

## *Journal of Issues in* **Intercollegiate Athletics**

### **Division III Athletes: Perceptions of Faculty Interactions and Academic Support Services**

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*Participation in intercollegiate athletics is an important component in the overall educational experience for many Division III students. However, college athletes have regularly reported both positive and negative experiences in managing their academic and athletic commitments (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). Support for broad-based success is an on-going concern for administrators and athletic department personnel, and the role of faculty, in and out of the classroom, is considered to be particularly important. (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Pierce, 2007). This study was designed to investigate the perceptions of NCAA Division III athletes in relation to faculty interactions, and the use of academic support programs.*

*Surveys and focus groups were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Respondents considered athletic participation to be a valued component of their collegiate lives and had strong athletic identities ( $M = 38.75$ ; maximum score = 49). Athletes reported generally positive views of their interactions with faculty; however, some negative perceptions also existed. Significant differences in the perceptions of Division III athletes were found based on maturity level, gender, GPA and visibility of sport played. Recommendations are offered including suggestions for increased collaboration between academic and athletic personnel, and increased use of peer advising.*

### **Introduction**

**S**tudent success and the role of athletics on college campuses has been debated by educators and researchers for many years (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004; Lawrence, 2008; Thelin, 2008). In 1994, Thelin described intercollegiate athletics as, “American higher education’s ‘peculiar institution’” (p. 1) focusing attention on the balance of athletics and academics, and also the experiences of athletes within these programs. Other researchers (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Sperber, 2000) have investigated a broad range of concerns within this area including academic integrity, athletic identity, academic success, preferential treatment of athletes, and effects of participation. Interactions with faculty and

utilization of academic support services have also been identified as important factors impacting athlete performance (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Harrison, Comeaux, & Plecha, 2006; Kane, Leo, & Holleran, 2008). Baucom and Lantz (2001) and Cotten and Wilson (2006) highlighted the fact that stereotypical views of athletes may exist leading to misconceptions about academic ability and motivation. In addition, Simons, Bosworth, Fujita and Jensen (2007) concluded that even though athletes reported both positive and negative reactions from faculty, they were regularly stigmatized and often perceived to be less capable academically.

The majority of the previous work in this area has focused on the experiences of athletes at the NCAA Division I and II levels with less attention given to Division III athletes (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey & Banaji, 2004; Jolly, 2008; Knapp, Rasmussen & Barnhart, 2001; Pierce, 2007; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Sharp & Sheilley, 2008). However, as the scrutiny of intercollegiate athletics continues to expand, it is important to recognize the Division III collegiate experience. Cotton and Wilson (2006) and Harrison et al. (2006) highlighted the important role of faculty in impacting the success of athletes in academic settings. Increased understanding of athletes' perceptions with regard to faculty interactions is necessary in order to strengthen the positive experiences that exist and provide additional opportunities for athletes to feel comfortable in utilizing faculty resources as they progress towards degree completion. The provision of academic support services and the response to these programs by athletes also impacts academic performance (Potuto and O'Hanlon, 2007). Enhanced awareness of the perceptions of athletes towards these academic support services may also be valuable in providing relevant programs that are designed to improve academic success. The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of male and female athletes at the Division III level in relation to faculty interactions, and the provision and use of academic support programs. Formal and informal interactions between athletes and faculty are examined both within and outside the classroom setting. The provision and use of academic support programs are also investigated in an attempt to determine the impact of these programs in supporting Division III athletes in meeting their academic goals.

## Literature Review

### *Faculty Oversight and Involvement*

The role of faculty in the oversight of collegiate athletics has been questioned for many years. Weistart (1987) suggested that the historical absence of faculty oversight of big-time athletics programs was one of the most surprising elements revealed during investigations into the sport scandals of the 1980's. Weisert (1987) questioned why faculty did not assume greater oversight of athletics programs particularly in difficult times, and speculated if increased involvement could be expected in the future. In 2008, Ridpath also considered this question and stated that

“Ultimately the integrity of college sports must start at its stated purpose-education of the participants. Sadly, even those who are guardians of the curriculum-the faculty-are as complicit as anyone in the degradation of academic integrity on campuses of higher learning in America. It is not only the faculty, but the faculty can and should be the lynchpin to actually reform the current system (p. 12).”

Lawrence, Ott, and Hendricks (2009) found that faculty members' perceptions of intercollegiate athletics programs covered a wide spectrum. Some faculty viewed athletics programs as having a negative effect on the academic reputation of their schools and others believed that there was a disconnect between athletics and academics. Conversely, there were faculty who saw no conflict between athletics and academics and highlighted the positive contributions of athletics, such as the development of athletes' personal characteristics and providing student entertainment. Lawrence et al. (2009) and Noble (2004) suggested that the varying opinions could be due in part to institutional and individual differences. Faculty working at Division I institutions, where athletics are more prominent, were less satisfied with their programs than faculty from Division II, Division III or NAIA institutions. Also, faculty from schools with winning athletics programs had more favorable attitudes towards athletics than their counterparts at institutions with low athletic success (Noble, 2004).

The American Association of University Professors (2002) report called for more faculty authority over academic matters and stated that oversight should extend to athletes and governance of the athletics departments. However, Lawrence et al. (2009) found that faculty placed oversight of athletics as a low priority when rating important areas of faculty governance and lacked knowledge and awareness of policies related to faculty oversight. These authors concluded that for any type of athletics reform, faculty must assert their influence; however, many appeared to lack the confidence to do so.

Other advocates (Lawrence et al., 2009; Brand, 2007; Ridpath, 2008) of reform have also insisted that faculty become more actively involved in by determining policy for athletics programs and by speaking out when academic integrity is compromised. Knorr (2004) suggested that faculty get involved and address relevant issues with their faculty senates and athletics councils. In addition, Knorr (2004) proposed that faculty serve as academic advisors to the athletes as opposed to athletics department personnel who often provide this support.

Newman, Miller and Bartee (2000) conducted a survey of athletic directors and faculty senate presidents at leading NCAA Division I schools regarding the "methods, means and techniques by which faculty should be involved in the administration or governance of intercollegiate athletics" (p. 1). Forty-nine techniques with the potential to empower faculty were identified. The strategies included reviewing proposed NCAA legislation with regard to academic policies, comparing academic success of athletes to non-athletes, and reviewing student academic support services.

Myles Brand (2007), former President of the NCAA, identified three primary and formal roles that faculty members should play with regard to the conduct of intercollegiate athletics: a) setting and maintaining academic standards; b) governance oversight; and c) direct assistance and involvement with the intercollegiate athletics program. Brand (2007) believed that college athletes are students first and should not receive any preferential treatment. He also reinforced the idea that the academic standards that apply to the general students should be identical to those applied to athletes. Brand (2007) further suggested that it is unacceptable to treat athletes adversely if they are following institutional rules and procedures. He stated that "unfortunately, because of understandable reluctance to criticize colleagues, faculty members are active in ensuring that athletes are not unfairly advantaged, but often not equally attentive to ensuring that athletes are not unfairly disadvantaged (p. 2)."

### *Faculty and Athlete Interactions*

In many cases athletes fail to take advantage of the faculty as one of their primary educational resources and are reluctant to meet with them outside the classroom (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Jolly, 2008). Pierce (2007) noted that “time spent with the faculty advisor is perceived as being especially critical” to the academic success of athletes (p. 801). In addition, the importance of informal interactions between athletes and faculty members has been documented in several studies (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Harrison et al., 2006; Jolly, 2008). Cotton & Wilson, (2006) found that students rarely interact with their teachers outside of class and if they do, it is usually because they are struggling with an assignment or have a specific problem with the class. Cotton & Wilson (2006) also suggested that many students do not realize the potential benefits of substantive interaction with faculty. By contrast, students involved in a group or activity that required substantial, one on one conversation or meetings with faculty had meaningful relationships and interactions and recognized the benefits. For some students, informal out of class interactions increased their comfort level and resulted in increased in-class interactions (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). Similarly, Jolly (2008) found that more informal interaction can help athletes with their misperceptions of faculty.

Jolly (2008) suggested that faculty must be proactive in reaching out to the athletes outside the classroom and by doing so can increase athletes’ short term success and create life-long learners. Informal social interactions provide an important foundation for students to pursue more academically focused interactions in the future. Jolly (2008) stated that faculty must understand athletes’ day-to-day lives and challenges. Faculty who had taken more interest in athletes’ academic success reported additional beneficial results from their informal interactions with the athletes such as attending games and practices (Jolly, 2008). The athletes also embraced the engagement of the faculty in the athletic side of their lives and became more comfortable approaching faculty in an academic setting.

Harrison et al. (2006) examined relationships between male athletes and faculty, specifically the impact of student and faculty interaction on academic achievement. The research was limited to NCAA Division I and II men’s football and basketball players, but produced results that may be applicable to other sports, divisions, and women. Harrison et al. (2006) suggested that faculty who provided intellectual challenges and stimulation for their students and helped students achieve professional goals, made strong contributions to the athletes’ success. Academically oriented interactions with faculty positively impacted athlete success and led to a recommendation that initiatives designed to increase levels of faculty communication and mentoring of athletes should be developed and implemented.

### *Athlete Experiences and Perceptions*

For many years, unappealing and negative attitudes toward athletics have existed which places an additional burden on athletes (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Simons et al., 2007; Thelin, 1994). A number of researchers have concluded that stereotypical views of athletes exist often leading to misconceptions about their academic ability and motivation (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Jolly, 2008; Knight Foundation, 2007; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). These stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes are evident at all levels of competition, including community colleges, and are directed towards athletes in both revenue

and non-revenue sports (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Engstrom et al., 1995; Hobneck, Mudge & Turchi, 2003; Richards & Aries, 1999).

Aries et al. (2004), Engstrom et al. (1995), Potuto and O'Hanlon, (2007), and Simons et al. (2007) reported that athletes experience both positive and negative interactions with faculty. In addition, athletes were regularly stigmatized and often perceived to be less capable academically. Simons et al. (2007) investigated athlete stigma in higher education by surveying 538 Division I collegiate athletes. The authors suggested that the general view of Division I college athletes as "privileged" often masks the fact that this group is also stigmatized and that the "dumb jock" stereotype is often applied. When asked how they were treated by faculty and non-athletes, only 15 % of athletes cited positive perceptions. Negative perceptions from professors and other students were reported at 59% and 33% respectively. Athletes also reported that they were refused or given a hard time when requesting accommodations for athletics competitions (61.5%), had heard faculty members make negative comments about athletics (62.1%), had tried to hide their athletic identity to avoid being stigmatized (44.5%) , and (89%) reported they rarely or never received preferential treatment (Simons et al., 2007).

According to Brand (2007), "one concern often voiced by student-athletes is that some faculty members disparage them publicly, or worse penalize them in terms of grades and academic opportunities, because of requirements of sports participation...there is little doubt that some faculty members treat students who are athletes adversely (p .2)." In the 2005-2006 NCAA GOALS, over 20,000 athletes responded to the statement, "I feel my professors view me as more of an athlete than a student." Almost 70% of Division I and II men's football and basketball players agreed. However, it is interesting to note approximately 80% of those respondents felt positively about their relationships with the faculty (Student-Athlete Relationships, 2007, p. 2). A 2008 survey conducted by the NCAA and administered to over 21,000 athletes, revealed that nearly two-thirds of the Division I football players and male basketball players considered themselves more of an athlete than a student (Wieberg, 2008). Given this self-assessment by the athletes, it is not surprising that faculty members may also see them as such.

In a study of faculty attitudes toward male athletes competing in Division I revenue and non-revenue sports, Engstrom et al. (1995) found that prejudices existed and were based on the perceived preferential treatment of athletes with regard to admissions standards and financial support. Disparate treatment was also evident with some professors reluctant to provide athletes opportunities to make up missed work (Jolly, 2008). Potuto & O'Hanlon (2007) also found nearly 50% of the Division I athletes believed that they were discriminated against by their professors because they were an athlete.

Baucom and Lantz (2001) also demonstrated that discrimination is not limited to Division I athletes. Prejudice towards male athletes in revenue and non-revenue sports, specifically regarding admissions processes, financial support and provisions of academic support services, was present at a highly selective Division II school (Baucom & Lantz, 2001). In addition, Hobneck, et al. (2003) reported that even though community college students viewed themselves as being equally successful in athletics and academics, faculty perceived athletes as lacking the academic skills necessary to succeed and believed the students' primary concerns were with athletics. Division III athletes also reported significantly more difficulties in being taken seriously by their professors than non-athletes reported (Richards & Aries, 1999). Jolly (2008) emphasized the point that the stereotype of athletes being unintelligent and unqualified for academics continues to be perpetuated.

Beck, Bennett, Maneval, and Hayes (2001) and McKindra and Centor (2005) proposed a contrasting view and suggested that many faculty members treat athletes in the same manner as any other student and also understand the role athletics play in their college's mission. Pierce (2007) also supported this position and investigated the experiences of Division I athletes majoring in engineering. Pierce (2007) found that these athletes met frequently with professors and received substantial support. For example, 54% of the respondents met with their professors frequently (1-2 times per week). When asked about the level of support the athletes received from their professors, 83% indicated that they received some support, with 50% reporting a lot of support. It is not surprising that those who met frequently with their professors received more support, thus highlighting the importance of frequent communication (Pierce, 2007).

Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) and Simons et al., (2007) also reported that athletes have positive perceptions college experience, are satisfied with the level of academic support received, experience strong influence and support from within (coaches & administrators) and outside (family & teammates) their athletic departments. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2006) studied athletes at 18 Division I universities and found that athletes had positive perceptions of their overall college experience over 90% of the time, and 93% said it was "very important" that they graduated from college. In many cases, athletes viewed their participation in collegiate athletics as an overwhelmingly positive experience. However, Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) also found that over 50% of athletes did not spend as much time as they would have liked on academics, and 80% of these athletes stated that athletics was a contributing factor (Student-Athlete Relationships, 2007, p. 2).

University of Michigan Faculty Athletics Representative, Percy Bates, suggested that the best way for athletes to avoid being stereotyped is to display proper academic behavior, "if we don't address the faculty-perception issues, we risk losing credibility as it relates to the balance inherent in 'student-athlete'" (McKindra & Centor, 2005, p. 14). Sharp and Sheilley (2008) underscored the importance of educating athletes with regard to appropriate academic practices and strategies needed to be successful. For example, athletes should be encouraged to develop open communication with the faculty, and recognize the importance of attending and actively participating in classes. In addition, by proactively seeking to develop an understanding of the day-to-day lives, experiences, and responsibilities of athletes, faculty members could increase their role in helping athletes succeed academically (Engstrom et al., 1995; Jolly, 2008; Sharp & Sheilley, 2008). Aries et al. (2004) noted that many athletes perform well academically and generalizations of underperformance are often overstated. Highly recruited athletes in "big time" programs may provide the majority of these examples; thus, faculty should reexamine any negative stereotypes they have towards athletes in general. Further, Baucom and Lantz (2001) suggested that institutions at all Divisional levels should examine policies and procedures that may facilitate or reinforce negative attitudes towards athletes.

Given that many athletes devote a great deal of time and energy to their athletic interests, researchers (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Martin, Mushett, & Eklund, 1997) have investigated the concept of athletic identity in relation to college athlete experiences and behaviors. Brewer et al. (1993) defined "athletic identity as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (p. 237). A strong athletic identity indicates a greater importance of the role athletics plays in an individual's life. Athletic identity has been considered in relation to a number of variables including commitment to exercise, level of athletic performance, and potential psychological benefits or problems. Brewer, Boin, and Petitpas (1993) and Brewer et al. (1993) considered athletic identity in relation to commitment to exercise behavior and level of

athletic performance. Individuals with strong athletic identities developed strong self-identities through their participation in sport and demonstrated a higher commitment to exercise behavior. In addition, athletes with an exclusive athletic identity (when an individual bases his or her self-identity solely on the athlete role) may have stronger athletic performances. Brewer et al. (1993), Ogilvie and Taylor (1993), and Sinclair and Orlick (1993) considered the psychological impact of strong and exclusive athletic identities. The authors concluded that maintaining a strong but non-exclusive athletic identity may have long-term psychological benefits; however, a strong, exclusive athletic identity may cause emotional difficulties, especially if the athlete is unable to participate in sport.

Over 60% of the athletes in the Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) study identified themselves more as athletes than students. The authors suggested that this is not surprising given the amount of time and energy committed to their sports and the fact that many of them receive scholarships related to their athletic participation. Athletes from all divisions were found to be similar in their athletic identity relationships; however, the relationship was weaker for Division III athletes. In contrast, Griffith and Johnson (2002) surveyed track & field athletes and found significantly higher levels of athletic identity among the Division III athletes compared to the Division I athletes. In this case, the authors concluded that high athletic identity score may have been influenced by the success of the Division III Track program which had a history of winning national championships. A unique challenge for educators and administrators is to acknowledge athletic identity, yet encourage and reinforce "student" identity. As Jolly (2008) stated, "part of helping student-athletes overcome their academic challenges is working with them to strengthen their identity and self-efficacy as students" (p. 147).

### *Engagement and Academic Support*

As academic preparation and motivation are commonly viewed as the best predictors of whether or not a student will graduate (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), institutions of higher education are often caught in a precarious situation. Graduation rates would likely increase if only the best and brightest students were admitted, however that solution is unreasonable for most institutions. With lesser prepared students granted admission, many colleges and universities are struggling to find ways to enhance these students' chances for success. One area of emphasis that has shown promise in supporting increased success is the role of student engagement.

Umbach, Palmer, Kuh & Hannah (2006) used data from the National Survey of Student Engagement to compare the experiences of college athletes with their non-athlete peers. Umbach et al. (2006) found that athletes are engaged in educational practices, and in some areas, more involved than non-athletes. Compared to their non-athlete peers, the athletes perceived their campus environments to be more supportive of their social and academic needs. Interestingly, the impact of being an athlete was generally consistent across all types and levels of institutions (NCAA Division I, II, III and NAIA). Their research findings contradict earlier research by Bowen and Levin (2003) that reported athletes have lower quality campus life experiences than their peers.

Comeaux (2005) considered predictors for academic achievement for male athletes in revenue producing sports and found that high Grade Point Averages and verbal scores on the SAT continued to be strong predictors of academics success for all students, athletes included. Interactions between athletes and faculty were also investigated and considered to be an

important factor in the overall impact on student success. The specific nature of the interaction also impacted achievement. For example, faculty who provided help in reaching professional goals proved to be more beneficial to the athletes than did encouragement to pursue graduate school. Comeaux (2005) concluded that institutions should encourage many forms of faculty communication (both formal and informal) and mentoring and develop programs that recognize and meet the needs of athletes with varying academic skills and abilities.

Gaston and Hu (2009) examined student engagement of Division I athletes in four areas: a) interactions with faculty; b) interactions with students other than teammates; c) participation in student groups, other organizations and service activities; and d) participation in academic related activities. Of the four engagement areas, athletes most often engaged with students other than teammates. Male and high-profile athletes had lower levels of interactions with students other than teammates when compared to female and low-profile athletes (Gaston & Hu, 2007). Gaston & Hu (2007) suggested that different types of engagement activities have varying results for athletes from different sports but increased opportunities for engagement can have overall positive outcomes on learning related goals.

Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) found that athletes had positive responses to the special support structures set up to assist them with their academics. Athletes cited the positive influence from coaches, advisors (general and within the athletics department) and professors. In addition, family, teammates, roommates and friends were identified as providing important social and emotional support. Kane et al. (2008) examined the issues related to academic support and performance of Division I athletes at the University of Minnesota. A number of factors that contributed to the academic success of the athletes were identified: a) the ratio of units attempted to units completed in the first semester; b) ethnicity of the athlete; c) number of "C" grades and "W" grades received in the first semester; and d) admission to a specific college within the institution, for example, College of Liberal Arts or College of Education. Kane et al. (2008) recommended the addition of intensive and comprehensive summer programs to help Division I athletes in the transition from high school to college. In addition, they suggested that once admitted, athletes should be offered access to academic areas of interest. Chelladurai (2008) agreed with the benefits provided by summer programs and suggested that institutions might even go further and place Division I varsity athletes on a 12 month schedule. As a result, academic course loads could be reduced during the semesters allowing athletes to make up credits in the summer.

Burnett (2010) discussed the success of academic support programs, such as study halls, and tutoring programs, offered specifically by athletic departments. He found that support programs were more successful (based on grade point averages) with female athletes than with male athletes. Burnett (2010) concluded that academic support programs are not "one size fits all" and that male athletes may need a different structure and approach than programs developed for female athletes. Umbach et al. (2006) found that both male and female athletes felt that they received more academic and social support than their non-athlete peers. Division III athletes also received more support when compared to athletes at Division I and II schools.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of NCAA Division III athletes in relation to faculty interactions and the provision and use of academic support programs. The current study hopes to fill a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of Division III athletes and provide valuable information to those charged with supporting the academic success of these students. The following questions were examined: Do the perceptions of athletes regarding faculty interactions and relationships differ based on gender, athletic

identity, sports played, class or grade point average (GPA)? Which academic support programs are considered most valuable to athletes? What are the concerns of Division III athletes in relation to academic success and institutional relationships?

## Method

The study was conducted in two phases, beginning with a broad-based survey that was designed to collect quantitative data. In phase two, focus groups were used to provide a qualitative perspective and allow more in-depth questioning in key areas. The steps utilized in each phase are outlined below.

### *Survey Participants*

Participants ( $N=1098$ ) included Division III athletes who were active during the 2009/2010 academic year. Athletes from three north-eastern institutions were invited via email to complete the survey. Email addresses were obtained from the athletic department personnel at each institution. The institutions represented included a mid-size public regional comprehensive university, a small private college, and a mid-size private university. According to US News and World Reports, the institutions involved were considered to be “less selective” or “selective” in their admissions criteria. The questionnaire was administered via email and of the 1098 potential respondents, 409 useable responses were obtained, resulting in a 37% response rate.

### *Instrumentation*

A 16-item questionnaire was constructed to measure athlete perceptions in a number of areas of their athletic and academic experiences. The survey included 14 original items, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) and a 4-point Likert scale adapted from the work of Simons et al. (2007), measuring faculty/athletes interactions. The survey measurements were developed following a review of literature on the academic experiences of athletes in all NCAA divisions and validity of the survey was reviewed using a panel of three experts. These individuals evaluated the relevance and clarity of the items, provided suggestions for improvement, and the questionnaire was modified based on their input.

The questionnaire was organized into 6 sections. Section 1 focused on demographic data (e.g., year, gender, ethnicity). This section also included the self-reported GPA of each respondent that was used as a measure of academic success. Section 2 was used to gather information relating to athletic participation (e.g., sports played, time spent in athletically related activities). Section 3 included the AIMS, 7-item Likert-type scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). The athletic identity of participants was measured using a total composite score generated by adding each of the 7-items with higher AIMS scores indicating stronger identification with the athletic role (maximum score = 49). Section 4 focused on the frequency and type of athlete/faculty interactions that occurred outside the classroom setting. In section 5, athlete perceptions of faculty interactions were assessed using an 8-item scale adapted from the work of Simons et al. (2007). Participants evaluated each item on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Section 6 was used to collect data on the provision and use of academic support services (e.g., study hall, mentoring programs, advising services). Finally, an open-ended question was used to solicit additional feedback from the respondents.

### *Focus Groups*

The second phase of the research incorporated a qualitative component and included the use of focus groups. Focus groups were chosen as an appropriate method of data collection based on the fact that the researchers had identified areas of importance from the survey data with the intention of addressing them in greater detail in the focus groups setting. Focus groups were selected instead of individual interviews so that interaction among participants could be used to stimulate and generate greater depth and breadth of information (Morgan, 1998). Three focus groups involving 30 athletes were conducted in March 2010. Focus group participants were recruited via email and subsequently participants were randomly selected from the volunteer pool. The focus groups were held at each of the three campuses.

One or more researchers attended and moderated the focus groups which were audio-taped. Each focus group lasted approximately 1 hour and began with participants reviewing and signing an informed consent form. Each participant also completed a short demographic form. These materials were collected prior to the focus groups beginning. Finally, the participants were assigned an identification number to be used prior to speaking during the focus group session. The focus groups' data were later transcribed and transferred to QSR Nvivo qualitative software for analysis.

An initial coding scheme was developed from focus group debriefing sessions and early review of the transcripts. Each researcher coded and categorized responses independently in order to further develop the coding scheme and ensure consistency. Approximately 90 percent of the coding was consistent among the three researchers. The initial coding led to the identification of four key areas: a) role of athletics; b) interactions and relationships; c) academic support systems; and 4) communication issues. Using these broad codes, the transcripts were further coded using QSR Nvivo and additional, more specific, codes were developed (Morgan, 1998).

## **Results**

Factor analysis was performed on the faculty/student interaction scale adapted from the work of Simons et al. (2003). The adapted scale included 8-items related to two dimensions; negative interactions, and favoritism /special treatment. The results of the factor analysis supported a strong two factor solution with high levels of explained variance (63%), no significant cross loadings (i.e., 0.30 or less) and good sampling measurement adequacy, KMO = .864 (Nunnally & Berstein, 1994). The reliability of the revised scale was tested by computing Cronbach's Alpha (.842). An additional factor analysis was also performed on the AIMS scale and confirmed the three factor solution with high levels of explained variance (65%). The factor loading for each item was greater than 0.7 and Cronbach's Alpha reliability was .810.

Descriptive statistics (*f*; %) were calculated to provide demographic data on the respondents. Respondents were asked to identify their gender; 47.7% were male and 52.3% were female. Respondents had a mean GPA of 3.14, with a range of 1.33-4.0. A GPA of 3.0 and above was selected as a benchmark of academic success; 65% of the participants had a GPA of 3.0 and above and 35% had a GPA below 3.0. A majority of the respondents (93.6%) identified themselves as Caucasian/white. Respondents also provided information on the number of sports played; 95% indicated that they were single sport athletes. Sports played were classified into high visibility and low visibility sports based on regional and institutional priorities. Thirty-two percent of respondents participated in high visibility sports such as basketball, ice hockey,

football and baseball. Representatives of each class participated with 29.4% first-year students, 26.7% sophomores, 26.0% juniors, 16.9% seniors and 1.0% graduate students. Respondents reported the hours of commitment to their sport both in-season and during the non-traditional season. The mean number of hours committed in-season was 28 hours compared to 14 hours during the non-traditional season.

Respondents also identified the frequency of their out of class interactions with faculty; 79% rarely met in person with faculty and 52% reported that they rarely communicated with faculty via email or phone. The use of a variety of academic support services was also considered and 35% of respondents indicated that they often used their faculty advisor, 15% often used tutors, and 23% often utilized study halls. Finally, respondents also provided information on who they used when needing support or assistance in academic advising matters; faculty (33%), teammates (30%), and coach (29%) were utilized “very often” when assistance was needed.

Table 1 presents respondents’ ratings on the AIMS. Respondents rated the social identity sub-scale higher than the negative affectivity and exclusivity sub-scales. The overall combined mean for the AIMS was 38.75. T-tests were used to examine the mean differences in the AIMS scores based on gender, GPA, and visibility level of sport. A single combined score from the AIMS scale was used and no significant differences were found based on gender ( $t(391) = 1.672, p > .05$ ), or GPA ( $t(394) = -.219, p > .05$ ). Significant differences in the AIMS scores were found for the visibility level of sport ( $t(393) = 4.135, p < .05$ ), athletes from high visibility sports had higher mean AIMS scores than those of athletes from low visibility sports. Analysis of variance was used to compare the mean AIMS scores of respondents from each academic class. No significant differences were found in the mean AIMS scores for first years, sophomores, junior and seniors ( $F(4,393) = .923, p > .05$ ).

Table 1 - *Athletic Identity Measurement Scale*

Variable	M	SD
I consider myself an athlete	6.68	0.68
I have many goals related to sports	6.24	1.07
Most of my friends are athletes	5.89	1.19
Social Identity	18.81	2.34
Sport is the most important aspect of my life	4.60	1.52
I spend more time thinking about sports than anything else	4.25	1.63
Exclusivity	8.88	2.95
I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport	5.42	1.48
I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport	5.66	1.46
Negative Affectivity	11.07	2.69
Overall AIMS score	38.75	6.39

Note: Respondents scored each item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).  
Total maximum AIMS score = 49

Table 2 provides data relating to the perceived interactions of athletes and faculty. Respondents rated awareness of athletes receiving special treatment most strongly followed by acknowledgement that faculty had refused or reacted negatively to requests for accommodations for athletics. In addition, 26% agreed that faculty had refused or reacted negatively to requests for accommodations for athletic contests, 20% agreed that they had heard negative comments from faculty regarding the academic abilities of athletes, and 29% agreed that athletes received special treatment from professors.

The mean scores of each item on the faculty/student interaction scale were compared to examine gender, GPA and visibility level of sport with several *t*-tests using listwise deletion. The mean scores for male athletes were found to be significantly higher than those of female athletes for the following faculty/student interaction items:  $t(392) = 3.508, p < .05$  for "Faculty believe I am less academically capable";  $t(392) = 3.992, p < .05$  for "Faculty believe I am less motivated";  $t(392) = 4.186, p < .05$  for "I avoid letting faculty know that I am a student-athlete"; and  $t(392) = 2.186, p < .05$  for "I have heard negative comments from faculty regarding the academic abilities of student-athletes".

Table 2 - Respondents Perceptions of Athlete/Faculty Interactions

Variable	M	SD
I am aware of student athletes receiving special treatment from professors.	2.12	0.77
Faculty have refused or reacted negatively to my requests for accommodations for athletic contests.	2.09	0.77
I have heard negative comments from faculty regarding the academic abilities of student athletes.	1.95	0.75
I have experienced favoritism from professors because I am an athlete.	1.92	0.66
I have experienced discrimination from professors	1.85	0.51
I avoid letting faculty know that I am a student-athlete.	1.85	0.70
Faculty believe I am less capable academically	1.79	0.70
Faculty believe I am less motivated than my non-athlete peers.	1.78	0.67

Note: Respondents scored each item on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Additional *t*-tests were also used to compare mean faculty/student interaction scores of athletes based on GPA (Table 3.). The means scores for athletes with a GPA less than 3.0 were significantly lower than those of athletes with GPA's of 3.0 or above for all items representing the negative interactions factor. The mean scores on both items in the favoritism/special treatment factor were not significantly different in relation to the athletes GPA ( $p > .05$ ).

T-tests were also used to compare mean differences on the faculty/student interaction scale relating to the visibility of sports played. The means scores from respondents from high visibility sports were significantly higher than those from low visibility sports when respondents were asked if they avoided letting faculty know they were an athlete ( $t(394) = 2.121, p < .05$ ). Analysis of variance was also used to examine the mean faculty/student interaction scores for each item on the faculty/student interaction scale for each academic class. The results for the "Faculty have refused or reacted negatively to requests for accommodations to miss class for athletic contests" item varied significantly depending on the class status of the athletes ( $F(4,394) = 3.382, p < .05$ ). Scheffe post hoc analyses identified significantly higher mean scores for junior level athletes ( $M = 2.20, SD = .800$ ) than for first-year athletes ( $M = 1.87, SD = .735$ ). For the remaining items on the faculty/student interaction scale no significant differences were found in relation to class affiliation ( $p > .05$ ).

Table 3 - *Faculty/Student Interactions Scores for Athletes with a GPA of Less than 3.0 or a GPA of 3.0 or Above*

Variable	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
I have experienced discrimination from professors	(383)	2.710	< .05
Faculty have refused or reacted negatively to my requests for accommodations for athletic contests.	(383)	2.106	< .05
I have heard negative comments from faculty regarding the academic abilities of student athletes.	(383)	2.578	< .05
Faculty believe I am less motivated than my non-athlete peers.	(383)	4.551	< .05
I avoid letting faculty know that I am a student-athlete.	(383)	2.498	< .05
Faculty believe I am less capable academically	(383)	4.183	< .05
I have experienced favoritism from professors because I am an athlete.	(383)	1.606	> .05
I am aware of student athletes receiving special treatment from professors.	(383)	.491	> .05

p<.05

Mean differences were also examined in the use of various individuals, such as faculty advisors, coaches, and teammates, as an academic advising resource. Female athletes ( $t(388) = -2.512, p < .05$ ) and those who participated in high visibility sports ( $t(390) = -4.187, p < .05$ ) had significantly higher mean scores indicating that they relied more heavily on coaches for advising assistance than the male athletes or those who participated in less visible sports. Athletes with a GPA below 3.0 had significantly higher scores indicating greater reliance on teammates as an academic advising resource when compared to athletes with a GPA of 3.0 or above:  $t(380) = 2.020, p < .05$ ).

Analysis of variance was also used to examine the mean differences in the use of faculty advisors, coaches, and teammates as an academic advising resource for each academic class. Significant mean differences in the use of faculty advisors was found;  $F(4,390) = 2.733, p < .05$ . The use of coaches varied significantly depending on athletes class status ( $F(4,390) = 4.737, p < .05$ ) with the mean score for first year ( $M = 3.00, SD = .996$ ) and sophomore ( $M = 2.86, SD =$

.975) athletes significantly higher than the mean of senior level athletes ( $M = 2.36, SD = 1.032$ ). The use of teammates as an academic advising resource also varied significantly ( $F(4,390) = 3.422, p < .05$ ). Scheffe post hoc analyses identified significantly higher mean scores for sophomore level student athletes ( $M = 3.11, SD = .836$ ) than for senior athletes ( $M = 2.65, SD = .969$ ).

In the second phase of the study, focus group data were analyzed and revealed the following four themes and corresponding sub-themes: a) role of athletics, value and faculty understanding; b) interactions and relationships, faculty and athletics personnel; c) academic support, formal and informal; and d) communication, accommodations/policies and maturity. The coding scheme was developed during multiple reviews of the transcripts and independent coding by the three researchers showed high levels of consistency.

Focus group participants included 65% female athletes and 35% males. Class representation was 66% first and second year students and 35% upper classmen. The participants had a mean GPA of 3.16 and 68% of athletes had a GPA of 3.0 or above.

The participants discussed the overall role of athletics in their lives and stressed the importance of the athletic experience, and the value and benefits associated with participation. Respondents consistently highlighted these views by stating “athletics is extremely important to me, I love playing my sport”, “we won the championship, that was great, winning feels good”, “it is a positive experience that has only benefited me”, “It makes you a lot more connected to the school and makes you care a lot more about what’s going on”, “athletics makes me a better student”, and “it helps me academically and socially”. The respondents also made it clear that they understood the role of athletics in a NCAA Division III institution and appreciated the balance between academics and athletics. “We have a positive program, demanding but not as demanding as Division I or II. We don’t travel so far and it allows you to focus on academics which will be needed for the rest of our lives”. One respondent stated that athletics participation has resulted in increased “structure in life”.

The participants felt that many faculty failed to recognize the role of athletics in the athletes’ lives and lacked understanding of the value the athletes placed on their sporting accomplishments. Athletes felt that many faculty did not understand the commitment required to compete in athletics nor did they recognize the sacrifices made. The following statements illustrate these concerns; “some professors have the outlook that you are in college now, and athletics will not help in our futures”, “most professors haven’t played sports and don’t value it as much as academics”, and “they could care less”. In a situation where a team was assigned a faculty mentor, the athletes on that team felt that the relationship was important as it provided the faculty member with a way to develop greater understanding of “how much the team loves the game and it shows the dedication in our program”.

A robust theme highlighted throughout all the focus groups related to important athlete relationships with a variety of different groups and individuals. The athletes identified strong relationships with their teammates and stated that “you come in and have an immediate family and friends”, “as a team we are very close, like family”, and by playing on a team “you have a feeling of security, you have a group of people that are always going to back you up and support you. Relationships with coaches and athletic department personnel were also emphasized. One athlete stressed the reliance on coaches and athletic department relationships by stating that “I would go to anyone in the athletic department (for help) before I would go out of it, because we are so small, everyone knows you. It is very supportive, it’s like a separate community within the school”. Athletes at one particular institution discussed an especially strong relationship with an

assistant director of athletics who has responsibility for academic support. This individual was consistently referred to in terms of the support provided; for example, “one of our athletic directors helps a lot, she bends over backwards to help everybody”, “she does so much”, I feel without her we would have a really hard time getting into the classes we need and getting organized”.

Another important theme that received considerable attention in all the focus groups was the relationships of athletes with faculty and in particular how this related to their requests for accommodations to miss classes for athletic contests. One student summarized the feelings of his peers by responding that faculty relationships were “definitely hit and miss”. “Some professors are really nice and flexible with games and missing class, but other professors are not flexible at all. Athletes reported that requests for accommodations often resulted in consequences such as having “to take a zero on an assignment”, being “told to drop a class because the professor didn’t like athletes” or having to do extra work to get the same grade as everybody else”. Additional comments in this area included; “some teachers will see someone is in a sports team and treat them in a different way, sort of discrimination” and “I think we are stereotyped in the classroom, we are not viewed as students so much, we are viewed as athletes”. Participants in the focus groups also identified positive interactions with faculty who were accommodating and willing to “reschedule a missed quiz” or to “allow a make-up assignment”. In summary, one respondent stated that “it depends on the teacher”, “some are very understanding, they will work with you around your schedule, so I think it just depends on the individual professor”, “it is just individual professors have different views”.

Issues and concerns related to academic support systems were also highlighted as a central theme. Athletes were critical of many of the formal academic support systems that were used at their institutions. Respondents highlighted numerous problems with faculty advising at all three institutions. These concerns are summarized in the following statements: “getting hold of your advisor can be challenging”, I have met with my advisor once, only because I had to”, “every year I have had a new advisor” “he tells me what to take via email, if I ask him”, and “I have only met physically with my advisor once and I felt more rushed talking about my future and more stressed out”. In some cases, upper classmen expressed differing views; for example, “My academic advisor is great now but for the past three years it has been tough” and “My advisor is great. We have a personal relationship now, maybe because my major is small. I feel relaxed and assured that I am on the right direction”.

The use of study halls was prevalent on all campuses and received criticism from many students who found the location, time and organization to be problematic. In contrast, students from one institution consistently praised their study hall setting, “I like the study hall set up, there are computers, there are quieter rooms. The coaches are right there if you have questions. The academic athletic director is there if you have questions, and there are a few tutors”.

The focus group discussion on academic support systems also led to the identification of a number of informal support systems. Respondents relied heavily on “teammates and other athletes” as well as “other students” for academic advice. Peers were widely regarded as a valuable source of information especially in terms of class scheduling, and understanding and meeting program requirements. “One girl sitting next to me is a year ahead of me and she told me what I need to do, who I need to talk to, and how to register”

As noted previously, athletes reported mixed reactions to their requests for accommodations to miss class for athletic contests and often felt like they were not supported by faculty. Communication strategies used during interactions with faculty, particularly in instances

where athletes were seeking accommodations to participate in games, were also discussed throughout the focus groups. Some athletes described a pro-active approach in communicating with faculty and upper classmen appeared to recognize the importance of their actions in the process. For example, junior and senior level athletes on each campus made the following comments, “you have to have an open and honest relationship with your professors”, “you have to be up front with them at the beginning of the semester”, and “sometimes you have to put in the extra effort to build a better relationship with professors for them to respect you”. In contrast, a sophomore level athletes stated that she communicated with faculty in regard to missing class for games but would “usually tell them as it comes up, don’t go out of my way to tell them”. Another respondent noted that

I had a more negative viewpoint when I was a freshman but throughout the years I felt like I needed to get a better relationship with my professors which I have and I feel like that has helped now that I am a senior.

The use of policies to support athletes in managing both academic and athletic commitments was also discussed. Many participants noted a lack of policies in relation to missing class; “they don’t have excused absences, it doesn’t matter what you are missing for unless you have a doctor’s note basically”. Athletes also noted that their experience in missing classes relied on faculty “tolerating” absences. They often felt “penalized” by the lack of understanding or policies; “One professor didn’t say upfront that he had an issue with my missing classes”. Other athletes at this institution discussed the efforts of the athletic department to assist in communication between athletes and faculty.

At the beginning of the year we are given a sheet and it lists the class, the teacher’s name, and all the classes you are going to miss because of sport and what you are going to do to make up the work and the teacher will sign it.

These athletes felt that the process assisted them in making sure that the faculty were aware of the missed time and their efforts to make up work. Additional conversations stemmed from the use of this document, for example; “these are the classes I’m going to miss, is that alright? and here is how I will make up the work”. In addition, priority scheduling policies at one institution was seen as a positive; “This has been a huge improvement from the past. We actually don’t have to struggle and stress about getting into classes”.

## Discussion

The data collected in this study provide valuable insight into the perceptions of Division III athletes. In general, athletes reported positive experiences in interacting with faculty and considered athletic participation to be a highly valued component of their collegiate lives. The athletes expressed different perceptions based on gender, academic performance, class affiliation, and sport played. Male and female athletes had similar, relatively positive, perceptions in a number of areas. Both had strong athletic identities, and similar positive perceptions of the faculty interactions that related to receiving special treatment or favoritism, being refused or receiving negative reactions in request for accommodations, and experiencing discrimination. However, male athletes had different perceptions than females in a number of

areas. Male athletes were more likely to have heard negative comments from faculty about their abilities, and were more likely to avoid letting faculty know that they were athletes. In addition, male athletes had stronger perceptions that faculty believed they were less motivated and less capable academically. The reliance on teammates and peers for academic support was also similar for both male and female athletes; however, female athletes relied more heavily on their coaches.

According to the quantitative data collected, the perceptions of athletes from different academic classes were similar in many respects; however, first-year and sophomore students relied more heavily on academic support from coaches than the upper class students. Qualitative data analysis supported different perceptions between lower and upper classmen especially with regard to accommodations for missing class and in communicating with the faculty. Upper class athletes generally recognized and practiced more pro-active strategies in managing faculty relationships and were more likely to be familiar with any policies that existed.

Athletes with GPA's below 3.0 had more negative perceptions of their faculty interactions than those who were performing at a higher academic level. In addition, those with lower GPA's also relied more heavily on their teammates for academic support. Athletes who participated in high visibility sports such as ice hockey, basketball, football and baseball had stronger athletic identities than those from lower visibility sports. In general, athletes from these teams had similar perceptions but they were more likely to conceal their athletic participation from faculty and relied more heavily on coaching staff for academic support.

The athletes in this study emphasized the importance of athletics in their lives and demonstrated high levels of athletic identity. Brewer et al. (1993) and Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) also found strong commitment to athletics among athletes from all divisions. Recognition of this commitment and identity is important to athletes who dedicate a great deal of time and energy to their sports. The findings of this study support the notion that Division III athletes are similar to those in other divisions in this regard. Recognition by faculty was of particular concern in this study as athletes expressed a desire for faculty to take steps to understand their athletic commitments. Brand (2007) suggested that faculty should provide direct assistance and should become increasingly involved in supporting athletes. The importance of informal interactions between athletes and faculty has also been widely recognized; however, it appears from the experiences documented in this study that additional work is needed. Previous researchers (Engstrom et al., 1995; Jolly, 2008; Sharp & Sheilley, 2008) suggested that more proactive roles by faculty that increase the understanding of the day-to-day lives, experiences, and responsibilities of athletes, could lead to stronger relationships that impact academic success. Many athletes, however, fail to take advantage of the faculty as an educational resource, either through formal or informal interactions (Cotton & Wilson, 2006).

It is interesting to note that athletes seek support and guidance from coaches, teammates, family and peers in athletic, academic and personal situations. The athletes in the focus groups described the importance and strength of their attachments to coaches and teammates. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) also highlighted the importance of these relationships in supporting athletes' success. The time spent together allows strong bonds to develop that provide support in many areas of the athletes lives and often appears to become the dominant support system in the collegiate setting. First and second year athletes noted the importance of team relationships as particularly significant in their transition to college.

Numerous researchers (Baucom & Lantz, 2007; Brand, 2007; Engstrom et al, 1995; Hobneck et al., 2003; Pierce, 2007; Simons et al., 2007) have noted the negative and often

prejudicial treatment of athletes by faculty members. The findings of this study present a relatively positive view although some Division III athletes were also treated adversely and had to cope with a range of negative experiences. Brand (2007) emphasized the unfairness of penalizing athletes who are attempting to fulfill multiple commitments in their academic and athletic lives. Some athletes in this study identified a variety of negative experiences, most notably when faculty refused or reacted negatively to requests for accommodations to miss class for athletic contests. Athletes described this process as “hit or miss” and 29% had experienced a situation where their absence was not excused, they received a lower grade or they were not allowed to make up a missed exam or assignment. On a positive note, the incidence of this type of negative interaction reported in this study was lower (29%) than the sixty-one percent reported for Division I athletes (Simons et al., 2007). Importantly, many athletes reported positive interactions and relationships with faculty.

Burnett (2010) and Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) found that athletes had positive responses to academic support structures but that there was “no one size fits all” approach. Umbach et al. (2006) included Division III athletes in his work and found that they had greater access to academic support programs. The athletes in this study indicated that although programs were often available (offered by both academic and athletic departments), many were under-utilized; only 15% often used tutors and 23% often used study halls. The challenge for athletic departments and academic support personnel is to better understand the needs of athletes and to develop programs and tools that the students value and use on a regular basis.

As discussed previously, the athletes in this study associated a high level of importance and value in their athletics participation and experience, and were strongly identified as in athletic roles. The athletes in the focus group sessions also made it clear that their academic roles were equally important along with balancing athletics and academics expectations. However, it appears that many of the current activities of college and university personnel are ineffective in fully integrating athletics within the educational experience. In order to change this situation, increased levels of collaboration are needed that include academic affairs, faculty and athletic department personnel. Further review by NCAA members may be necessary to consider policies that support the practice of balancing of academic and athletic priorities. Faculty engagement, as previously recognized, is a key component in athlete success. Formal policies should be created and articulated to establish an environment in which the athlete’s athletic activities are conducted as an integral part of the overall educational experience. A key to success in developing and implementing these policies is the support and collaboration of all parties involved. Faculty and administrators must play a role in developing and communicating a workable plan that addresses any barriers that exist. In addition, athletes must also be coached to accept their responsibilities in the process.

Development and communication of policies specifically designed to support accommodations for athletes who miss class appears to be a pressing need. Many athletes appear to be operating in differing classroom climates and are often required to negotiate with individual faculty about completing academic requirements. The institutions represented in this study have policies and best practices statements that seem to be ineffective and it is logical to believe they are not unique in this position. For example, even though students communicate their athletic contests commitments in writing to faculty ahead of time, they may still be penalized for the missed class time. Increased involvement of faculty and academic leaders in policy development, and increased levels of communication and education are needed. Policies, once approved,

should be distributed to each constituency and re-visited on a regular basis to ensure awareness is maintained.

The role of the athlete should not be under-estimated and athletic administrators and coaches should work with athletes to ensure that they understand their responsibilities in initiating communication with faculty. Training and education sessions are needed particularly for lower classmen who often lack the confidence and maturity to be pro-active in beginning these conversations. Team-based role playing where upper class athletes take the lead in modeling strong communication behaviors could provide valuable opportunities for all athletes to learn how to more effectively address these issues. Role playing may also provide additional value in re-enforcing athletic department policies and expectations.

A number of institutions have implemented programs designed to support increased communication and interaction among athletes and faculty. Salve Regina University and the State University at Oneonta have Faculty Mentor Programs where faculty are assigned to teams and engage in team activities such as attending practice and events, hosting dinners, and participating in community service projects. The goals of these programs are to integrate academics and athletics, promote understanding and communication, build relationship and enhance support structures for athletes. The University of Pittsfield at Bradford hosts a "Student-Athlete Day" to recognize those with GPA's above 3.0. Athletes participate by inviting a faculty member who has been influential in their lives and education to attend a special reception.

Other strategies to support the integration of athletics and academics are programs such as priority registration where athletes are allowed to register ahead of the general student population. The goal of a priority registration policy is to plan schedules that promote little loss of class time and therefore reduce the potential for conflicts. In addition, initiatives could include programs designed to coach the students to better communicate with faculty on missed class time, and further work with the faculty advisors to help them better understand the time demands and requirements for participation in athletics.

Athletes are naturally seeking out their peers, particularly teammates, to provide academic support and assistance. This offers a potential opportunity to create formal programs utilizing peers. Peer advising or tutoring programs could be developed within academic support or athletic departments. Peer advisor programs have great potential and can be strengthened by formal recognition within the institution; for example, peer advisors may earn credit for participation in these roles. Athlete advisors or tutors would require training and mentoring but may become a valuable resource in furthering academic success.

Future research in this area could be developed to investigate best practices in the use of policies related to accommodation issues and in the use of peer advising programs specifically designed for athletes. The use and effectiveness of faculty-athlete liaison programs provides an opportunity to enhance the frequency and context of athlete/faculty interactions and should also be further examined. In addition, further comparative work would be useful in understanding the similarities, as well as the differences, in the experiences and perceptions of athletes in different divisions, as well as those of non-athletes at Division III institutions.

Despite the challenges athletes face in balancing both academic and athletic commitments, it appears that the general perceptions of Division III intercollegiate athletic experiences are overwhelmingly positive. It is also apparent that Division III athletes are similar to those competing in other Divisions in many ways. Division III athletes are committed to both academic and athletic roles, and their success may impacted by the actions and perceptions of a variety of campus constituencies. Many athletes are performing well academically and athletic

departments should highlight these successes to promote a well-rounded view of athletes across the campus. Strategies to increase the quality of faculty interactions are needed but it is also important to consider the role of the athlete. If athletes are to be effectively supported in all aspects of their educational experience, priority should be given to ensuring focused education and collaboration among the constituencies that impact overall success.

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