

**Not Just an Athlete: Examining Division III Student-Athlete Stigma**

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### **Abstract**

Erving Hoffman defines stigma as the “situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance.” The stigma surrounding Division III student-athletes and what can be done to dispel the stigma is of importance to anyone at a Division III university, but particularly the population of athletes on these campuses. Division III collegiate athletes often face academic stigma, and these stigmas often surround their perceived inability to perform well in different environments outside of athletics. Existing research examines stigmas surrounding higher-level athletes, like those in Division I. However, within Division III athletics, less research points to evidence showing the possible stigma. The questions driving this research are, “Is there a certain stigma that surrounds Division III student-athletes?” and “What can be done to dispel the possible stigma surrounding student-athletes?” Ideally, this research aims to find evidence that non-student-athletes view student-athletes in a certain way and find a stigma surrounding this group. In this research, many different sources will contribute to the findings.

## **Introduction**

Stigma and stereotypes exist almost everywhere. Merriam-Webster defines stigma as “a set of negative or unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something.” Many student-athletes exist in many colleges and universities all over the country. Athletes, in general, are on the frontlines when facing certain stigma. The NCAA student-athlete population is divided into three categories: Division I, II, and III. In this case, we will be focusing on Division III athletes because of the relevance of the situation. Various factors were considered for the research, including different demographic groups, such as different races among athletes, the sex of the athletes, and even socioeconomic situation. When examining different research conducted, the focus was to target sources that included Division III student-athletes in the research. In doing so, we were able to diagnose what causes Division III student-athlete stigma and what can be done to dispel the stigma. The research centered on two questions: Does the stigma surrounding Division III student-athletes exist? If so, is there a possibility of getting rid of any academic stigma surrounding what athletes are capable of?

## **Rationale**

This research aims to examine the stigma that exists when viewing the student-athlete population. It is essential to investigate student-athletes lives and make it known that they are more than just athletes on the field; instead, they can accomplish more than many believe. Athletes, specifically, are affected by this issue. Many student-athletes are looked upon as just being an athlete. This stigma exists solely based on the population of non-athletes who believe that athletes are just athletes. The non-athlete population at colleges and universities believes athletes only exist on campus to fulfill athletic goals (Wininger and White, 2015). Athletes can

accomplish more than just athletic goals; student-athletes can also achieve plentiful success in the classroom (Barlow and Hickey, 2014).

### **Context**

Piedmont University is a small, Division III university in the mountains of north Georgia. Half of the population of students living on campus are athletes. Investigating the possible stigma on Piedmont University's campus inspired this research. Stigma exists almost everywhere, so why would it not exist on this campus? Thousands of student-athletes inhabit colleges and universities nationwide, and stigma must live on almost every campus. Many non-athletes view student-athletes as “dumb jocks” (Wininger and White, 2015). Various researchers have conducted many studies proving that the gap exists between non-athletes and student-athletes. Previous findings have pointed to a few differences between the two populations. Evidence supporting this notion is derived from athletic success, so many athletes on the field also succeed in the classroom and after completing their education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Several communication theories can be applied when examining the stigma surrounding Division III student-athletes, but the two most prevalent are stereotyping and symbolic interactionism. Stereotyping is the “idea that people have preconceived notions of people that may or may not be true” (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). This definition directly aligns with the idea that athletes have stigma and stereotypes surrounding the group. Symbolic interactionism is “the idea that we create symbols and assign meanings to object, interactions, etc.” (Blumer, 1969).

**RQ1:** Is there a certain stigma that surrounds Division III student-athletes?

**RQ2:** What can be done to dispel the possible stigma surrounding student-athletes?

### **Literature Review**

For a long time, student-athletes have been perceived as dumb jocks. This stigma exists within the non-athlete population in the higher levels of athletics, like Division I. Stigma also exists when examining different demographics. Academic stereotypes also exist when considering college athletes. Looking into the published literature, there is a common theme when viewing stigma among student-athletes. As mentioned, student-athletes are viewed as “dumb jocks” (Wininger and White, 2015), but this is not the only stigma. The same literature shows that “students report having lower academic expectations of student-athletes” (Wininger and White, 2015). Within Division III athletics, a certain notion has been that teams expect their student-athletes to perform well in the classroom. Division III student-athletes report having a good relationship with their professors, which they can accredit to their academic success. “The Division III student-athletes viewed their academics as important in itself” (Boyd, 2010). Academic success is important among Division III student-athletes, although the stigma among students that athletes are typically lesser in the classroom is untrue. Studies have shown that student-athletes are not significantly different academically from regular non-athlete students. “[Student-athletes] attain GPAs that do not significantly differ from those of nonathletes” (Barlow and Hickey, 2014). Existing literature shows no difference between the academic performance of student-athletes and non-athletes.

Division III student-athletes value academic success. Stigma exists among athletes because of their portrayal and how their classmates often view them. Most non-athletes need to be fully aware of what student-athletes go through week-by-week. Student-athletes are usually

dealing with a full plate. “Student-athletes are required to devote upwards to 25 hours per week when their sport is in season” (Van Rheenen, 1999). While this can often lead to the realization of athletes who will most likely not perform well academically, some student-athletes have continued to be successful athletically and academically. Being a student-athlete is physically demanding and can often lead to many student-athletes being well-prepared for the real world.

### **Stigma Surrounding Student-Athletes**

For an extended period, there has been a negative stigma surrounding student-athletes at all levels of competition. This is a prevalent issue regarding academic success among student-athletes on campuses of colleges and universities throughout the country. The issue regarding academic stigma is that many believe athletes are just athletes; frankly, this is not the case. Many athletes can perform academically and athletically at a high level. Different levels of competition preach academic success. The stigma still exists no matter what achievement is achieved. Many athletes who play at the Division III level value their education. While this is also true of the different Divisions in the NCAA, previous literature shows that Division III athletes are more focused on obtaining a good education from their selective college or university. Student-athletes at the Division III level are some of the top performers in the classroom. “The Division III baseball players that stated they participated in school activities in addition to playing baseball expressed that they had a desire to play professionally, but that they felt they could rely on their education as an alternative” (Boyd, 2009). As Boyd has expressed, many Division III student-athletes have shown their desire to obtain an education.

Education is a part of aspiring student-athletes choosing to attend a Division III affiliated college or university. While non-athletes may not understand the student-athlete's decision, this typically introduces the stigma surrounding these athletes. Many non-athletes develop this stigma

based on previous experience or for the sole fact of viewing student-athletes as lesser. Student-athletes make up large population numbers at Division III schools. Previous literature has stated that the academic achievements of student-athletes and non-athletes are similar. “The academic requirements at various Division III colleges hold students to a very high standard of academic excellence” (Barlow and Hickey, 2014). Student-athletes are required to be more than just an athlete at Division III schools. Requirements set by the various colleges and universities ensure that student-athletes continue to perform well in the classroom. Non-athletes develop the stigma about athletes being lesser early on. While this stigma still exists moving through various levels of education, studies show that the differences between the two populations are not significantly different. Non-athletes and student-athletes alike tend to perform the same in the classroom setting.

### **Differences in Demographics**

Many different demographic groups exist within Division III athletics. When examining the different demographics within Division III athletics, all groups portrayed can hold the same levels of academic success. As previously mentioned, academics at Division III affiliated schools are prestigious and held to a higher standard. African-American student-athletes must deal with much opposition in their different collegiate experiences. As previous literature has expressed, African-American student-athletes are the group that faces stereotypes and stigma more than other groups within collegiate athletics. Evidence shows that black student-athletes are more inclined to face academic opposition. “Facing a learning environment that is racist and discriminatory predisposes black athletes to potential academic failure” (Njororai Simiyu, 2012). Predominantly White Colleges (PWC) are shown within this research to show some racial stereotypes that limit the potential success of African-American student-athletes. Black student-

athletes have faced stereotypes and stigma since the integration of schools in the 1960s. Research shows that student-athletes facing institutional racism are moving through post-secondary education.

Women in sports is another topic of discussion that has received controversy. The unequal display of stigma amongst female student-athletes remains the same even with the introduction of Title IX in 1972. While the opportunities and participation of women in collegiate sports have increased, the likelihood of women working in the sports industry has remained the same. “There has not been the same growth of opportunities for women to work in the sport industry” (Taylor and Shigeno, 2022). Women in sports have seen a drastic improvement, as previously stated, but the inclusion of women working within sports has still seen little to no improvement. Title IX improved the involvement of women in sports at the initial breakthrough, but since the legislation was enacted, there has been a decline in women holding positions within sports (Taylor and Shigeno, 2022).

### **Contemporary Relevance**

Student-athletes continue to have a stigma surrounding them about being just an athlete. This research aims to show that the two groups, student-athletes and non-athletes, are similar in academics. The discussion of athletes being more than athletes continues to be a topic of relevance. The stigma that exists believes that student-athletes are lesser in an academic setting. Research has proved that this belief is, in fact, not true. The topic of discussion holds less prevalence now, but considering the topic of stigma among the student-athlete population continues to exist, the topic needs to be reintroduced in areas of study. Many student-athletes know of the stigma surrounding the group, but the relevance has yet to be paid much attention since the late 1990s and early 2000s. Reintroducing the topic is necessary. To dispel the stigma



can benefit the population of student-athletes. Dispelling the stigma starts with non-athlete populations eliminating previous ideas and thoughts regarding student-athletes. While this may seem impossible, non-athlete students in the same environment must begin to understand what athletes go through and handle in their lives. Student-athletes deal with more than the average student, with many different commitments and engagements that must be dealt with daily; non-athletes are quick to assume that these athletes are lesser just because they are athletes and not just regular students. Understanding that the student-athlete population is not lesser is the first step to dispelling the stigma among non-athletes.

### **Methodology**

My capstone project aims to better my understanding of student-athletes and their relevance to the college or university they attend. Understanding that there is a stigma surrounding collegiate athletes benefits my career path of one day working within college athletics and understanding who student-athletes are. Aspiring to work in sports has shown that staying within Division III athletics is something I want to do. My deliverables include this research paper, a promotional package including two audio advertisements, two press releases, and two print advertisements, a 12-week sports talk show on our department radio station, a 12-week podcast series featuring different Piedmont athletes and their plans after their playing career is over, a 12 part blog accompanying the podcast series offering more thoughts and information about the podcast episode and guest, and a portfolio website which will serve as the hub for all parts of my capstone housed in one location. Each deliverable promotes the topic of sports within my project, and the podcast will be used as the main platform to inform individuals about student-athletes and show that they're more than an athlete. My technologies include Soundforge, Audacity, Canva, WordPress, Wix website creator, Adobe Audition, and Canva.

With these technologies, it will provide me with an opportunity to complete my desired objectives for this project.

### **Capstone Project Management**

#### **Timeline**

At the end of the spring semester of 2023, Dr. Dale Van Cantfort and I planned a capstone contract and an outline for my capstone project by September 5, 2023. Deliverables 1-6 will be due in order from September 19<sup>th</sup> to the drop-dead date of November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

#### **Challenges**

My first challenge was ensuring that enough valuable research was available for my research topic. Another challenge was recording the podcast with different Piedmont athletes; the different Piedmont athletes had delicate schedules, so finding the available time was challenging. Another challenge was ensuring that all my audio content was at a level of quality that I deemed necessary. Maintaining a level of correctness and quality was another challenge. Maintaining that level of quality is hard, especially with the two different audio platforms I am using. I want to ensure that I am proud of my created content and allow myself to use these elements as portfolio options to show potential employers. Some of my successes came from my ability to meet the set deadlines and maintain a high level of organization throughout the project. Staying ahead was another success; I sometimes found myself nearly three weeks ahead on content.

### **Conclusion**

I found enough available resources to conduct valuable research to examine my topic during this research. Though much is needed to dispel this stigma about student-athletes, it is a possible task in the future. Gaps in the research do exist, but being able to bring new foundations to the research allows for more research to be conducted in the research. The research topic is

relevant to the current situation of being enrolled at a Division III affiliated university. A large percentage of student-athletes on campus allowed for the research to be conducted and showed that student-athletes are more than just athletes. In the future, I want to revisit this project and know that I have produced exemplary content sufficient for my portfolio.

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