

Janelle Haire

Dr. Caouette

Writing and Rhetoric 100H-02

16 December 2011

Brains Versus Brawn at Rhode Island College

Higher education has only one purpose; to educate. But the exact definition of an *education* has recently become blurry. Education is now multi-faceted, meaning that students are not only looking for academic education, but also social education. To most students today, the college experience has to be all encompassing and therefore must provide much more than just adequate class instruction. Students look for a more diverse education through means of extracurricular enrichment in Greek life, clubs, intramurals, and especially in intercollegiate athletics. Some critics argue that involvement in intercollegiate athletics directly and negatively affects academic ability in school.

Recently, college athletics have caused quite a bit of debate. Critics seem to lean more towards the negative aspects of athletics and often make very broad and unfair generalizations. Rhode Island College, however, does not appear to fit within such generalizations. Currently, researchers are using grades and grade point averages as a means to measure the impact of athletics on academics, however this is not reliable or valid. For example, the overall difficulty of classes changes across major fields and even between teachers. Empirical evidence to support either claim—whether athletics negatively or positively affect academic experience—is very difficult to produce, and therefore leaves researchers puzzled when it comes to organizing studies. The authors of one article titled “Intercollegiate Athletic Participation and Freshman-Year Cognitive Outcomes” suggested three questions to guide recent research into the matter:

First, are any negative cognitive effects of intercollegiate athletics the same for all sports or are they largely confined to athletes in revenue-producing sports such as football and basketball? Second, are any cognitive impacts of intercollegiate athletics the same for women as they are for men? Third, are the cognitive impacts of athletics the same for all students or do they differ for students with different background characteristics (for example, precollege ability, ethnicity and social origins) and in different institutional contexts (for example, NCAA Division I versus non-Division I schools, the average academic ability of the institution's student body);... (Pascarella)

Using the above questions, the authors conducted a study using a very wide variety of schools across the United States in order to find the most accurate results. Researchers also paid close attention to "pre-college" ability since this factor plays an important role in the freshman ability of students. They used plenty of tests, including the ACT (American College Testing Program) as well as the CAAP (the College Assessment of Academic Proficiency) to empirically define academic ability. These tests are designed to measure student ability in reading comprehension, mathematics, and critical thinking; three characteristics researchers believe define academic achievement (Pascarella).

A summary of the findings reports that some declines in academic achievement do exist for college athletes. For male intercollegiate athletes participating in revenue-producing sports including football and basketball, net freshman year declines in reading and mathematics clearly exist. However, males not participating in sports showed "modest net gains" (Pascarella). Female athletes did not establish any decline in reading, but rather made smaller net gains than non-athletes. Researchers attribute these declines in academic rank to participation in intercollegiate

athletics (Pascarella). Overall, scholars show that athletics have a negative impact on education in colleges and universities all across the nation.

Rhode Island College, however, does not fit this typical mold. With careful examination of the athletics department here at Rhode Island College, one can easily see that students and faculty alike work to provide athletes with a top notch educational experience. The anchormen website notes that “since 1995, a dedicated ‘team’ of coaches and staff, under the direction of Athletic Director Donald E. Tencher, have been working tirelessly to ensure that RIC students have a sound educational experience, both in the classroom and in athletics” (History). This tireless work has certainly paid off. Student athletes at Rhode Island College are just that; *student* athletes. There is a reason the word student is placed before “athlete,” and that is because the emphasis in higher education must be on academics. Here at Rhode Island College, many guidelines are set in place and enforced by enthusiastic faculty and students so that academics always remain of utmost importance.

Even before a student officially becomes a varsity athlete at Rhode Island College, academics begin to factor into the equation. At Rhode Island College there are twenty one varsity sports, many of which require some evidence of academic standings on recruitment forms. GPA, SAT and ACT scores, as well as the student’s intended major at RIC are sometimes required on recruitment forms. Nearly 32% of varsity sports require students to cite their GPA on recruitment forms, and nearly 37% require SAT scores. 42% of all RIC sports require students to note intended major and class rank is required by 26% (Varsity). However, academic prowess is not only important on recruitment forms. Donald Tencher, director of athletics at Rhode Island College states that “academic commitment comes into play in everything we do, especially in recruiting. [Student Athletes] have to be committed to what we do and that is hold[ing] them

accountable for their academics. They also must follow the normal admissions plan so academic success plays a critical role” (Tencher). Like every other student at Rhode Island College, athletes have to fully go through the admissions process and meet the specific entrance requirements.

Rhode Island College athletes can only hold this title after being admitted to the College itself. Essentially, even the greatest athletes can only become Anchormen once they complete the admissions process and are admitted to Rhode Island College. According to the Common Data Set, academics are the foundation to the admissions process. Section C7 ranks the importance of different aspects of the application process and places “class rank” and “rigor of secondary school record” (Common Data Set) as “very important” (Common Data Set). Closely ranked as “important” are “Academic GPA, Standardized test scores, Application Essay, and Recommendation” (Common Data Set). Every applicant to Rhode Island College is carefully and precisely measured using these academic standards as a scale of ability. This, in turn, means that every single athlete that applies to Rhode Island College is academically examined in the same way. Even prior to becoming a varsity athlete, students must demonstrate capable pre-college ability.

However, academics do not fall by the way-side as soon as a student becomes an athlete. The Student Athlete Development program was first started in 1996 and since then it has expanded to rival similar programs in Division I schools. Each year, the entire concept of this academic development plan is re-evaluated in order to secure its effectiveness. Rhode Island College administrators have noticed the positive effects this program has brought about. As the program first developed, the intercollegiate athletic program was solely responsible for its funding. However, after seeing “consistent, quality results” (Student-Athlete), the program is

now fully supported by Rhode Island College as a whole. The main goal of the Rhode Island College Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, Intramurals and Recreation is to “educate and support the ‘total student-athlete’ with the expectation that its student athletes will be successful citizens both on and off the competitive playing arena” (Student-Athlete). Using the student-athlete development program, RIC athletic administrators ensure that students are focused on and dedicated to academics as well as athletics.

In fact, academics continually play an integral part in a student-athlete’s life at Rhode Island College. Many guidelines and consequences are set in place in order to place academics first on the list of a student athlete’s priorities. Donald Tencher states that “if [student athletes] don’t maintain a certain GPA and accumulated credits they have to go to the academic center and are held accountable on a daily basis. We check class attendance in many ways, we check grades especially mid terms, and we stress there is always help available” (Tencher). Katie Donovan is a freshman and varsity basketball player at Rhode Island College who supports Tencher’s claims. She explained that each “week [her coach] makes [the team] fill out academic reports...[that let him] know exactly where [they] stand with [their] work. He wants to know any grades [they] got the past week, anything due this coming week, [and] when next quizzes/tests are... He also walks past [their] classes to make sure [they] are going to them” (Donovan). This rigorous examination of academic standings by coaches shows just how important academics are to the athletics department at Rhode Island College. Student Athletes that fail to acknowledge the importance of academics will surely be punished. Tencher states that if a student falls behind in classes but “is trying and doing what is called for [academically]... then we will do everything in our power to support them” (Tencher). However, if the student is falling behind because of a lack of motivation and is not putting forward his or her best academic efforts, the consequences are

different, In this case, Tencher states that the student will “face suspension until [he or she] gets [his or her] priorities straight” (Tencher). These consequences are strictly adhered to and no exceptions will be made. By monitoring student athletes so closely, it is quite difficult for these athletes to let academics fall in importance.

Donald Tencher says “there is always help available” (Tencher). In fact, Rhode Island College has set up the *Marocco Family Student-Athlete Academic Support Center* in order to provide this extra help to student athletes. The center offers extensive hours to student athletes; it is open on Sundays from 4 to 8 pm, and Mondays through Thursdays 11 am to 8 pm. On Fridays, athletes can use the center by appointment only. The Marocco Family Student-Athlete Center is located in the Intercollegiate Athletic Complex on the Rhode Island Campus and is described as the “cornerstone of RIC’s Student Athlete Development Program” (Student-Athlete). This center “services the needs of hundreds of RIC student-athletes per week” (Student-Athlete) by providing support opportunities and benefits to student athletes. Katie Donovan says that “[student athletes] are forced to do six hours a week of student athlete study hall” in the Academic Support Center. Though she must balance this required six hours per week with daily three hour practices and homework, Katie says that “[the study hall requirement] forces us to do our work” (Donovan). Like Katie, every freshman athlete at Rhode Island College is required to attend six hours per week of study hall. Aside from freshmen, those athletes who are at academic risk must also fulfill this allotted study time. To maximize the effectiveness of this study time, the requirement must be met each week of both fall and spring semesters. This means that even during an athlete’s ‘off-season’, he or she is expected to log study time at the Academic Support Center, making academics a year round priority for student athletes. Upper-class student athletes need not attend study halls, but are required to “maintain minimum requirements in credits and

grade point average per semester, as well as [display] satisfactory progress toward a degree” (Student-Athlete). Academic progress is tracked not only for freshmen athletes and those at academic risk, but in fact, for every athlete at Rhode Island College! Students who do not fulfill such above noted academic requirements are, with no exceptions, restricted from athletic participation. These strict rules are set in place to secure academics as a top priority in the Rhode Island College Athletics department.

Additional Support is provided by the Life Skills Program at the college. This is a national program that was launched in 1991 in hopes of providing necessary student-development for intercollegiate athletes. At Rhode Island College, this life skills program, also known as “CHallenging Athletes Minds for Personal Success” or CHAMPS, continues to be an integral part of the development program at RIC. The main goal of this program is to “support a student-athlete’s development in five areas: academics, athletics, personal development, career development and community service” (Student-Athlete). This aspect of the development program has its own requirements in addition to those fulfilled at the Marocco Center. The CHAMPS program at Rhode Island College expects students to participate in:

Bi-weekly educational forums and seminars...to support the development of a well-balanced lifestyle for RIC student-athletes that encourage their emotional well-being, personal growth and decision making skills. Additionally, workshops are sponsored to encourage the student-athlete to pursue career and life goals. Lastly, each RIC student-athlete is required to engage in service to his/her campus or surrounding community as part of their varsity experience;...(Student Athlete)

As one could see, these requirements teach students to make healthy choices which allow them to excel in academics. When the focus is on bettering themselves as students and athletes, better grades and more solid academic dedication naturally follow.

Another program designed to aid in the development of RIC student-athletes is the All American Mentoring Program. This program was started at Rhode Island College around the same time as the aforementioned programs in 1996, and continues to be an important facet of the student-athlete development program. With this program, “each varsity team has a volunteer mentor who is a member of either the College’s faculty, staff or administration” (Student-Athlete). This mentor meets with his or her team a selected amount of times per semester and is additionally required to meet with student athletes individually to approve course selection during registration periods. It is also the responsibility of the mentor to be available upon student-athletes’ request. Once again, availability is definitely no issue in respect to the mentors. It is strongly encouraged that mentors attend every team activity including practices, competitions, and other various team events. The mentoring program is used to create “an additional academic safety net for student-athletes in order to support the department’s efforts with reference to academic retention, satisfactory progress and, ultimately, the successful completion of a course of study” (Student-Athlete). This program is said to be “one of the most unique facets of the RIC Student-Athlete Development Program” (Student-Athlete), and definitely helps athletes achieve academic success. The combination of The Marocco Family Student-Athlete Development Center, the CHAMPS program, and finally, the All American Life Skills Program, creates an incredibly strong foundation for the Student-Athlete Development Program at Rhode Island College that teaches students to prioritize and balance academics with athletics.

These programs have allowed student-athletes at Rhode Island College to excel academically. Katie Donovan says that she is “doing better academically in college than [she] was in [high school]” (Donovan). According to the data, it seems that other student athletes at Rhode Island College may feel the same way. At Rhode Island College, there is an average of about 300 students participating in the college’s intercollegiate athletics program. Just last year, in the Fall of 2010, “13 student athletes posted a 4.0 GPA, 145 earned a 3.0 or better, and 97 made the Dean’s list” (Office). Defined on the Rhode Island College website, a student can only make the Dean’s list if he or she achieves a 3.25 GPA or higher for any given semester. If the student is student teaching, he or she must achieve a 3.0 GPA to receive recognition on the Dean’s list. This data indicates that more than half of all student-athletes during the Fall of 2010 achieved a GPA of 3.0 or higher! Very similar data exists for the Spring of 2011. During this semester, “10 student athletes posted a 4.0 GPA, 126 earned a 3.0 or better, and 96 made the Dean’s List” (Office). These impressive numbers indicate the success of the Student Athlete Development Program at Rhode Island College. There is no question as to the importance of academics at Rhode Island College, specifically in regards to student-athletes.

The hard work and dedication of student athletes, coaches, and administrators alike has separated Rhode Island College from the norm. Scholars too often generalize, saying that academics fall short of athletics across the nation’s intercollegiate athletic programs; however, at Rhode Island College, academics always prevail. Because of such a strong Student-Athlete development program, Rhode Island College should serve as a model for schools all across the nation. Academics is the foundation of a sound educational experience in today’s society. At Rhode Island College, student-athletes are guaranteed this sound educational experience.

Works Cited

- "Common Data Set." *Rhode Island College*. Rhode Island College. Web. 09 Nov. 2011.
<<http://www.ric.edu/oirp/commonDataSet.php>>.
- Donovan, Katie. E-mail interview. 3 Dec. 2011.
- "History and Traditions." *Rhode Island College Athletics*. 4 Nov. 2011. Web. 16 Dec. 2011.
<<http://www.goanchormen.com/index.html>>.
- "Office of Undergraduate Admissions - Freshman Viewbook." *Rhode Island College*. 14 Sept. 2011. Web. 16 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.ric.edu/admissions/viewbook.php>>.
- Pascarella, Ernest T., Louise Bohr, Amaury Nora, and Patrick T. Terenzini. "Intercollegiate Athletic Participation and Freshman-Year Cognitive Outcomes." *The Journal of Higher Education* 66.4 (1995): 369-87. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Dec. 2011. <<http://0-www.jstor.org.helin.uri.edu/stable/2943793>>.
- "Student-Athlete Development Program." *Rhode Island College Athletics*. 6 Feb. 2007. Web. 16 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.goanchormen.com/index.html>>.
- Tencher, Donald E. E-mail interview. 29 Nov. 2011.
- "Varsity Sport Offerings." *Rhode Island College Athletics*. 12 Feb. 2010. Web. 16 Dec. 2011.
<<http://www.goanchormen.com/index.html>>.

