

An Examination of Correlation Between Upperclassmen Leadership and Player Retention Rate
in NCAA Division III Women's Volleyball

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there is a correlation between the number of designated upperclassmen leaders on an NCAA Division III Women's Volleyball team and the program's student-athlete retention rate. The participants were fifteen coaches at Division III colleges and universities in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Each coach was asked to disclose the number of designated upperclassmen leaders on each of their teams from 2015 to 2018. This data was then compared to each program's retention rate from 2016 to 2019. It was found that there was no correlation between the variables ($r = -.011$, $p > .05$). Thus, the null hypothesis was accepted. Future research should continue to focus on athletic programs' retention rates, with concentration on related areas of possible influence.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Since American colleges and universities began fielding competitive athletic teams, they have created an atmosphere of expectation, stress, and opposition within the general student body. Although athletes have, in large part, benefitted from elevated status in their communities, their college experiences have been complicated by additional responsibilities, constant physical fatigue, disagreements with coaching staff, and pressure to succeed and represent the school positively. These factors contribute to high transfer and attrition rates among student-athletes.

While transfer, retention, and graduation rates are studied and reported extensively at the NCAA Division I and II levels, the research and relevant data available for Division III institutions is relatively limited. This is true even though retention is a more evident problem at the Division III level. In 2012, the graduation rate of the fourth-year class among student-athletes was 67% for Division I, but just 54% for Division III (NCAA, 2018). In addition to the student-athletes that do not graduate, other athletes choose to transfer schools for athletic, academic, financial, or social reasons.

Many collegiate coaches recognize the benefits of having older teams. These benefits include more athletic repetitions to develop skills properly, more time to gain physical strength and conditioning, more academic experience to multitask effectively, and more social experience to provide leadership and mentorship to younger players. Creating a culture of upperclassmen leadership is difficult for athletic programs when retention rates are low. Furthermore, young players who are on teams with few upperclassmen may view the program as lacking stability and legitimacy. This can constitute an additional reason to consider leaving the school. A vicious

cycle can thus be created wherein younger players may leave the school due to a lack of upperclassmen leadership, meaning they, in turn, cannot become upperclassmen leaders for the next generation of players.

Statement of Problem

This study examines whether there is a correlation between the number of upperclassmen in designated leadership positions and the athlete retention rate of NCAA Division III Women's Volleyball programs.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is as follows: there is no significant correlation between the number of designated upperclassmen leaders and athlete retention rate for NCAA Division III Women's Volleyball programs.

Operational Definitions

The independent-like variable is the number of designated upperclassmen leaders and is operationally defined as any non-first year on the team that fulfilled extra responsibilities, occupied a symbolic position such as captain, received additional and exclusive leadership training, and/or was clearly distinguished by her teammates and coaches as a social leader.

The dependent-like variable is the program's athlete retention rate and is operationally defined as the number of returning players to the program for the next season divided by the total number of players (excluding seniors) on the roster in the previous season.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review examines the reasons collegiate student-athletes may transfer and factors that play a part in their decision making. The first section covers student-athlete experiences, and how they differ from general students. The second section examines the different factors that may influence student-athletes to consider transferring. The final section observes the impact of leadership and leadership training on college athletes.

The Current Landscape for College Athletes

Research on collegiate student athletes as a separate entity, instead of as a portion of the general student body, is vital to understand their experiences and needs. The reason for this is that the daily routines, expectations, and priorities differ drastically for student athletes compared to regular students. In addition to their academic expectations, athletes usually face twenty hours of practice per week, and frequently miss classes due to sport-related commitments (Gayles, 2009). Many consider these differences to cause a stark division between athletes and general student populations. There is significant criticism that “suggests that athletics programs create a separate culture in which student athletes experience lower levels of academic performance, graduate at lower rates, cluster in certain majors, and are socially segregated from the general student population” (Gayles, 2009, p. 34). The consensus among many of college sports’ detractors is that athletes and general students have largely separate experiences. These different experiences also tend to cause athletes to act in different, sometimes problematic, ways.

Athletes are often held in high social esteem at colleges, a circumstance that often places them at risk of engaging in unhealthy and troublesome behavior. According to Lewis (2008), student athletes binge drink more often than nonathletes and endure more consequences. Lewis’

study examines drinking norms and expectations among student athletes, as well as coaches' attitudes toward alcohol consumption. The findings show that in general, proximal norms and expectations (i.e., how one's close friends behave) are more powerful in dictating behavior than distal norms (i.e., how a "typical" student behaves). This research suggests that athlete culture is more influential to college athletes than college culture (Lewis, 2008).

In addition to unusually high alcohol consumption, athletes frequently are involved in legal and moral incidents within the college community. In response to increased legal incidents involving student-athletes at the University of Albany, school and team officials created the ATLAS program, focused on identifying and limiting potential issues (Williams, 2011). The program focuses greatly on appropriately sanctioning adverse behavior, but another major piece centers around leadership building within the team, and cultivating leaders who are willing to discourage problematic actions by their fellow athletes. In this sense, both Williams' and Lewis' works have a key theme in common: an agreement that peer leadership is key in determining student athlete behavior.

Factors that Influence Transferring in College

There are many influences that may cause a student (athlete or otherwise) to consider transferring schools or dropping out. These include "personal characteristics, academic background, and integration into the academic and social life of the campus" (Wohlgemuth et al., 2007, p. 459). Several researchers have additionally pointed out the importance of social forces in retention of students, especially those of parents, peers, and teachers (Wohlgemuth et al., 2007). This is useful in a practical sense: a person with others around them encouraging them to stay at the university is more likely to stay at the university.

One important influence on retention of students is academic performance and involvement. Student athletes' struggles in this area are well-documented. Hamilton (2005) explains that the NCAA has measures in place to identify academically floundering programs: the academic progress rate (APR). If an athletic program has an APR of under 925, they begin to incur sanctions from the governing body. The clear trend in the data is that athletes in some sports struggle more than in others, with football, baseball, and men's basketball posting national average APRs of below 925, implying that fewer than half of their players are on track to graduate (Hamilton, 2005).

Difference in sport is just one method of segmentation to determine athlete academic performance. Citing that the majority of research is centered around high-profile college sports, Beron & Piquero (2016) posit that research in other sports and in divisions other than Division I is underdeveloped. Their study focuses on how student athletes' GPAs reflect their attitudes toward academics, how coaches influence them, and what their major is. It was found that:

GPA is directly influenced by how they see themselves (e.g., as an athlete more than an academic), the athletic context in which they surround themselves (e.g., as in a coach's influence), and the seriousness with which they take their academic careers (e.g., believing that graduation is important). (Beron & Piquero, 2016, p. 149)

In order to ensure that student athletes are able to have fruitful academic careers, many help and support systems have been developed. Hollis (2001) examines which of these strategies actually benefit student athletes. Since the advent of athletic scholarships, many institutions have utilized recruiting strategies that completely discount the students' academic performance and college readiness. To make up for the lack of academic screening before admission, many

universities choose to implement more services for athletes once they get to college, which merely treat the symptoms. Hollis (2001) observes:

An institution does not recreate equal opportunity for student athletes by providing more services once a student athlete begins the freshmen year. The inverse relationship indicates that institutions are responding to the admission of less academically prepared student athletes with an increase in support services. (p. 280)

According to the data, the most helpful service that is provided to student athletes is the option of summer school prior to their freshman year. Moreover, it is demonstrated that academic advising has less impact.

One key reason that academic advising does not substantially help athletes is the manner in which it is carried out. In many cases, as Hollis (2001) points out, advisors control what classes athletes take, when they take them, and who their professors will be. This style of advising infantilizes athletes and strips them of autonomy. Others have determined that the majority of athlete academic advising has focused on maintaining the eligibility of athletes, rather than ensuring that they pursue an enriching education (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Eligibility and graduation rates are vital to universities, whose goal is to maintain their image to the public. Broughton & Neyer (2001) claim: "It is clear, however, that this concentration on academic advising does not sufficiently meet the needs of student athletes" (p. 48). The advising methods and quality of resources can be partially blamed when considering that students report academic estrangement and boredom with classes as primary reasons for attrition (Hollis, 2001).

While the availability and quality of support services for student athletes plays a crucial role in academic success, another determinant for how well an athlete fairs academically is whether they have an athletic scholarship. In 2012, Rubin published a causal-comparative study

examining the performance of scholarship athletes compared to non-scholarship athletes. Results show that non-scholarship athletes can be defined by several characteristics, including race (Asian and White), sport type (individual) and sex (female). Scholarship athletes could largely be described by race (Black), sport type (team) and sex (male). Non-scholarship athletes have higher GPAs than scholarship athletes (Rubin, 2012).

While the research and literature on academic performance and advising for athletes is fairly plentiful, there is comparatively little research on reasons that athletes transfer or consider transferring. Richards et al. (2016) identified major factors that influence athlete transfers at one institution as coaching style, playing time, lack of on-campus support, and the school's social scene. Factors that impacted others' decisions to remain at the school included academics, the school's social scene, and the presence of an athletic scholarship. Another determining factor that pushes players to consider transferring are levels of perceived stress, with transfers reporting considerably higher levels than retained student athletes (Richards et al., 2016).

The Impact of Leadership Within College Athletic Teams

As previously stated, many researchers argue that the actions of peers affect student athlete behavior more greatly than the actions of the general student populace or direction from authority figures (Williams, 2011; Lewis, 2008). As a result, quality leadership is considered a necessary part of successful culture within a college athletic team. Many methods exist for developing student athletes into leaders, with varying success. Navarro & Malvaso (2015) contend that the most effective strategies for developing leaders are holistic in their approach, focusing on the individual in all walks of life, and not just within their sport. They also suggest "a focus on leadership from the top level down, beginning with older student-athlete peer

mentors could foster increased group cohesion and networking within smaller group sessions” (p. 46). This method focuses on teaching leadership through peers rather than authority figures.

The clear majority of available research ascertains that leadership training has a positive impact on athletic programs. Bergsma (2011) points out that leadership training is widely utilized in college athletics. Furthermore, the success of the program is dependent on several factors, including the characteristics of a team leader, setting, theoretical basis, time and cost, among others. When considering all of these influences, it is safe to say that appropriate leadership development is highly situational, depending on the individual athlete in question.

Summary

This review of the literature has shown that student athletes have their own unique set of experiences, expectations, and issues. As a result, collegiate student athletes are likely to transfer or drop out of school for reasons other than those of the general student population. Student athletes are typically active in a school’s social scene. Research shows that they consume more alcohol, commit more disciplinary infractions, and incur heavier consequences than nonathletes. Some classify student athletes as an at-risk population for these reasons (Lewis, 2008).

Student athletes are prone to experiencing academic difficulties, given their demanding schedules and athletic expectations. Significant literature shows that athlete academic performance can be segmented in many ways, including scholarship status, sport, race, sex, and quality of academic advising. Additionally, this literature review examines the importance of quality peer-to-peer leadership and mentorship. Strong peer relationships can affect all of the aforementioned subjects, all of which can influence student athletes to transfer, consider transferring, or remain at their current institution.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of the study was to determine a possible correlation between the number of upperclassmen leaders on NCAA Division III Women's Volleyball teams and the retention rate of their corresponding programs.

Design

The research design was a correlational study. The independent-like variable was the number of upperclassmen (non-first years) that were placed in positions of leadership on their respective teams. The dependent-like variable was the percentage of players returning to each team for the following season.

Participants

The participants in the study were fifteen NCAA Division III Women's Volleyball programs located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The programs were selected based on their current coaches' length of tenure with the program (each coach had to have been with the program since at least the 2015 season), the availability of team roster data, the coaches' willingness to provide information on their team, and location. There was no separation or group formation among the participating programs. Competitive success was not taken into account as a factor in choosing participant institutions, and the study included a wide range, from teams that have had little success to national championship contenders.

Instrument

The number of upperclassmen leaders on each team was determined by asking each team's coach to provide information on which upperclassmen players were in positions of leadership in each year that the study focused on. How a position of leadership could be

determined was intentionally left open to each coach's interpretation, but had to include some type of clear elevation of status and responsibilities within the team. This could include being designated as a captain, serving on a leadership council, participating in extra leadership mentoring, or being a public team representative. Retention rate was measured using a simple percentage. It was determined by taking the total number of players on the team (excluding seniors) and dividing into it the number of those players that returned to the team for the following Fall season.

Procedure

The coach of each participating program was asked to disclose how many upperclassmen in leadership positions were on their teams during the Fall 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 seasons. The researcher then used the existing public roster data for each team to determine the corresponding retention rate for each year. The retention rate was calculated using data from the Fall 2015-2019 seasons. The number of upperclassmen leaders from a given year was connected to the program's retention rate for the following year. For example, the number of upperclassmen leaders in the 2015 season was compared to the retention rate between the 2015 and 2016 seasons. Each program was then assigned an average value for both number of upperclassmen leaders from the 2015-2018 seasons and the retention rate for the 2016-2019 seasons.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study examined whether there is a correlation between the number of designated upperclassmen leaders on NCAA Division III Women's Volleyball programs and their yearly retention rate. Data was collected on 15 teams. Each was examined over five seasons (or four measurement cycles), from 2015 to 2019. Table 1 shows the cumulative data for each program, with the mean number of designated leaders per season as well as each team's total retention rate (rounded to three decimals) for the entire period. Also displayed is the data for the entire study as a whole pertaining to number of designated leaders (Mean = 2.52, Standard Deviation = 1.13) and retention rate (Mean = .797, Standard Deviation = .099). The data shows that there is no significant relationship between the two variables ($r = -.011$, $p > .05$). Thus, the null hypothesis that there is no correlation between the number of designated upperclassmen leaders and retention rate of NCAA Division III Women's Volleyball programs is accepted.

Table 2 displays the season-by-season data for each program. Among all fifteen programs, the average number of designated leaders remained relatively consistent each year (between 2.3 and 2.6). The cumulative retention rate varied slightly each year (Mean = .801, Standard Deviation = .032). The season-by-season data provided no clear trend over time that might suggest that the null hypothesis ought to be rejected.

Table 1***Cumulative Data for Each Program***

	Average Number of Leaders per Season	Retention Rate
Team 1	1.5	.782
Team 2	3	.895
Team 3	5.75	.782
Team 4	2.75	.769
Team 5	2	.679
Team 6	2.25	.775
Team 7	3	.814
Team 8	2	.564
Team 9	2.5	.872
Team 10	2.5	.714
Team 11	2.25	.729
Team 12	2.75	.963
Team 13	3	.872
Team 14	0	.922
Team 15	2.5	.804
Mean	2.52	.797
Standard Deviation	1.13	.099

Table 2***Season-by-Season Data for Each Program***

	2015 Leaders	2016 Retention	2016 Leaders	2017 Retention	2017 Leaders	2018 Retention	2018 Leaders	2019 Retention
1	2	14/17 (.824)	2	9/12 (.750)	2	11/15 (.733)	0	9/11 (.818)
2	2	11/11 (1.00)	3	11/11 (1.00)	3	13/16 (.813)	4	16/19 (.842)
3	6	11/13 (.846)	6	8/12 (.667)	6	14/19 (.737)	5	10/11 (.909)
4	3	6/9 (.667)	3	8/10 (.800)	2	7/8 (.875)	3	9/12 (.750)
5	2	8/13 (.615)	2	9/14 (.643)	2	9/10 (.900)	2	10/16 (.625)
6	2	7/10 (.700)	3	8/8 (1.00)	2	8/13 (.615)	2	8/9 (.889)
7	3	12/15 (.800)	2	12/14 (.857)	4	12/14 (.857)	3	12/16 (.750)
8	2	3/7 (.429)	2	4/11 (.364)	2	7/8 (.875)	2	8/13 (.615)
9	3	10/10 (1.00)	2	10/12 (.833)	3	11/12 (.917)	2	10/13 (.769)
10	3	4/7 (.571)	3	6/9 (.667)	2	9/10 (.900)	2	11/16 (.688)
11	2	11/13 (.846)	2	7/11 (.636)	3	10/12 (.833)	2	7/12 (.583)
12	3	9/9 (1.00)	2	13/13 (1.00)	3	15/16 (.938)	3	15/16 (.938)
13	2	9/13 (.692)	4	9/9 (1.00)	3	11/11 (1.00)	3	12/14 (.857)
14	0	6/8 (.750)	0	12/12 (1.00)	0	14/14 (1.00)	0	15/17 (.882)
15	3	9/14 (.643)	3	14/14 (1.00)	2	9/13 (.692)	2	13/15 (.867)
Mean	2.53	.759	2.6	.814	2.6	.846	2.33	.785
Std. Dev.	1.2	.161	1.25	.186	1.25	.107	1.25	.110

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to ascertain whether there is a correlation between the number of designated upperclassmen leaders on an NCAA Division III Women's Volleyball team and the program's retention rate. A correlational study was conducted using data from fifteen volleyball programs. The results showed that there is no discernable correlation between the two variables ($r = -.011$, $p > .05$). Based on this data, the null hypothesis was accepted.

Implications of Results

These results have a few implications. The first is how it relates to the importance of assigning leaders. Many collegiate coaches and athletes place significant value upon selecting captains, and view it as a position of significant prestige and importance. Conversely, other coaches view it as an unnecessary division among their team, and do not hold the position in high esteem. This study may help to inform coaches' decisions in choosing whether to appoint captains and how many to have.

Another implication of this study can be found in the retention rate data. The study found that the average retention rate among the fifteen participating volleyball programs was 79.7%, with a standard deviation of 9.9%. Collegiate coaches and administrators can use this data to contextualize their own programs' retention rate. The data would suggest that a Division III Women's Volleyball team is in a healthy state if it retains 80% of its players each year.

The results of this study will be useful in informing collegiate coaches in how to value leadership within their programs. As mentioned in the review of the literature, the quality of leadership on athletic teams from both the coaches and the players is vital to the program's success. However, based on the data, the quantity of leaders within a program does not appear to

be as important. Coaches may draw from this study that their best course of action is not to assign a certain number of captains, leadership council members, etc. Rather, it is to focus on each individual athlete's qualitative leadership capabilities.

Threats to Validity

This study has several limitations. The size and geographical scope of the study was limited by design, focusing on fifteen schools, all located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Since there are 446 NCAA Division III Institutions (NCAA, 2020), this study encompasses a small portion of the general institutional population of the nation. Had the study been conducted on a larger scale, or in a different region of the United States, the results could have differed.

As previously stated, competitive success was not taken into account when selecting programs to contact for the study, and programs on all points of the competitive spectrum were contacted. However, the majority of respondents were programs with some sustained competitive success. The combined winning percentage of all participating programs during the 2019 season was .624, and only 3 of the 15 participants had winning percentages below .500. This fact may have influenced the results of the study, as the possibility exists that a program's retention rate is influenced by its competitive success.

Another threat to internal validity exists in the operational definitions of the variables. The independent-like variable was defined as the number of non-first years on the team that fulfilled extra responsibilities, occupied a symbolic position such as captain, received additional and exclusive leadership training, and/or was clearly distinguished by her teammates and coaches as a social leader. The researcher intentionally left this open to the coach's interpretation, but only counted a designated leader as somebody who carried an official title.

Many respondents noted the contributions of players who were not technically designated leaders, but filled important informal leadership roles on their teams. Had these athletes been counted in the data, or had they been classified separately, the results may have been altered. The dependent-like variable was defined as the number of returning players to the program for the next season divided by the total number of players (excluding seniors) on the roster in the previous season. This means any athlete who did not remain with the team as a competitive athlete for the duration of their eligibility was noted as an unretained player. This does not take into account special circumstances, such as players who stopped appearing on the roster as competitive athletes but remained with the team as managers, players who were forced to retire due to injury, players who were academically ineligible for one season but returned to the team for the following season, etc. By choosing to define retention rate in rigid terms, the researcher created some potential inaccuracies in data, especially pertaining to the spirit of what it means to “retain” an athlete.

To control the data, the researcher chose only to include programs that had not undergone a head coaching change in the past five seasons. This likely altered the data, inflating the overall retention rate for all programs. Richards et al. (2016) point to coaching changes as one of the top reasons for student-athletes transferring. Including programs that had undergone head coaching changes would likely change the dynamic of the study, but would also make the study more unwieldy, as multiple coaches would then have to be contacted for a single program, each with their own definitions of what makes a designated leader.

Connections to Previous Studies

This study aimed to provide more insight into what influences a student-athlete’s decision to remain at the same school or transfer to a different school. In particular, this study focuses on

the structure of leadership within a team, and the importance of designating leaders like captains or a leadership council. While the research on this specific topic is limited, previous studies have addressed similar topics. It should be noted that the vast majority of research on collegiate athletics is done at the Division I level, where athletic scholarships come in to play.

Richards et al. (2016) previously examined factors that influence student-athletes to transfer, consider transferring, or remain at their current institution. Among the student-athletes surveyed, the top reasons for transferring were coaching style and playing time. The top reasons for students to remain at their current institution were the school's academics and the school's social scene.

In a similar vein, Weiss & Robinson (2013) addressed issues that influence student-athlete retention, this time at the Division II level. By surveying 229 student-athletes at a particular institution, it was determined that top factors influencing retention or withdrawal of student-athletes include relationship with the head coach, satisfaction with the department, and team success.

Navarro & Malvaso (2015) conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of student-athlete leadership development programs, and potential different perceptions of the program based on gender. It was found that student-athletes largely consider leadership development important in terms of team success and individual growth. Additionally, perceptions of the program did not vary greatly based on gender of the participants.

Implications for Future Research

As mentioned previously, future research on the topic should aim to increase the sample size of the study, as well as to include data from institutions in other regions of the country besides the Mid-Atlantic. This study also focused exclusively on Women's Division III

volleyball. Future studies ought to branch out into different sports, both team and individual, and add men's sports so as to compare data based on gender.

This study also may serve as a gateway to many other correlational studies involving student-athlete retention rate. Other factors that could be tested related to retention are program winning percentage, roster size, average team age, extent of postseason success, team GPA, and academic prestige/acceptance rate of the school.

Another area of interest for the researcher is the destination of student-athletes who are not retained. Based on the school and the athletic program, the method by which players are not retained likely differs from team to team. The researcher would be interested in a study that examines what percentage of unretained players quit, are cut for athletic reasons, are dismissed for personal reasons, become academically ineligible, retire due to injury, etc. A related area of interest would be what percentage of unretained players remain at the same institution, what percentage transfer, and what percentage drop out of college altogether.

Conclusions

During this study, the researcher surveyed fifteen NCAA Division III women's volleyball coaches, asking them to disclose how many designated upperclassmen leaders they had on their team for the 2015 to 2018 seasons. The researcher then matched that data to each program's athlete retention rate for the 2016 to 2019 seasons. It was found that no significant correlation exists between the number of designated leaders on a team and that team's retention rate for the following season. The study was limited in size and by geographical region. Some factors may have altered the data, including each coach's interpretation of what a leader is and the fact that none of the participating programs had endured a head coaching change within the last five seasons. Future research in this area should focus on other quantifiable factors that may influence

retention rate, like winning percentage, academic prestige, and roster size. This research can be used by collegiate coaches and administrators to comparatively gauge their programs' retention rates. It can also be used by coaches to evaluate the importance of assigning leaders and implementing leadership development programs.

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