

**The Commercialized Student-athlete
Research Proposal**

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Abstract

A commercialized student-athlete is the term this proposal has coined to best describe the new normal that dominates intercollegiate competition. Student-athletes themselves can be divided into two groups, those on the few revenue-generating sport teams, and those who make up most of the universities' student-athlete population. This classification is not a new idea, but the exponential rise in commercialization of college athletics has further strained the balance initially thought to be rectified by the federal enactment of Title IX and an increase in NCAA jurisdiction and enforceability of academic violations. Whether it is due to skyrocketing television revenue that universities cannot resist, recent judicial decisions that allow college athletes to profit off their own name, or the American professional sports draft model that places the key years of player development on institutions designed for higher learning, there is clear evidence that American universities have continued to grow the divide between the student and the athlete. This divide inhibits aspiring professional athletes during their time on campus, as well as directly reducing the quality of education allocated to professors and received by their students.

Introduction

All four major American sport leagues (NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL) use a unique format to assign new incoming talent from the collegiate level to their new professional clubs. This process is referred to as a “draft”. Drafts allow for struggling teams to add additional talent from better positions compared to teams who had more success the previous year. Although the draft is a major component of the competitive balance in American sports, there is a reason why the United States is the only western country to have their major professional leagues dominated by a draft format. Highly coveted talent at the university level do not have much say in their freedom of movement and have little options to resist signing with clubs who select them.

European sports, however, allow much more freedom for their young athletes, primarily due to a lack of university athletic association. This does grant players freedom of movement but does negatively affect overall competitive balance. The problems that will be presented today all result from the American draft system, so it is critical to clearly differentiate the two models. American universities that run successful athletic programs have recently evolved into a vaguely defined mix of amateurism and professionalism, with recent court cases now allowing their student-athletes to profit on their own name, image, and likeness (NIL). This recent development was a major success for awarding those who generate billions for their respective universities to profit off their own “brand”. However, this change has furthered in blurring the lines of collegiate sports to professional ones.

This collection of research aims to explain how this rapidly changing landscape affects student-athletes during their time at the university level and the role both their colleges and future professional clubs play in easing their transition to the professional level. This proposal also aims to display just how commercialized college sports have become, and the ramifications

students and facilities faced due to their “learning” institutions’ prioritization of highly profitable sports. The violations of personal freedoms and privacy by, primarily, the professional clubs throughout the draft process as well as the universities they attend, will be an additional component of this research.

Literature Search Methods

To begin the collection process, it was crucial to formulate an effective search method. After solidifying the research goals of this proposal and finding two accessible databases, which were the Journal of Applied Sport Psychology and JSTOR, the next step was to create key search terms that would assist in this area of interests. It was important that only collegiate and professional athletes were included in my sources, so recreational and high school athletes were excluded. Other aspects of this literature search were including protocols at the university and professional level, as well as research previously published that provides insight into how and what talent evaluators use to determine potential success-rate when selecting college athletes. Some variables of interests included in this proposal were outcomes following the transition to the professional level, differences in protocols in university athletic programs and professional clubs, potential areas of needed improvement or support, and trends for success and failure. These variables will be a major component in the potential findings within this proposal, as well as highlight the areas where current research is lacking and could benefit from further investigation.

Literature Search Results

Although there are numerous publications that focus on collegiate athletes and commercialization at universities, there is sparse attention from researchers on the professional leagues’ role in this new era of college athletics. The first implication of this search comes from a

sequential mixed method approach conducted by Hannah Kloetzer and Elizabeth Taylor in 2023. Their survey focused on current and former collegiate athletes' perceptions and experiences during their transition after the conclusion of their university career. Although not specifically tailored to this proposal of the transition leading to the professional level, their data will provide clear insight into the interworking's of university athletics and how the student-athletes perceive their experiences. 707 current and former athletes made up the authors' quantitative aspect of research, whereas semi-structured interviews with 10 former college athletes formed the qualitative portion. The authors' questions and interviews aimed to gain insight on the support systems provided for them, how impactful this support was, suggestions for future improvements, and testimonies regarding transitions out of university athletics (Klotetzer, 2023).

Table 2
Frequencies of Available and Mandated Athletic Department Sponsored Programming

Programming	Athletic Dept. Offered	Athletic Dept. Mandated	Institution Offered
Access to a sport psychology consultant	40.0%	47.0%	24.8%
Nutrition workshops	33.1%	53.8%	20.2%
Career planning	31.7%	37.1%	43.4%
Exercise workshops	28.7%	35.5%	21.8%
Exit interview	25.6%	34.8%	23.1%
Engagement with retired athletes	27.2%	14.1%	21.9%
Guest speakers	23.5%	19.3%	29.7%
Networking opportunities	21.2%	21.5%	36.9%
Graduate school counseling	19.4%	35.8%	29.7%
Specific industry sessions (e.g., nursing)	16.0%	26.5%	27.9%
Grad school info sessions	15.4%	13.8%	29.3%
Money management	10.6%	22.7%	12.0%
None	5.7%	N/A	3.4%

Note. Athletic Dept. Mandated percentages indicate the percentage of mandated programming within the Athletic Dept. Offered programs.

The table above displays the quantitative survey data that reflects the researchers' goals of better understanding experiences shared from college athletes. The qualitative side of this research, conducted through ten interviews, does what the data collection cannot do alone. It is clear from the percentages above that universities have differing philosophies and protocols for

their student athletes, with some (5.7%) having no programs for assisting their student-athletes in areas that do not involve their affiliated athletic team (Kloetzer, 2023). This data is further reflected from the interviewees, who mostly share the belief that they felt lost once they leave college athletics when it comes to their next profession. There were numerous common lasting impacts these former collegiate athletes shared, such as a negative body image, harmful eating habits, loss of identity, and lasting mental and physical health ailments. One ex-Division One Volleyball player summed up these widespread experiences during her interview (Kloetzer, 2023).

“When it came to like, almost like grieving your loss of identity, or dealing with body image as a retired athlete, or finding your new identity, or anything like that, I would have liked to see more. Maybe I just missed the email, but to my knowledge, there wasn’t as much of that. It wasn’t visible.”

This stands as one of many quotes that provided excellent insight into the minds and perceptions of current and former high-level collegiate athletes, which will stand as a foundational source for this proposal. However, this research differs from the intended proposal due to its’ sole focus on college athletes’ transitions into post-university life, without the inclusion of those with professional aspirations. While it falls short to fully relate to the desired proposal, it will be heavily involved in further critiques of the current university athletic system when it comes to my interpretation, as well as providing more evidence into why this area of research needs future attention.

While the first area of search revolved around student-athlete experiences and perceptions at their universities, this next article also uses college athletes as the source for their grounded theory and case study. *The Culture Cover-Up of College Athletics: How Organizational Culture Perpetuates an Unrealistic and Idealized Balancing Act*, by Uma Jayakumar and Eddie Comeaux, was published in 2016. These two authors interviewed 20 athletes and stakeholders involved in intercollegiate athletics from the same Division One university, as well as conducting their own field observations and document analysis. Although this source is not as relatable towards my proposal as the prior one, the inclusion of this study within my search clearly assists in displaying how a major university falls short for their student athletes when it comes to preparing them for life off their college campus (Jayakumar, 2016). The main area investigated in this research and then proven by their data is how a major university is primarily focused on their idealized image of both academic and athletic success, yet those interviewed say there was much more of an emphasis on their lives as an athlete, rather than a student. This differed from what these athletes expected, due to many of them having very successful high school academic careers and choosing this university due to their perceived academic prowess (Jayakumar, 2016).

The one most relevant component of this research is how this university treated their athletes that had high potential of playing at the professional level. One coach interviewed described how football players at this school had considerably lower graduation rates from other athletes. The coach ascribed this reduction to the little-to-no academic pressure placed on these high-profile individuals. The authors' discovered that this university, and many others due to interviewee testimony, place all their athletes into an academic five-year plan (Jayakumar, 2016). The additional year results from the common practice of "redshirting", which usually is

given to student-athletes during their first year at the university to best help them transition from the high school to the college level of athletic competition. Redshirting means a player cannot play in any competition during a full season, yet they are allowed to practice and participate in all other facets of the organization. Although most collegiate athletes do have a redshirt season (typically their freshman year), those with higher ability often avoid the redshirt classification (Kayakumar, 2016). This leads to early playing time, but also places the athlete a full year behind in credit accumulation to graduate. The coach interviewed about this issue with the universities model explains how if these players make it to the professional level, they do so without a diploma (Kayakumar, 2016). For those who are not redshirted and do not make it to the professional level, they are often forced to complete their degrees elsewhere due to running out of athletic eligibility. The same coach explained the commonly shared belief from these high-profile athletes' aspirations to play at the professional level.

“Athletes have unrealistic goals of playing in the NFL, and they have everyone telling them they were cheated and short-changed if they don't make it.”

The researcher team used their own observations and case studies to further the points brought forth throughout their interview process. Graduation rates were found to be lower at all major athletic universities for football and basketball players, the two sports where leaving the university before graduation is common for early entry into the professional level (Kayakumar, 2016). This proves their hypothesis of athletic department culture towards academic compliance, especially for high-profile athletes, is a fluid thing that can be manipulated if their athletic reputation is at stake. Although this area of research shares with the prior source in the lack of

inclusion of professional athletes, it benefits this proposal due to its' explanation of the common university athletic model and how it interacts with academic expectations, as well as its' interviewees highlighting how these colleges fall short for setting up their athletes for future success once they have left the university, including those who are moving on to the professional level and those who enter sport retirement.

The next addition into this literature search relates to the previous in its' intended goal of reforming high-level university athletics. Robert D. Benford published *The College Sports Reform Movement: Reframing the "Edutainment" Industry* for *The Sociological Quarterly* in 2007. His purpose of research was to examine corruption within college athletics, specifically with the programs that generate large amounts of money for their respective universities. There were five key problems that resulted from Benford's interviews, observations, and archival data. These five critiques: commercialization, university involvement in the entertainment industry, damage to the integrity of higher education, exploitation of athletes, and harm to nonathletes (Benford, 2007). Benford decided on a multimethod approach to best answer these critiques and prove their validity. He conducted twelve interviews with self-defined sports "reformers", examined hundreds of archival documents, and participated and recorded two discussion sessions on college sports reform.

Benford focused on explaining the history of college athletics in the United States from its' inception in 1852 during a Yale and Harvard rowing race (Benford, 2007). This useful historical context allows the reader to better understand just how much commercialization has taken over academic institutions in the last century, with athletics playing a major role in this slow evolution (Benford, 2007). The author creates and defines the "multiorganizational field"

that explains the contentious and competition environment that modern universities have created from this for-profit takeover (Benford, 2007).



Benford aims to highlight just how much money is awarded to universities from athletic success in revenue-generating sports, such as football and basketball, as well as the amount of money required to maintain that success. College football head coaches at division one schools are often the highest paid faculty member, including the university president. 40 out of the 50 states in the United States have a college football or basketball head coach as the highest paid public employee (Benford, 2007). A major reason this research is included in this proposal is the inclusion of explaining how American universities have long become de facto minor leagues for professional sports. The NFL has no form of “minor”, or developmental leagues, as well as the clubs themselves not allocating adequate funds for their own player-development, that is left for American universities to do (Benford, 2007). The NFL does not contribute a single penny towards academic institutions, but rather takes advantage of the commercialization that has engulfed division one sports.

“The heart of the problem facing college sports was commercialization: an interlocking network that included expanded press coverage, public interests, alumni involvement and recruiting abuses. The victim was the student-athlete in particular, the diminishing of educational and intellectual values in general, Also, students (including non-athletes) were the losers because they had been denied their rightful involvement in sports.” (Benford, 2007).

The College Sports Reframe Movement is full of negative repercussions that have been inflicted on our universities from this exponential rise of “edutainment”, especially the students themselves (Benford, 2007). The ones highlighted in this proposal were most relevant towards the intended outcome, yet it is critical to bring further awareness to the widespread violations that have continued to occur at these academic institutions, at the cost of the students and faculty that sought-out these places of perceived higher-learning. Academic fraud, exploitation of student-athletes, violence against women, scapegoating of Title IX, removal of sports that do not generate profits, and the lack of institutional integrity and transparency were all key focuses of this publication (Benford, 2007). Although these issues are not directly related towards this investigation, Benford’s inclusion of these continuous violations that our universities “cover-up” leave the reader little choice but to call for college sport reform.

From these first three articles that all focus on athletics at the university, this proposal has more than enough data to further the research questions presented with regards to the college level of sports. The second part of this proposal focuses on the professional level and their involvement within these transitional periods, as well as their own violations that perpetuate difficulties for newly arriving athletes. *The University of Pennsylvania Law Review* published one of the few articles that investigates these ethical issues at the professional level. Evaluating

NFL Player Health and Performance: Legal and Ethical Issues (2017) intended to evaluate the transitional process a hypothetical college athlete will endure during their advancement to the professional level. Using the name “James” as the hypothetical player for this case study, four authors provided their analysis to define and illustrate the types of health and performance evaluations an aspiring athlete will face and highlighting existing laws and regulations that professional sports openly violate (Roberts, 2017). Although a hypothetical case study, authors included real-life examples from NFL archival documents and legal frameworks to achieve their qualitative methodology.

A major aspect of this case study is the potential violations of federal laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA), that professional clubs intentionally include in their collective bargaining agreements made with player unions (Roberts, 2017). American universities legally cannot ask or access potential recruits’ medical and genetic history, which ethically is a good thing, yet from a performance perspective can inhibit the ability to fully predict future athletic success. The National Football League (NFL) however, is unwilling to take those risks. The NFL and the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) established employment terms for their players that directly violate federal law (Roberts, 2017).

The first introduction James has to this privacy violation is at the NFL Scouting Combine, which is a yearly talent showcase event that includes 300 of the best college players in the country that are aspiring to join one of the 32 professional teams in attendance (Roberts, 2017). This combine is televised and is mostly football-related, with speed and strength measurements, as well as on-field drills. But a major aspect of this annual event is the portion the fans do not get to see that is relevant to this proposal is the medical and personality evaluations.

NFL clubs pour millions into their large staffs to collect medical information on players years in advance before they are eligible to attend the combine, and those players will be forced to sign authorizations at the NFL Scouting Combine to undergo tests and evaluations from NFL team doctors to answer scouts' questions regarding their health and medical history (Roberts, 2017). This includes family medical history, and although technically voluntary, players face significant pressure to comply if they want to be selected in the upcoming draft (Roberts, 2017). The reason these violations are allowed at this scale is due to the NFL's legal interpretation of the ADA law, specifically the "job-related" health inquires, which it views as a critical need in their player evaluation process (Roberts, 2017). These medical examinations generally include x-rays, MRIs, echocardiograms, EKGs, and blood vial analysis. If a player has had a specific injury at the college or high school level, the affected area will undergo further evaluations from differing experts, leading to clubs often having conflicting medical opinions on a given player. Injury history is a major factor with draft selection, and American leagues that function from this draft system place financial compensation to match draft selection, so the higher you are selected, the larger the contract you receive at the beginning of your career (Roberts, 2017). Researchers used the example of Star Lotulelei, a player for the University of Utah who attended the 2013 NFL Scouting Combine. Prior to his medical evaluation, he was a "projected" top selection in the upcoming 2013 NFL Draft, which takes place two months after the combine. Doctors discovered an irregular echocardiogram, yet a later MRI showed no heart abnormality evidence. Despite this, he was drafted lower than initially predicted, costing him millions of dollars (Roberts, 2017).

Lotulelei's story is one of thousands from players who were medically evaluated whether correctly or not, at this yearly event that directly lowered their perceived "value" held by NFL

scouts (Roberts, 2017). The NFL furthered its legal maneuvering by creating the shell-organization National Football Scouting, which was formed as a separate corporate entity jointly owned by the NFL's clubs to be the one that specifically controls and manages the combine, and thus bears the legal binding if these federal laws were decided to be enforced (Roberts, 2017). This structure that encompasses the largest sport in the United States directly inhibits a college athletes' ability to successfully transition to the professional level. These players are pushed to their physical and mental limits at the university level due to the previously discussed financial incentives for these universities, to then have these medical inflictions used against themselves in the scouting process.

James, the hypothetical aspiring professional athletes in this case study, continues his combine journey after the medical evaluation to the personality evaluation. Most occupations have a formal interview process for their new employees, so it is clear why NFL clubs want to do the same with these potential new hires before awarding them multimillion dollar long-term contracts. However, these interviews differ from the typical job interview most are familiar with. Instead of one interview that all teams can assess from, teams are allotted a certain number of interviews at the yearly combine.

If James is a highly coveted player expected to be selected in the top 15 of the NFL Draft, he will have to attend at least ten highly intense interviews that challenge a players' football intelligence, personal integrity, and life outside of football (Roberts, 2017). James can decline interviews, but evidence provided in this study explain how declining interviews with one team can send a sour message to another. James will be expected to reflect complex understanding of football tactics with an audience of 20 to 30 individuals that make up the teams scouting, medical, and coaching department (Roberts, 2017). NFL clubs have full-time employees whose

sole responsibility is collecting data on incoming players, and they input anything they can find, including conduct records from as far back as middle school (Roberts, 2017). Social media profiles are closely scrutinized, and players are expected to answer any concerns brought forth during these high-intensity interviews. If James failed a drug test as a freshman in college, he will be asked to say the exact date he had last consumed illicit drugs. If James got arrested for reckless driving as a sixteen-year-old, he will be expected to explain how that happened and what he learned from the situation (Roberts, 2017). *Evaluating NFL Player Health and Performance: Legal and Ethical Issues* provides just how thorough NFL clubs are with new players, as well as throughout their career once they do eventually end up with a club, such as health and body monitoring through technology, as well as personal life involvement if a team deems performance is being inhibited by off-the-field relationships. Although not as relevant within this proposal as is the combine is when investigating this transition, it's clear that NFL teams operate with full legal immunity, with regards to personal information, throughout a player's career (Roberts, 2017).

The University of Pennsylvania Law Review provides four "C" that are intended recommendations for the NFL to better provide autonomy and personal freedoms that all other employees are guaranteed based on federal law. Compliance, the first "C", recommends the practices align with the ADA and GINA statues. Clarification aims to address legal ambiguities, like the previously mentioned "job-related" inquires under the ADA. Circumvention Prevention, the third "C", calls for the NFL and the clubs themselves to avoid common practices that continuously bypass privacy laws. The last "C", changes, calls for legislative intervention to protect players' rights and limit the potential for discrimination based on health and genetic data (Roberts, 2017). This study also highlights just how little freedom of movement these athletes

have if they are selected to a club that they do not want to go to. Clubs are awarded priority over other teams, even if the player refuses to sign, and the player cannot return to university athletics after declaring professional intent. This results in players having to live in areas or work for an organization that they would not have if it was up to them. This clearly differs from any other form of employment in the United States, besides the other professional sport leagues and military deployment. The authors' thorough explanation towards the NFL scouting process is a very informative one for someone unfamiliar with the American sports model, as well as displaying just how far these teams will go to increase their draft success, which in turn directly affects their clubs' success.

Discussion

The four included areas of research all relate towards reaching the goals brought forth from this proposal. The American draft system that defines its' professional sports and the commercialization of university athletics that has exponentially increased in the last 50 years both influence the athletes involved in a major way. The overlap of higher learning with the billion-dollar NCAA athletic industry is incompatible without compromising the students and facility that make up the university itself. The student-athlete on a revenue-generating sport is exploited for their extremely risky participation without fair compensation and the student-athlete on a non-revenue-generating sport is at a constant risk of losing their scholarship and the team itself due to the university's prioritization of other sports. College coaches, who can make up to \$15 million dollar a year, face no consequences for false promises given to athletes to gain their enrollment. A student-athlete with professional aspirations attends a school they see that will best assist in their goals of reaching the pinnacle of their given sport, yet the university sees this player as means to their end goal of enhancing their own on-field success, without

consideration to the players' future once they leave campus. This is displayed throughout this proposal with evidence towards just how little these schools emphasize academic success, obtaining a diploma, and providing their athletes with skills that they can use if unforeseen circumstances effect their future professional goals.

These unforeseen circumstances are often caused by the universities themselves, who act more similarly to professional clubs than the average person would believe. Downplaying of medical issues, providing illicit drugs to help a player "play through the pain", and a lack of emphasis on personal character all are a result of college commercialization, and the for-profit professional clubs worth billions of dollars are more than accepting of this current structure that places this burden on institutions of higher learning. Research included in this proposal explains how universities must maintain their relationships with professional clubs for their players to be selected in these drafts, which convince high school players that this universities can develop them. This compromises the player at the university who is attempting to transition to the professional level, because private information will be willingly shared to these clubs from their own schools, and this information will be used against them in their combine interviews. This can affect draft position, which determines compensation, as well as form league-wide reputations for these players before they have played a single game as a professional.

Commercialization of college athletics benefits two groups: the universities from increases in TV revenue and enrollment that come from on-field success, and the professional leagues that take advantage of this exploitative process to better formulate on-field success for themselves. The ramifications placed onto the students usually takes form in increased tuition to pay for athletic enhancement, reallocation of academic resources, and limited access to courses that are reserved for athletes who are given the earliest enrollment opportunities. Professors are

often pressured to be more lenient on athletes, especially if they are a member of a profitable sport, as well as having to balance the pressures from their superiors to not negatively influence the athletic programs with a student-athlete who, based on data provided from these sources, will most likely not graduate.

These generalizations do not apply to all student-athletes, rather the direct opposite. The two revenue generating sports are usually football and basketball, and these student-athletes are at higher risk of not being held accountable by the universities they attended, whereas athletes in other sports are provided less access to tutoring and travel schedules that were formed based on TV revenue expectations, not travel logistics. This is not a major issue for a sport like football, which typically has at least a week before each game and takes place predominately on Saturdays. Whereas a women's volleyball player for instance, plays in multiple games a week, and their opponents can be on the other side of the country. Recent commercialization outcomes can be seen from the dissolution of the Pac-12 conference, which consisted primarily of schools situated close to the West Coast. Multiple top programs left this conference for more lucrative television contracts for their football and men's basketball teams. A good example is the University of Southern California (USC), who is entering their first year as a member of the BIG10, a predominately Midwest and Northeastern conference. This awards their football program with enhanced competition, higher profits, and better recruiting enticement, but makes non-profitable sports, like women's volleyball, become even more of a financial negative due to a major increase in travel distance.

It seems redundant to even discuss university profit-margins within athletic programs, because the formation of intercollegiate competition never considered or envisioned a future where profits would be this lucrative or define the universities themselves, rather than the reason

colleges exist in the first place: for higher learning. If you applied the logic and attitudes universities have towards their athletic programs to a high school, it is easy to see just how incompatible these philosophies have become. A commercialized student-athlete in this era is not a student, nor a valued member of athletics if they are not a key player, but rather a needed instrument for universities to continue their prioritization of constant growth. Although this proposal is targeted at colleges with major athletic programs, this economic model that has become the norm with our institutions for higher learning is slowly engulfing schools that historically have resisted athletic dominance on their campus. This is because of growing costs to maintain other non-profitable sports, as well as a consistent flow of new applicants, now requires a profitable football or basketball program to keep not just other athletic teams intact, but the university itself.

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