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# Academic Clustering: Mid-Major Issues Within Women's Intercollegiate Athletics

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ACADEMIC CLUSTERING: MID-MAJOR ISSUES WITHIN WOMEN'S INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS


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Academic clustering has become an epidemic across all intercollegiate levels. Academic clustering is present when at least twenty-five percent of an athletic team, or department, is specialized in one academic area (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987). This concept has been often examined among collegiate athletes; however, most research has been centralized on top-tier football programs and other revenue generation sports. This ignores the collective intercollegiate landscape as a whole. The purpose of this study is to further investigate the idea of academic clustering, but with a more under representative demographic. Women's Basketball and Softball student athletes' academic interests within the Mid-American Conference will be looked at in depth to determine if academic clustering existed within mid-major competition. Data was collected during the fiscal year 2017 and academic majors were gathered through the various institutions' athletic websites, mainly a team's Internet rosters. A complete list of academic majors for these athletes was created, then percentages were calculated to determine whether clustering existed within each sporting program. It was imperative that data be collected from nine different team members to show statistical significance that clustering was present within the program based off preceding studies (Paule-Koba, 2015). The results indicated that academic clustering was existent within the Mid-Major Women's athletics as previous literature suggested. This study will examine the possible reasons clustering occurs and the implications academic clustering may have for the National Collegiate Athletic Association, Mid-American Conference, and member institutions.

**Introduction**

Academia has become one of the most influential indicators of success in recent decades. Not only are academics able to broaden knowledge, they also allow students to specialize in a particular content area, propelling individuals to their desired career (Strayhorn, 2015). The price of education does not come cheap; it is clear that specific talents, such as athletics, may help cut the cost of institutional learning to a minimum through scholarship programs. These scholarships given to student athletes should be able to help the students, but it appears institutions are promoting the idea of academic clustering (Morgan, 2012). It is speculated that the action of clustering is counterproductive, hindering the student athlete's ability to fully evolve into an experienced professional.

The continual exterior pressures that athletes currently face, are far above the amateur requirements that NCAA puts on the students athletes. It is suggested that many high profile athletes are to continually be available to media, work well over the twenty required hours per week, stay healthy, be active in the community service and be a successful academic. With all of these things being very important to the athlete and respected institution, the thing that often gets put on the 'backburner' is academics.

Academic clustering has been receiving more scholarly attention and acknowledgement from mainstream media (Case, Greer & Brown, 1987; Paule-Koba, 2015). However, much of the information is derived from high power intercollegiate football and basketball systems (Fountain and Finley, 2009; Fountain and Finley 2011; Schneider, Ross & Fisher, 2010). This study mirrors the structure of previous literature, but investigates a different demographic. Mid-American conference women's basketball and softball teams will give an indication if the

academic clustering phenomenon is consistent throughout all intercollegiate sports, rather than high profile men's teams.

Academic clustering is present when at least twenty-five percent of an athletic team, or department, is specialized in one academic area (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987). Many people may infer that this is due to the athletes having similar interests, but it is apparent through preceding studies, this concept of clustering may go beyond that initial assumption. The National Collegiate Athletic Association, otherwise known as the NCAA, has continually backed their motion that a student athlete is a student first (Weston, 2013). However, this claim would suggest that all student athletes are being treated as normal students and academic clustering would become extinct.

## Literature Review

### Academic Clustering in the NCAA

A study discussing the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), an average Bowl Championship Series (BCS) conference, looked at a student athlete's academic performance alongside their athletic performance (Fountain & Finley, 2009). Looking at the ACC was useful due to it being one of the larger conferences, which fulfilled the author's desire for a large sample size. The authors believed that academic clustering was happening within this conference and wanted statistical data to confirm their hypothesis. The participants in this study were the football players in the ACC, which came out to 394 student athletes. While looking at these athletes, Fountain and Finley (2009) were observing minority players' majors and comparing them with their Caucasian teammates. When gathering information on these student athletes, the authors decided to use the media guides that were created by the individual schools' athletic communications department, following the conclusion of the 2006 football season. Although,

these guides were not readily available for every school, they were able to get 91.6% of the schools' media guides for that particular season. The procedural portion of this study was analyzing the media guides and seeing which individuals fell into which academic majors. The independent variable for this study was the different races that were looked at regarding academic clustering and the dependent variable was the media guides in which the researchers investigated. Through this research, Fountain and Finley were able to determine that academic clustering is prominent within minorities in the Atlantic Coast Conference (2009).

The authors examined academic clustering and the major selections of Division I student athletes of the Big XII Conference (Schneider, Ross & Fisher, 2010). This study was completed because current professors were seeing a lack of attention in class, along with the belief that academic clustering was present without concrete data to prove this epidemic. The researchers examined collegiate football players in the Big XII conference at three different points in the past twenty years (Schneider, Ross & Fisher, 2010). Schneider et al. (2010) believed that academic clustering was taking place within this conference. While looking at these collegiate players, they took an average sample size of 30-50 individuals from each member institution. The data retrieved from the media guides after the 1996, 2001 and 2006 football seasons, had a main focus on the academic majors of these athletes. Using the different years as their independent variable and the different media guides as their dependent variable, Schneider et al. (2010) concluded that academic clustering was present within the Big XII conference, especially in their football programs.

Another study regarding academic clustering looks into the different timelines that will affect a collegiate athlete in regards to their course work at their respective institutions. The research question was whether academic clustering occurred over time and if it was different for

Caucasian and non-Caucasian athletes (Fountain & Finley, 2011).  The researchers strived to provide further justification of past findings by looking at the issue with a longitudinal approach to give further insight into this developing problem within intercollegiate athletics.  The researchers narrowed down their participants to 230 student athletes over the span of a ten-year period from 2000-2009.  Consistent with the previous studies, Fountain and Finley (2011) used media guides and were able to track the academic majors from many Division I athletes.  The results indicated that academic clustering was indeed a problem and was more prevalent in the upperclassmen on athletic teams.  Using academic level and several years of media guides as their variables, these researchers were able to conclude that academic clustering was present within this sample of Division I student athletes.  They found that athletes were more likely to be in different majors as underclassmen but the gap diminished over the course of their collegiate career (Fountain & Finley, 2011).

While previous studies dove into academic clustering as it pertains to Division-I football programs and the different effects one's race might play on the student athletes decision, Amanda Paule-Koba took a look at all Division I intercollegiate Women's Basketball teams. The purpose of this study was to investigate if females were being clustered within majors to help retention and graduation rates for the university, although the significance of obtaining an education and acquiring a degree cannot be understated (Paule-Koba, 2015).  Paule-Koba looked at every Division I women's basketball team during the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years.  Data was retrieved from the most up-to-date lists of the 340 universities.  While taking the majors of all the student athletes', anyone who had an undeclared or undecided as their major was not accounted for in the study, and each team had to have 9 students with recorded academic majors to be measured within the study.  This study found that 44.5% of the usable data collected

showed academic clustering in 2008-2009 and 29.8% of the usable data for 2009-2010 showed clustering within Women's basketball (Paule-Koba, 2015). These results indicated that academic clustering does not only exist within Men's athletics, but exists within Women's' athletics too. Although, clustering does exist within Women's sports, further research needs to be conducted on the small conferences and divisions of the NCAA to prove that this is not waited by top-tier conferences.

*Academics in the NCAA*

The NCAA holds the standard that all student athletes are a student first, letting researchers infer that student athletes should be primarily focused on their academic achievement before focusing on intercollegiate athletics (NCAA). NCAA athletics allows gifted individuals a different platform to make a collegiate education more affordable.  This education is geared toward developing successful professionals as graduating seniors enter the work force.  An indicator of possible professional success is academic achievement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Korobova & Starobin, 2015).

Academic achievement is defined as how well students are achieving their education goals, often measured by assessment (Korobova & Starobin, 2015).  These assessments' that measure the overall strength of a student in a particular content area are vital, however, previous literature suggests that athletics has promoted academic success on student athletes (DeMeulenaere, 2010). A study completed by Parsons (2013) looks into academic success and how individuals are able to achieve better grade point averages during the sport seasons, as opposed to their off-season.  Parsons also looked at the negative stereotypes that were presented with student athletes and the perceptions their educators had.  While using 252 student athletes, the dependent variable of surveys and the independent variable of academic performance, the

author confirmed her hypothesis. The survey results reflected that athletes were able to perform better while they were in their respective season, but still fell under the university average when it came to their GPA. The survey was also able to conclude that professors may be inclined to form negative stereotypes regarding student athletes due to the amount of excused absences they receive for travel (Parsons, 2013).

An article by Sherry and Zeller show a different side of what many individuals believe may be true about student-athletes and their pursuit of an education degree (2014). Many athletes dream of a professional career, but even if the talent and luck are present, they are still an injury away from ending their playing careers (Sherry & Zeller, 2014). These researchers discovered that many Women's collegiate basketball players are strongly invested in both their athletic and academic success within their programs, but take more time to succeed academically. Along with the constant pursuit of success that many individuals within this study displayed, collegiate athletes are consistently facing stereotypes and different prejudices about their intellect (Sherry & Zeller, 2014).

Although these studies have shown that many student athletes are career driven and focused on academic and professional growth. Many of these students have increased focus on their academic interests because of sport, but a majority of athletes still face the negative connotations of the typical athlete stereotype.

*NCAA Rules and Amateurism Clause*

The National Collegiate Athletic Association believes that the athletes are students first. This organization has strict bylaws that have been set forth to declare their athletes as amateurs, under their amateurism clause. The NCAA's definition of amateurism emphasizes that these athletes are students first, that they are not to spend more than 20 hours a week on their craft and

are being awarded the opportunity to receive a free, or discounted education, through the sport that they love.  However, the NCAA made nearly $750 million dollars in overall revenue in 2009-2010 academic year (Busby, 2011).  The idea of amateurism has been widely debated over recent decades, but the NCAA and academic institutions stand strong regarding the clause.

Through the NCAA bylaws, we can infer that this organization believes that their athletes are amateurs and trying to keep them students first, rather than athletes first (Sack, 2008). Sack believes that this is far from the truth and that athletes are counterfeit amateurs (2008).  With being counterfeit amateurs, these athletes are not only advised to act as professionals, but bring in large numbers of revenues for their institutions.

Another way, other than the amateurism clause, that the NCAA can maintain eligibility of their student athletes is the 40-60-80 rule put in place to maintain the student athlete's progression to their academic degree.  This rule mandates that students need to remain eligible by have 40% of their degree completed following their first 4 semesters and an additional 20% of their degree for each remaining academic year, until their academic eligibility is completed (Wolverton, 2007).  Athletic officials believe that this sets the student athletes up for success when they are enduring the hardships a student-athlete may face, however, Brad Wolverton discusses that this may affect the eligibility of transferring student athletes, or individuals that may change their majors (2007).  These situations may in fact, hurt the individuals being forced into specific majors to remain academically eligible or preventing athletically talented athletes from transferring to larger schools, to make their skills more marketable.

Amateurism and the 40-60-80 rule are two different rules that could affect a student athlete when selecting academic majors.  The idea of amateurism within collegiate athletics may force athletes into selecting majors they seem to be uninterested in to simply get through the

rigmarole of being a student athlete, while the governing institution generates large sums of monetary value. The 40-60-80 rule can affect all student athletes, regardless of their intentions within their time at an academic institution, by forcing them to maintain strict academic protocol in their pursuit toward graduation.

**Methodology**

When gathering the Mid-American Conference academic majors data, the use of Internet rosters located on the respected institutions athletic pages were used as a main reference. This method of data collection was similar to other academic studies (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Paule-Koba, 2015). The Mid-American conference was selected for this study due to the lack of attention that "mid-major" institutions received from past studies that pertained to academic clustering. Female student athletes from all collegiate academic standings were examined over the fiscal year 2017. This fiscal year ranges from July 1, 2016 to June 30, 2017. Data was collected during the beginning stages of the spring season; it can be inferred that all information gathered was accurate.

For the purpose of this study, athletes listed with undecided, TEAM IMPACT or individuals with unlisted majors were not used when calculating statistical data of their respected teams. TEAM IMPACT is an organization that seeks to "Improve the quality of life for children facing life-threatening and chronic illnesses through the power of team" (2017). Nine members of each athletic team needed to have obtainable majors for the athletes to be analyzed. This is consistent with a Paule-Koba study on academic clustering (2015). A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was created to input the collected information, categorizing the athletes under the institutional name. The institutional names have been coded to ensure the privacy of student-athletes, based on a random alphabetical scale. Taking the reported data collection from all

twelve Mid-American Conference member schools, the goal would be to identify whether academic clustering is as prevalent in "mid-major" Women's athletics, as it appears to be in other Men's intercollegiate athletic teams. This information would determine if the epidemic that is being explained in previous literature exists within women's sports, both at the revenue and non-revenue generation level.

**Results**

Information was gathered from all 12-member schools of the Mid-American Conference. In the 2016-17 seasons, there were a total of 415 female student athletes that held an academic standing at the subject schools, who either played intercollegiate Women's basketball or softball. Overall, the academic majors were able to be collected for 317 female athletes, which was nearly 76.4% of the population. Of those 415 female student athletes, 172 of them played collegiate basketball and 243 of them play collegiate softball. From the 172 student athletes that played collegiate basketball, 124 (72.1%) individuals had academic majors listed on the athletic websites. Of the 243 collegiate softball players, academic majors were collected from 193 (79%) of the student athletes.

Each team was categorized into their respected sport. Team data was unable to be collected for three (3) Women's basketball teams within the conference, due to lack of academic majors on athletic department websites. Of the remaining nine teams, only two (2) teams showed that academic clustering was prevalent within their Women's basketball program, which is 22.22% of the testable data. Ten (71.42%) academic majors were able to be collected from the University H Basketball program. Of these 10 academic majors, 3 (30%) of them were communications majors. Also, 11 (91.66%) academic majors were able to be collected from the University F Women's basketball team. Of the 11 athletes, 3 (27.27%) of the student athletes

were majoring in Exercise Science.  These schools were the only two to show academic clustering within their Women's basketball program, in the Mid-American Conference.

Team data was unable to be collected from one (1) Women's softball team within the Mid-American Conference, due to lack of academic majors on the athletic department websites. Of the remaining eleven (11) teams, four (4) teams showed academic clustering within their softball programs at their institutions, which is 36.36% of the testable team data. Eleven (50%) of the athletes' academic majors were able to be collected from University G, which showed clustering in Therapeutic Recreation with 3 athletes (27.27%) focusing on that field of study. University E provided academic interests for 14 (56%) of their intercollegiate softball athletes, with 4 (28.57%) pursuing a degree in Exercise Science. Sixteen (94.12%) University F softball academic interests were shared on their athletic site, showing a clustering effect in Kinesiology with 5 (31.25%) individual's focused on that academic major.  Lastly, academic clustering was found within the Women's Softball program at University D.  Data was able to be collected for 10 (52.63%) of the student athletes where 4 (40%) were pursuing a degree in Exercise Physiology.

The combined collected data between the Mid-American Conference Women's Basketball and Softball programs showed that 4 (8.33%) of the total teams in the conference did not have enough data to be collected.  Of the remaining 20 teams, 5 (25%) of the member institutions sporting teams showed results where academic clustering was present.

**Clustered Teams**

| Academic Institution | Athletic Team | Clustered |
|---|---|---|
| University D | Softball | 4 (40%) |
| University E | Softball | 4 (29%) |
| University F | Basketball | 3 (27%) |
| University F | Softball | 5 (31%) |
| University G | Softball | 3 (27%) |
| University H | Basketball | 3 (30%) |

**Total Team Data**

| Total Combined Data | Basketball | Softball |
|---|---|---|
| Percentage of Athletes Collected | 124 (72.09%) | 193 (79.42%) |

**Individual Team Data**

| | Basketball | Softball |
|---|---|---|
| University A | 13 (92.9%) | 17 (100%) |
| University B | 14 (82.4%) | 8 (42.1%) |
| University C | 4 (26.7%) | 21 (91.3%) |
| University D | 10 (71.4%) | 10 (52.6%) |
| University E | 15 (100%) | 14 (56.0%) |
| University F | 11 (91.7%) | 16 (94.1%) |
| University G | 5 (35.7%) | 11 (50.0%) |
| University H | 10 (71.4%) | 19 (100%) |
| University I | 13 (100%) | 19 (90.5%) |
| University J | 13 (92.9%) | 23 (95.8%) |
| University K | 14 (93.3%) | 18 (90.0%) |
| University L | 2 (13.3%) | 17 (100%) |

**Discussion**

Academic clustering seems to be present at larger Division-I schools, as studied in previous literature. From this study, we are able to gather that academic clustering does appear to be present in both revenue and non-revenue athletics for Women's teams. This phenomenon of academic clustering could be caused by a wide-array of reasons, including schedule flexibility, the NCAA rules of eligibility, common interests and easy curriculum. Based on the results, it is clear that academic clustering may be existent within Mid-American Conference Women's teams for nearly all the reasons listed above, but more closely aligned with common interest of the athletes tested. Most of these teams show academic clustering within the common core of recreation, exercise and human movement. Five of the recorded six teams that displayed academic clustering within their sporting programs were closely related to this common core. Only one institution had recorded clustering outside of these areas of study.

The flexibility of a class schedule may coincide with the hectic rigmarole that an athlete may have to endure over the course of their athletic season. Departments within the institution may have different classes for busy athletic schedules, considering most athletes practice in the afternoon, holding more classes within the morning hours (Schneider, Ross & Fisher, 2010). Having accommodating faculty to ensure athletes are progressing within their academic interest could be a large reason that athletes are being clustered within these specific majors. Within this study, nearly 83% of the teams with clustering were focused on human health, a possible common interest shared between faculty and student athletes, resulting the more frequent occurrence in these specific programs.

The NCAA holds strict stipulations when deeming student athletes' eligibility throughout the course of their collegiate career. One specific rule is the 40-60-80 rule, this that states 40%

of a student athletes degree must be completed following their second year of eligibility (4 semesters), 60% by their third year (6 semesters) and 80% by their fourth year (8 semesters), in order to stay academically eligible to play in competition (NCAA, 2011; Paule-Koba, 2015). Although, this idea seems to help progress student athletes along within their academic interests, it is clear that this may take into account for some of the reported academic clustering. A quick change within a program may inadvertently force undecided athletes to quickly transition to a historically easy major, or one where they have garnered more credits.

Academic advisors could also play a large role in the overall selection of a student athlete's selection of academic interests. While being an athletic administrator, there is a large amount of revenue that can be gained from having successful athletic teams, or athletes within the departments (Brown & Jewel, 1995). Not only is the possible revenue important, but also the overall arms race for athletic departments to have the best facilities, recruits and coaches is a constant battle (Winston, 2000; Hoffer, Humphreys, Lacombe, & Ruseski, 2015). Ensuring these student athletes will remain eligible is vital in the constant pursuit of this arms race. Athletic administrators could suggest to academic advisors, or student services that athletes should be grouped within certain majors, to maintain eligibility for the competitive edge. This service could in turn help the student athlete in the short term, but one could argue that this would eventually lead to long term failure. This short-term success for the student athlete could help the academic institution receive these large monetary sums.

There is no true reason for why academic clustering is existent with NCAA athletics, however, I feel this study provides insight to core reasons that may be taking place within the mid-major level, especially for Women's athletics. This study showed us that the common core of health and human movement were very attractive academic interests for these student athletes.

Although some of the Mid-American conference schools showed academic clustering within the member institutions, researchers should focus on the "why" of their academic choice, rather than the quantitate number. Researchers should be able to infer from this study, that academic clustering is not as prevalent with these intercollegiate athletes, as simple percentages would infer.

**Recommendations for further Research**

This study is able to capture a different view of academic clustering, it is clear that more research needs to be completed in order to help evaluate the phenomenon of academic clustering. Further research should continue to be conducted on other conferences with the focus on Women's sports and the athletes' academic majors. A qualitative study should be completed to identify why these athletes are choosing these majors that cluster them within their athletic teams, instead of speculation from a wide variety of different individuals.

Previous literature suggests that large Division-I programs show signs of clustering, but the continued search needs to be focused on smaller schools and different non-revenue sports that have not been examined. The amount of individuals that play Men's Football and Men's Basketball is just a small percentage of athletes throughout all divisions of the NCAA. Focusing more on the student athletes as a whole, rather than focusing on specific sports, may help researchers identify other problems within the NCAA as it pertains to academic clustering.

Having a study focused on the positive and negative aspects of academic clustering, rather than its pure existence, will help in understanding if academic clustering needs to be eliminated within NCAA athletics. One could infer that many athletes are in college based on their athleticism, rather than their academic achievements. By looking at both the positive and negatives, researchers could determine if supplying individuals with higher education degrees are

in-turn, helping them succeed in the future, even though their true academic interest was not pursued.

**Implications**

Although further research is needed to truly understand the overall impact that academic clustering may have on the intercollegiate landscape, there are several implications that all associated parties may need to endure, if academic clustering is prevalent within the NCAA, intercollegiate conferences, academic institutions and individual student atheltes.

*National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)*

Academic clustering could become a problem for the entirety of NCAA, especially in the constant justification of the definition of a student athlete.  Although TV revenue and other forms of monetary gain may come from keep star athletes, clustering will raise questions regarding whether a student athlete, is truly a student first.  If it is found these athletes are essentially employees of academic institutions, student atheltes will likely begin to be paid by their schools, causing the NCAA's bottom line to dwindle?

*Athletic Conferences*

Athletic conferences are aligned due a wide-array of different reasons; whether that be the strength of athletic teams, regional markets, and proximity to member schools or education standards.  The existence of academic clustering within an athletic conference may hurt the standard and tradition of academic success, that a college or university may treasure.  This presence could result in the transitioning of universities from different conference to diminish, due to the lack of educational standards an institution may have.

*Academic Institutions*

These institutions of higher learning may be able to help student athletes through clustering them within specific majors, primarily majors with easy curriculums and light course loads. Allowing students to remain eligible for athletic contests, they are progressing toward their collegiate degree, making themselves more employable by graduating as a student-athlete. However, the credibility of academic institution may be hurt by the progression of underperforming students, coming through specific programs.

*Individual Student Athletes*

It simply hard to determine the effects academic clustering may have on an individual student athlete. On one spectrum, the progression to a collegiate degree may be an opportunity some student athletes would never have gotten to experience if it wasn't for an athletic scholarship. On the other spectrum, the lack of determination and self-responsibility may impact the professional growth of student-athletes entering the workforce. No specific outcome can be implied from this study regarding the overall effect academic clustering may have on student athletes.

**Conclusion**

For this particular study, the theory of academic clustering within the NCAA Division-I landscape was tested within the member schools of the Mid-American Conference Women's Basketball and Softball teams. Although, no reported study has looked at why athletes may be focused in on certain academic areas, NCAA guidelines, athletic administrators, common interests and historically light curriculums may aid the growing idea of academic clustering. This study showed that academic clustering existed within Women's sports at the "mid-major"

intercollegiate level, disproving argument stating "women's regulation is based on the student-first concept; the men's on athlete first" (Hult, 1980, p. 310; Paule-Koba, 2015, p. 3) However, although clustering did exist, many of the clustered majors were not aligned with previous literature, but showed signs of dealing with sport and human movement, a common interest among most athletes.  Regardless of the presence of academic clustering, it is still unknown the total affect that academic clustering has on the intercollegiate athletic landscape.  Being able to further this research will allow individuals to examine why this is taking place and the overall societal impact academic clustering may present.

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