, and administrators with information about a student's past, the development of the GRO model and other studies, such as Ting's, demonstrate that academic success is influenced by more than test scores. Advisors, academic support personnel, coaches, and administrators must understand which additional factors influence academic success to help student-athletes reach their potential in the classroom, persist through graduation, and find fulfillment in their professional lives after graduation.

Social and Emotional Learning

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a multidiscipline collaboration founded in 1994 that advocates for social and emotional learning for all students. There are hundreds of studies that demonstrate that social and emotional learning has beneficial

outcomes related to socioemotional skills, attitudes about self, school, and civic engagement, social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (CASEL, 2022). The benefits of social and emotional learning curriculum have been found to have long-term effects. Participants develop skills that lead to higher levels of well-being up to 18 years later than those who do not participate in the curriculum. Employers report difficulty attracting applicants with soft skills, including the ability to communicate clearly, take initiative, problem-solve, and get along with others (Davidson, 2016). A social and emotional learning curriculum provides students with the opportunity to develop such skills. Data supports that social and emotional development in young children can reduce societal expenses for public assistance, public housing, police involvement, and incarceration. With such impacts, the cost-benefit research shows an average return of 11to-1 across six different social and emotional learning programs (CASEL, 2022).

Salvatelli (2019) drew from Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory to analyze the effect of social and emotional skills on academic achievement in fifth-grade students. Social cognitive theory suggests the three factors that comprise behavior include the person, environment, and the behavior itself – and that an individual's response to environmental conditions is influenced by their upbringing, culture, and experience. With this understanding, educators and administrators can help students develop positive self-efficacy by teaching students to set appropriately challenging goals and develop resiliency (Salvatelli, 2019).

Wang et al. (2012) examined the effects of incorporating social and emotional competence curriculum in a freshman seminar course to enhance academic achievement, assist in retention efforts, and help students transition to college life. Components of the curriculum included time management, class participation, note-taking, knowledge of one's own and others' emotions, active learning, self-management, critical thinking, relationship skills, tolerance, test-taking, and behavioral flexibility. Students in the studied seminar class showed greater awareness of emotion and increased self-management skills than their peers in different classes. Students enrolled in the class that incorporated social and emotional learning also showed higher GPAs over the four semesters after completing the course (Wang et al., 2012).

Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) focuses on enhancing young people's personal competencies, social skills, and attitudes through increased positive relationships, social support, and environmental enhancement (Taylor et al., 2017). Taylor and colleagues' (2017) research demonstrated positive benefits in students from a minimum of 56 weeks to 195 weeks. The study revealed improved social and emotional skills, positive attitudes, prosocial behavior, and academic performance across all demographic groups analyzed. Additionally, the school-based, universal social and emotional learning interventions served as a protective factor against the development of conduct problems, emotional distress, and drug use (Taylor et al., 2017).

Harris et al. (2018) expanded the five C's (character, competence, caring/compassion, connection, and confidence) of PYD to collegiate athlete academic performance and development. Their results showed personal skills, social skills, and extracurricular involvement as important contributors to positive psychosocial development. PYD is facilitated in a sports environment by

encouraging student-athletes to take responsibility, learn to compromise, give and receive feedback, regulate emotion, work as a team, and focus on community/diversity (Harris et al., 2018).

Institutional Impacts of Student-Athlete Academic Success

Higher education administrators across the nation are concerned with student persistence and retention. If students do not experience academic success, the likelihood that they withdraw or transfer increases significantly. Institutions have supported retention efforts through programs like first-year seminar classes and expanded social engagement opportunities on campus. Woolever (2017) drew on Bandura's Social Learning Theory – specifically self-efficacy and confidence in academic engagement – as well as Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory, Astin's (1999) Theory of Involvement, Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model, and results from the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) to examine how student-athlete academic engagement could affect retention. The SEI examines four subgroups of student engagement. The academic and behavioral components focus on information such as credits toward degree, attendance, class participation, campus engagement, and extracurricular participation. The cognitive and psychological components look at internal information such as self-regulation, relevance of major to career goals, feeling of belonging, and relationships with others.

Woolever (2017) highlighted that much of the literature on school practice overemphasizes academic and behavioral engagement, so it is important to measure cognitive and psychological engagement as well. His results showed that student-athletes are as engaged as their non-athlete peers and are achieving higher GPAs. These results indicate that engagement and academic success are correlated. While nothing can replace students' intrinsic factors, e.g., motivation, institutions of higher education have a responsibility to ensure they are providing a quality educational experience that also helps students develop socially and emotionally. If institutions can pinpoint the habits or actions 'good' students do, it is possible that programming could replicate these factors critical for success for all students.

While social engagement and involvement can be bolstered through athletic participation, other areas for engagement on campus include faculty and staff interactions, residential living, varied learning opportunities, and community-building opportunities. Forming positive relationships with faculty and staff can help students feel cared for and can create a sense of belonging (Woolever, 2017). Swanson et al. (2021) examined the psychosocial outcomes of a sense of belonging to campus, feelings of mattering to campus, academic self-efficacy, and social self-efficacy in relation to cumulative GPA and persistence of students' first three years of college. They found that all four psychosocial outcomes were significantly related to academic achievement, with academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging as the greatest predictor of academic performance. It is important to note that academic affairs and student affairs are almost always independent units on college campuses. To holistically support students' academic success and psychosocial development, there is a need for collaboration among these educational professionals.

Understanding student-athletes' social and emotional development and its effect on academic success can also have direct benefits for advisors, academic support personnel, coaches,

and athletic administrators. Student-athletes must meet eligibility guidelines set forth by the NCAA to participate in intercollegiate athletic competitions. Advisors and academic support personnel can use the understanding of student-athletes' motivation and academic self-efficacy in the advisement process and by providing academic support services. Incorporating social and emotional learning exercises in these processes can help realize greater academic success and develop skills that are desirable to future employers. From a purely athletic standpoint, coaches who have the opportunity to train and develop student-athletes over four years will likely see returns in on-field competition. Athletic teams can create a sense of belonging and help student-athletes adjust to the demands of college (Woolever, 2017). Student-athletes who buy into a team's culture and succeed academically are more likely to be successful in their athletic pursuits. Harris et al. (2018) suggested that more seasoned student-athletes can serve as peer mentors to teammates and assist in their psychosocial development.

Few studies show how social and emotional learning practices have been implemented in higher education. The University of Arizona focuses on intensive testing, one-on-one meetings with learning specialists, and workshops to help students develop communication skills, cope with stress and anxiety, problem-solve, and self-regulate. Widener University integrates social and emotional learning into freshman seminars using lectures, discussions, and experiential exercises that include role play. These efforts are supported by multimedia materials, trained staff, and extensive assessment (Socas, 2017). These efforts are a start, but there is a lack of widespread social and emotional learning integration in higher education. There is a need for additional research into how institutions can holistically support college students' maturation and development.

Discussion

Higher education institutions often operate in a siloed fashion. If they are to realize the goal of providing a quality educational and social experience for students while meeting retention and graduation rate goals, administrators must work to break down communication barriers. Faculty and staff have different interactions and experiences with students that provide unique perspectives. Interdepartmental collaboration can provide opportunities to refresh curricula to incorporate social and emotional learning and streamline campus programming to best serve student needs. Administrators play a pivotal role in pushing for such reform and fostering collaboration. They must recognize that more factors affect student-athlete performance than simply standardized test scores and GPA.

CASEL (2022) claims social and emotional learning has the greatest effect when it is customized for a particular culture or context. While there are numerous documented benefits to the implementation of social and emotional learning, there is currently no mandate for the inclusion of such a curriculum in K-12 education, and many institutions of higher education have no published information regarding such a curriculum. It seems logical to push for the inclusion of such a curriculum for all students; however, Indiana's Attorney General Todd Rokita spoke out against social and emotional learning programs. In a Parents' Bill of Rights, Rokita said, "SEL programs represent a fundamental shift in the role of teachers from educators to therapists and expand the reach of the government into the domain of the family" (Mintz, 2022, para. 8).

Without a clearly outlined and customizable social and emotional learning curriculum across K-12 education, students – especially minority students – arrive at college with varying degrees of emotional competence. Kitsantas et al. (2008) suggested that institutions of higher education need to focus on developing interventions that improve students' self-efficacy and time management skills. Suggestions included courses or workshops for first-year students that provide them with adjustment strategies, how to seek assistance, and examples of successful peers in first-year courses. An example provided for faculty includes showing students successful peers' past projects to provide encouragement and motivation (Kitsantas et al., 2008). Faculty and staff can be trained to incorporate social and emotional learning into various aspects of students' experience, from instructional methodologies to advising to faculty interactions outside the classroom.

There is an abundance of research that shows how social and emotional learning positively impacts students' academic and personal development (CASEL, 2022; Salvatelli, 2019; Wang et al., 2012). However, there is still resistance to mandating social and emotional curricula in K-12 education, and there is little public data on implementing social and emotional learning curricula in higher education. Research also demonstrates the positive impact athletics can have on student-athlete academic achievement, social development, and retention (Woolever, 2017). While social and emotional learning and athletics have both shown positive impacts on student achievement, there is little research that combines these topics or provides concrete suggestions for faculty, staff, and administrators to better understand student-athlete perspectives and implement more targeted support services to facilitate academic achievement and holistic development. Additional research is needed to determine which social and emotional constructs have the greatest impact on student-athlete academic achievement. Once these constructs are determined, administrators can leverage academic curricula, instructional methodologies, and athletic training curricula to foster further development.

References

- Astin, A.W. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 40(5), 518-529.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- CASEL. (2022). *What does the research say?* <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-does-the-research-say/>
- Cleveland State University. (2022). *LASSI - learning and study strategies inventory*. Cleveland State University Tutoring. <https://www.csuohio.edu/tutoring/lassi-learning-and-study-strategies-inventory>
- Davidson, K. (2016, August 30). Employers find “soft skills” like critical thinking in short supply. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/employers-find-soft-skills-like-critical-thinking-in-short-supply-1472549400>
- Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Springer US.
- Harris, S., Bean, C., & Fraser-Thomas, J. (2018). Factors associated with psychosocial development and academic success among university student-athletes. *PHEnex Journal*, 9(3).
- Johnson, J. (2013). Assessing academic risk of student-athletes: Applicability of the NCAA graduation risk overview model to GPA. *NACADA Journal*, 33(2), 76–89. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12930/nacada-13-041>
- Kitsantas, A., Winsler, A., & Huie, F. (2008). Self-regulation and ability predictors of academic success during college: A predictive validity study. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 20(1), 42–68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4219/jaa-2008-867>
- McArdle, J.J., Paskus, T.S., & Boker, S.M. (2013). A multilevel multivariate analysis of academic performances in college based on NCAA student-athletes. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 48(1), 57–95. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00273171.2012.715836>
- Mintz, S. (2022, February 15). *Social-emotional learning can help college students navigate the pandemic’s disruptions*. Inside HigherEd. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/social-emotional-learning-can-help-college-students-navigate-pandemic%E2%80%99s>
- Salvatelli, D. (2019). *Causal-comparative study: Differences in academic achievement by levels of social-emotional skills in grade five students* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Liberty University.

- Simons, H.D., Bosworth, C., Fujita, S., & Jensen, M. (2007). The athlete stigma in higher education. *College Student Journal*, 41(2), 251–273.
- Socas, J. (2017). Infusing social and emotional learning (SEL) into the community college curriculum. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 41(12), 901–904. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1244497>
- Swanson, E., Melguizo, T., & Martorell, P. (2021). Examining the relationship between psychosocial and academic outcomes in higher education: A descriptive analysis. *AERA Open*, 7(1), 233285842110269. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/23328584211026967>
- Taylor, R.D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J.A., & Weissberg, R.P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1156–1171. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864>
- Ting, S.M.R. (2009). Impact of noncognitive factors on first-year academic performance and persistence of NCAA division I student athletes. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, 48(2), 215–228. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1939.2009.tb00079.x>
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>
- Wang, N., Wilhite, S.C., Wyatt, J., Young, T., Bloemker, G., & Wilhite, E. (2012). Impact of a college freshman social and emotional learning curriculum on student learning outcomes: An exploratory study. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 9(2), 120–140. <http://dx.doi.org/10.53761/1.9.2.8>
- Woolever, D. (2017). *A comparative study of student engagement based on intercollegiate athletics participation* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Liberty University.