

# The Myopic (Academic) Landscape of Intercollegiate Athletics: A Discussion for How High Impact Practices Could Be a Solution?

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## Abstract

"Intercollegiate athletics programs often claim to do all they can to give their student-athletes a competitive advantage – both on and off the field. In that vein, many argue that being a student-athlete comes with inherent advantages, as these individuals have access to both on-campus resources and academic support via athletics (Umbach et al., 2006). As a result of these benefits, as well as their athletic experiences, there is a cultural belief that participation in athletics helps to develop transferable skills in everyday life during and after college (Friedman, 2013; King-White, Hawzen & Clark, forthcoming). In support, Friedman (2013) argues that many recruiters seek out (former) student-athletes when hiring new employees, often citing attributes aligned with their role as athletes (e.g., leadership, teamwork, critical thinking, and competitiveness). While that may be the case, we must consider whether student-athletes consciously connect skills acquired in and through athletic participation to life beyond sport or this is misperception of knowledge awareness. Further, while there are many known benefits of being a student-athlete, the role can also be a detriment to one's professional development during their time on campus. For example, they may be subject to stereotype threat, separation from non-athlete peers, and (mis)perceptions of those both in- and outside of athletics on their interest, intention, and ability to participate in enrichment activities (e.g., English & Kruger, 2020; Ishaq & Bass, 2019).

Scholars have already questioned the "student" moniker associated with the title student-athlete (Staurowsky, 2018). In the name, image, likeness (NIL) era, we believe that argument may grow stronger since these athletes are gaining access to capital in ways that were previously unsanctioned. However, when the NCAA continues to highlight the fact that most student-athletes "go pro" in something other than sports (Southall & Southall, 2018), these issues must continue to be questioned and the broader spectrum of student-athlete (e.g., Olympic sports, non-Power 5, mid-major, DII, DIII, etc.) should not be ignored. Additionally, while this conversation may take place, as seen in some previous academic work (e.g., Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022; Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2023; Harry, 2023; Ishaq & Bass, 2019; Shirley et al., 2022), it is often put on the backs of athletic academic support staff. While this is appropriate, we ask:

Do academic support staff for college athletes possess the legitimate power that others have in encouraging productive professional development activities?

This is a challenge in that the academic support staff's priority is to make sure students are eligible for competition and progress towards graduation. Much like coaches and their desire, or need, to win and retain their jobs, finding courses that facilitate eligibility and satisfactory progress toward degree completion often takes precedence over developing skills for life beyond the field of play. As such, we also critically reflect on whose responsibility it is to encourage

participation in curricular or co-curricular activities that help develop these young people in these ways. Some argue that being a student-athlete itself can, and should, be considered a HIP (Harry, 2023; Shirley et al., 2022). Is this true? Or is this, once again, a form of sportswashing that helps to get athletic departments to present a positive veneer of academic development without really investing in their student-athletes beyond their playing careers?

To that end, we believe that athletic departments can enhance student-athlete professional development by investing in high-impact practices (HIP) or engaged learning experiences that center on broadening student's experiences (Kuh, 2008; Watson et al., 2016). While there is the chance to do so through curricular and co-curricular activities on campus, some argue that participation in athletics itself is or could be a HIP (e.g., Harry, 2023; Shirley et al., 2022). Therefore, the purpose of this work is to critically examine NCAA guidelines, one institution's initiatives, and the current landscape of dichotomous academic scholarship (e.g., Harry, 2023; Shirley et al., 2022) to assess current practices in professional development. To do so, we focus on HIPs in intercollegiate athletics and address limitations in scholarly and practical spaces. The goal of this presentation is to begin a critical conversation about tangible praxis that could take place between educators and academic support staff in athletics that would help facilitate professional development for college athletes, assisting in their time on campus and their transition to life beyond athletics. Finally, limitations and future studies will be expanded upon in the presentation. "