

# Student Athletes:

## A profile of Ohio State student athletes

Center for the Study of Student Life

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents a profile of student-athletes in terms of their academic progress and challenges to that progress. There is evidence that student-athletes find that sports participation affects their time spent on academics, especially in season, and on the courses they choose for study. Other research suggests that student-athletes lack growth in learning skills. The guiding questions for this brief include the following: (1) Do student-athletes find academics difficult? and (2) What are the relationships between student-athletes, their academic pursuits, and their physical and mental wellness?

The authors used Ohio State data from two national surveys: the spring 2012 National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA II) and the winter 2012 Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL), comparing the responses given by student-athletes to the responses given by non-athletes. Other data used were retrieved from the Student Information System (SIS) for the term in which the survey was administered. These data give information about cumulative GPA and other demographic information for the population from which the survey respondents were drawn.

### QUESTION 1: DO STUDENT-ATHLETES FIND ACADEMICS DIFFICULT?

- The cumulative GPA for student-athletes was lower than the GPA for non-athletes for both terms.
- Fewer athletes than non-athletes reported that they found academics difficult to handle.
- When looking at impediments to academic performance, student-athletes identified *participation in extracurricular activities* as the single greatest impediment, followed by *stress, anxiety, and sleep difficulties*.

### QUESTION 2: WHAT ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENT-ATHLETES, THEIR ACADEMIC PURSUITS, AND THEIR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLNESS?

- Student-athletes ranked their health as better than did non-athletes.
- Athletes exercised *vigorously or moderately* more frequently than did non-athletes, and more athletes engaged in strength training.
- Fewer athletes felt *overwhelmed* or *extremely depressed* in the 30 days prior to the ACHA-NCHA II survey than did non-athletes.
- For all respondents (both athletes and non-athletes), the ACHA-NCHA II found that difficulty handling academics increased with decreasing health rankings.
- Student-athletes reported that they grew less in every academic skill than did the non-athletes, particularly considering the abilities to *learn on your own, pursue ideas, and find information you need* and to *critically analyze ideas and information*.
- Athletes reported lower confidence related to academic tasks such as *working with a team on a group project* than did non-athletes.
- Almost one-third of student athletes did not see a need to continue school once they had the minimum required to obtain a particular job.
- Student-athletes were very interested in *managing other employees, in training others, and in advancing through any organization or business they work in*.

## INTRODUCTION

This analysis presents a profile of student-athletes in terms of their academic progress and challenges to that progress. Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, and Banaji (2004) provide a useful summary of issues discussed in the higher education literature about athletes and athletics, as discussed by other researchers in the 1980s through the early 2000s. According to the literature, participation in athletics contributed to growth in the following areas:

- Leadership abilities
- Interpersonal skills
- Peer relationships
- Social connections among students, faculty, and alumni

When the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) asked Division I athletes in 2010 the number of hours the students spent on their athletic activities in season, students reported that they spent at least 30 hours, and those participating in men's football and baseball reported they spent over 40 hours per week<sup>1</sup>. When the same students were asked the number of hours spent in academic activities per week in season, the answers ranged from about 32 hours for baseball to 40 hours for women who did not play basketball. The survey found that students who played baseball, men's basketball, and football engaged in athletic pursuits more hours per week when their sport was in season than they did in academic activities (NCAA, 2010). One aspect of this balancing of athletic activities with academics was that Division I athletes missed around two classes per week in season; among those playing baseball, and both men's and women's basketball, at least 20% reported they missed more than 3 classes per week in season.

There is evidence that student-athletes lack growth "in openness to diversity and challenge, and in levels of learning for self-understanding" (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, and Banaji, 2004, p. 578). The heavy burden of time demands on student-athletes were discussed by Comeaux and Harrison (2011), who suggested that concepts such as peer relationships and even "communal bonds" may be much more limited for student-athletes than for other undergraduates. The schedules of practice, participation, training, and traveling cause many student-athletes to "live, eat, study, and socialize together and are even tracked into the same majors..." (p. 236).

Etzel, Watson, Visek, and Maniar (2006) indicated that student-athletes face the same developmental issues as do non-student-athletes in addition to the pressures of intensive sport training and institutional expectations related to their sports. For example, the 2010 NCAA survey reported that, across all sports in Division I schools, at least 44% of respondents reported that they took the courses on their schedule "because they fit with my practice schedule" (p. 28). At least one-third of student-athletes reported that their coaches or someone else in the athletics department discouraged them from taking particular classes. Between 42% and 62% stated that they were unable to take courses they had wanted to take because of their participation in sports (NCAA, 2010).

These pressures and demands are areas of concern for the Office of Student Life and other key Ohio State offices. The services offered by many Student Life units may provide support for student-athletes, points of observation about their health and wellness, and possibilities for informed interventions. A profile of student-athletes at Ohio State may inform decision-making processes. Given the literature, this profile involves the relationships between academics, stress, and related development. Therefore, the guiding research questions for this brief include the following:

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<sup>1</sup> The report included statistics for athletes who participated in baseball, men's and women's basketball, football, all other men's sports, and all other women's sports.

1. Do student-athletes find academics difficult?
2. What are the relationships between student-athletes, their academic pursuits, and their physical and mental wellness?

These questions involve impediments to academic performance and self-reports of how students felt they achieved academic skills.

## METHODS

The authors used Ohio State data from two national surveys: the spring 2012 National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA II), administered by the American College Health Association; and the winter 2012 Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL)<sup>2</sup>. The researchers compared the responses given by student-athletes to the responses given by non-athletes. When retrieving demographic information, the researchers used data from the Student Information System (SIS) for the term in which the survey was administered (winter quarter 2012 for the MSL, spring quarter 2012 for the ACHA-NCHA II). These data are included in the Appendix.

## RESULTS

### QUESTION 1: DO STUDENT-ATHLETES FIND ACADEMICS DIFFICULT?

#### Academic Performance

Cumulative GPA is one indicator of academic performance. Regarding the data gathered for the MSL, student-athletes from the winter 2012 term are compared with undergraduate non-student-athletes from the Columbus campus (the population from which the survey sample was drawn). Regarding the data gathered for the ACHA-NCHA II, student-athletes from the spring 2012 term are compared with all undergraduates, graduate students, and students studying for professional degrees from the Columbus campus (the population from which the survey sample was drawn).

Table 1

#### Cumulative GPA

Winter 2012 (MSL)	Average cumulative GPA	Spring 2012 (ACHA-NCHA II)	Average cumulative GPA
Non-Athletes (n=39,400)	3.11	Non-Athletes (n=49,955)	3.19
Athletes (n=1342)	3.08	Athletes (n=1338)	3.01

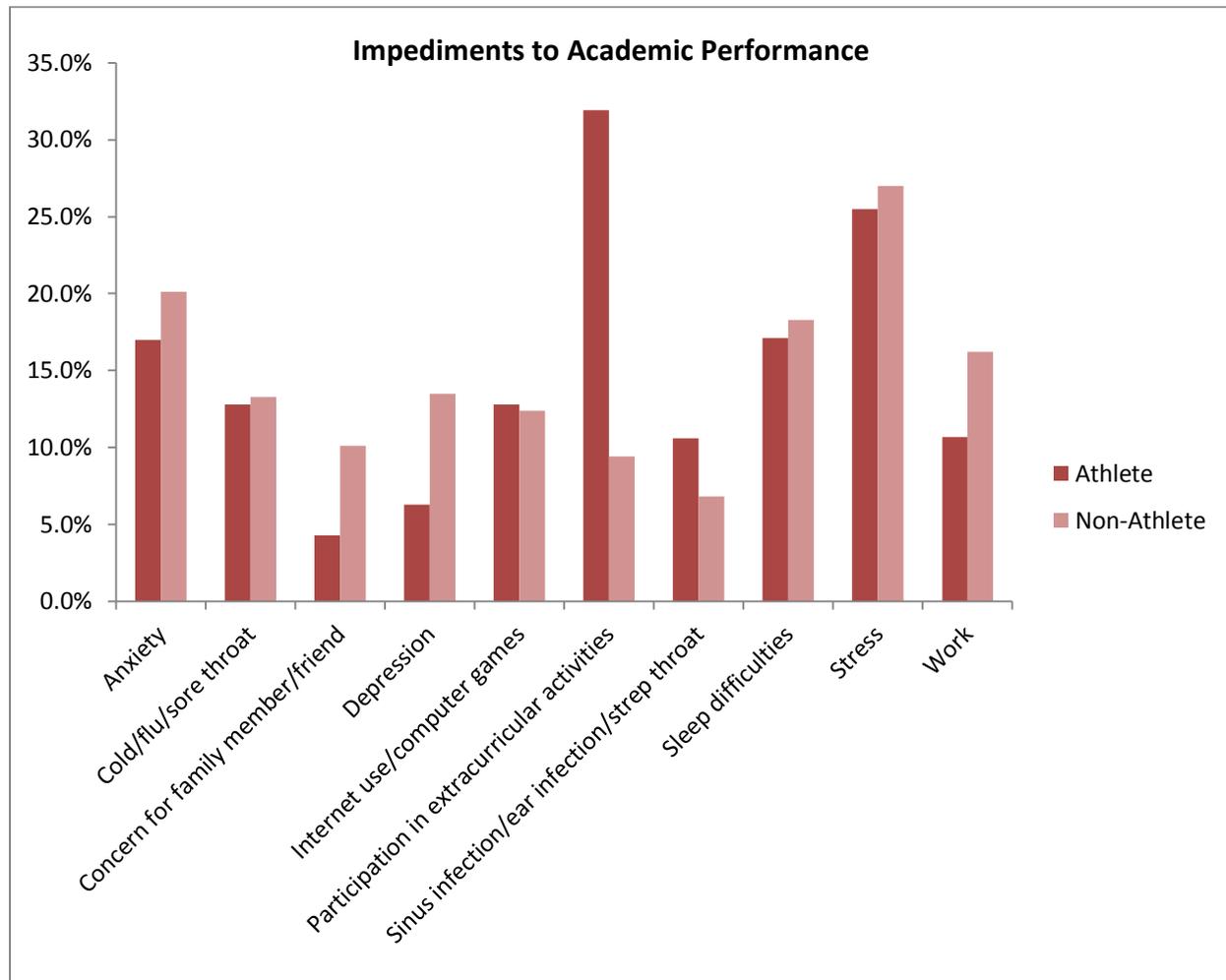
The average cumulative GPA for student-athletes is slightly lower than the average cumulative GPA for non-athletes. When compared to non-athletes (47.1%), fewer athletes (42.6%) reported that academics had been difficult for them to handle within the last 12 months.

The ACHA-NCHA II asked respondents to indicate whether they had suffered certain impediments to academic performance. The top ten impediments are displayed in Chart 1.

<sup>2</sup> MSL 2012 sample included a random sample of 4,000 students (858 respondents) and a comparison leadership sample of 1,000 non-randomly selected students (228 respondents).

Chart 1

*Impediments to Academic Performance*



In one-half of the top 10 categories, student-athletes reported a smaller negative effect on their academic performance in comparison with non-athletes. However, 31.9% of athletes reported that extracurricular activities were impediments to their academic performance, whereas only 9.4% of non-athletes reported this. The next highest point, stress, was selected by 25.5% of athletes. Anxiety and sleep difficulties were each selected by more than 15% of athletes.

The difference in reported effects related to work may be due to the difference in the percentage of athletes who work for pay in comparison to non-athletes. According to ACHA-NCHA II data, 31.9% of athletes worked for pay, compared to 64.4% of non-athletes. Of those who held jobs, both the majority of athletes and non-athletes worked 10-19 hours per week.

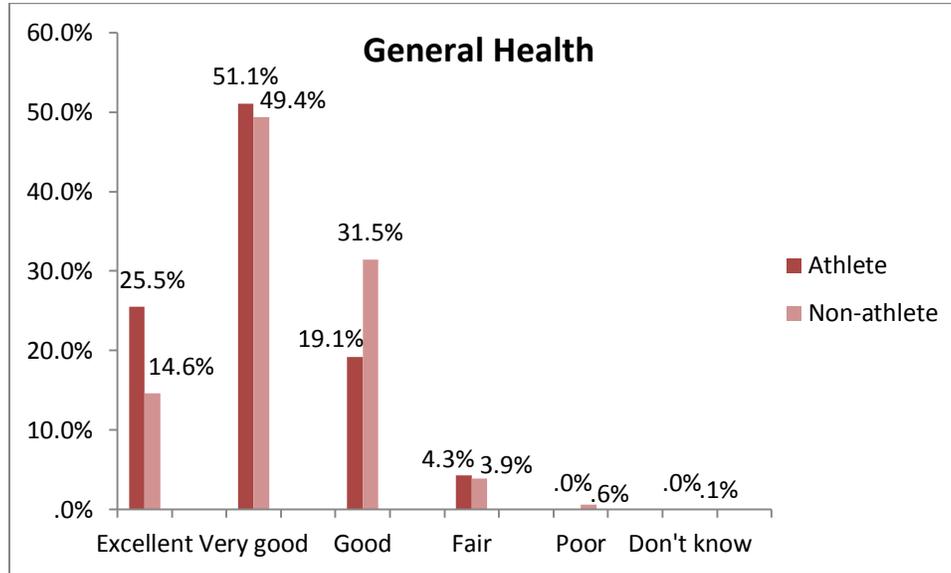
**QUESTION 2: WHAT ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENT-ATHLETES, THEIR ACADEMIC PURSUITS, AND THEIR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLNESS?**

Many aspects of mental/emotional wellness vary widely between athletes and non-athletes, most noticeably anxiety and depression. The data presented here illustrate aspects of physical and mental

wellness, and explore these factors in relation to student-athlete academics. On average, athletes rated their health a great deal better than non-athletes, as demonstrated in Chart 2.

Chart 2

*General Health*



Other findings from the ACHA-NCHA II concerned exercise. The survey asked three questions about levels of exercise. A larger percentage of athletes engaged in *moderate* (63.8%) or *vigorous* (57.4%) exercise 3 or more times per week than non-athletes (49.5% and 34.3%, respectively). More athletes also engaged in *strength training* (63.9%) at least twice per week compared to non-athletes (37.4%).

Fewer athletes reportedly felt *overwhelmed* in the last 30 days (63.0%) than non-athletes (66.9%), and when asked whether they had ever *felt so depressed it was difficult to function*, 14.7% of non-athletes felt this way in the last 30 days, in comparison to 8.5% of athletes, according to the ACHA-NCHA II.

Considering the Ohio State student body as a whole, the ACHA-NCHA II found that difficulty handling academics increased with decreasing health rankings, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

*Health and Academic Difficulty*

Last 12 months: Difficult to handle: Academics	General Health						Total
	Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor	Don't know	
No	70.8%	53.9%	46.4%	27.8%	25.0%	0.0%	52.9%
Yes	29.2%	46.1%	53.6%	72.2%	75.0%	100.0%	47.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Academic Skills and Involvement**

The MSL (2012) asked students to report their perceived degree of growth regarding a variety of academic skills. Results that compare student-athletes to non-athletes are presented in Table 3. Athletes ranked their growth lower than non-athletes on every item.

Table 3

*Academic Skill Development*

<b><i>In thinking about how you have changed during college, to what extent do you feel you have grown in the following areas?</i></b>	<b>Non-athletes</b>	<b>Athletes</b>
Ability to put ideas together and to see relationships between ideas	78.1%	77.7%
Ability to learn on your own, pursue ideas, and find information you need	85.2%	79.5%
Ability to critically analyze ideas and information	82.1%	76.8%
Learning more about things that are new to you	86.8%	85.7%

\*percentages reflect Grown/Grown very much

The MSL also asked students to report their degree of confidence related to certain academic tasks. Again, athletes ranked lower than the non-athletes on every item, most notably in terms of working with a team on a group project.

Table 4

*Perceived Confidence of Academic Skills*

<b><i>How confident are you that you can be successful at the following?</i></b>	<b>Non-athletes</b>	<b>Athletes</b>
Leading others	76.2%	72.4%
Organizing a group's tasks to accomplish a goal	84.3%	78.6%
Taking initiative to improve something	80.4%	76.8%
Working with a team on a group project	89.6%	81.2%

\*percentages reflect Confident/Very confident

When asked about their career aspirations, motivations varied between athletes and non-athletes, depending upon the item, as seen in Table 5 below. Athletes expressed interest in managing other employees, training others, and moving up, yet showed less motivation than non-athletes when it came to becoming a leader in their chosen field, striving for promotions, and pursuing further education and training.

Table 5

*Career Aspirations*

<b>Career Aspiration</b>	<b>Non-athletes</b>	<b>Athletes</b>
I hope to become a leader in my career field	78.9%	73.6%
When I am established in my career, I would like to manage other employees	59.8%	67.3%
I do not plan to devote energy to getting promoted in the organization or business I am working in	12.5%	25.4%
When I am established in my career, I would like to train others	57.3%	63.6%
I hope to move up through any organization or business I work in.	83.9%	85.5%
Once I finish the basic level of education needed for a particular job, I see no need to continue in school	11.0%	29.1%
I think I would like to pursue graduate training in my occupational area of interest	64.2%	57.2%
Attaining leadership status in my career is not that important to me	11.1%	22.8%

\*percentages reflect Quite a bit true/Very true

The MSL (2012) asked about various types of academic involvement. More athletes (19.0%) reported having engaged in community service as part of a class than non-athletes (13.7%). Nearly the same percentage of athletes engaged in study abroad, as compared to non-athletes.

## DISCUSSION

While average cumulative GPA does not differ dramatically between student athletes and non-athletes, there are many academic impediments that affected the two groups differently. In comparison to non-athletes, student-athletes reported struggling less with academics, both in general and in terms of specific academic impediments. Still, the four most prominent impediments reported by student athletes (extracurricular activities, stress, anxiety, and sleep difficulties) may warrant further exploration.

The most notable difference among academic impediments was that of participation in extracurricular activities, which, for athletes was a much larger concern than it was for non-athletes. Perhaps student-athletes consider their athletic sport to be an extra-curricular activity, or perhaps student-athletes tend to be more involved in extra-curricular activities in addition to their sport than are non-athletes. The NCAA 2010 survey asked if student-athletes had opportunities to participate in community service with their team; the response was overwhelming that athletes felt that they did (between 78% and 94% concurred, depending on their sport). It may be that the team expectations are that student-athletes participate in community service and that athletes considered their sport a source of this impediment, but further research is needed to confirm this.

The differences detected between athletes and non-athletes among aspects of mental/emotional wellness, particularly depression, may be related to the physical wellness of athletes, because athletes reportedly engaged in more cardiovascular and strength exercise and rated their health better than did non-athletes. The data illustrated that difficulty with academics was inversely related to health rating, suggesting physical wellness/health may be an aspect of athletics that affects academic performance.

Reported academic difficulty because of acute illness was similar between athletes and non-athletes, though a slightly higher percentage of athletes did rate more serious infections (sinus, ear, strep throat) as an impediment than did non-athletes. This may be because fewer athletes received information

about student health services. It is possible that student-athletes do not take advantage of Student Health Center services.

Athletes ranked their academic growth lower than non-athletes on every skill item. Among the most crucial were the ability to *learn on your own, pursue ideas, and find information you need*, and *the ability to critically analyze ideas and information*. It is difficult to make inferences from the data currently available; this could be due to a number of factors, such as the intrinsic and individual nature of the skills, in comparison to the team-oriented nature of athletics, or the effects of various academic impediments on these skills.

Similarly, athletes ranked lower than non-athletes on every item related to confidence in academic skills, most notably in terms of *working with a team on a group project*, which is surprising, considering the team-oriented nature of varsity athletics. It would be of interest to explore the ways in which skill development and learning may or may not translate to the classroom.

When asked about career aspirations, a small percentage of athletes reported interest in continuing their education following the basic education necessary for their job (much smaller percentage than non-athletes). This is somewhat contradictory to a different item, in which more than half of student-athletes indicated that they think they would like to pursue graduate training in their field of interest. More research is needed to understand this discrepancy.

## CONCLUSION

The literature suggests that being a student-athlete, particularly at a Division I school, is a complex situation. Students report that they are developing some inter-personal skills, but it may be that they do so in a limited social environment. At the same time, they experience major time demands, such that their academic pursuits are affected. The research findings show that student-athletes have a slightly lower cumulative GPA than do other students, and that they report less academic growth than do their counterparts who are not student-athletes. Although their career aspirations include managing and training people, they are less interested in graduate degrees or additional study pertaining to a career. Our findings show that, while student-athletes seem less stressed about academics than are their counterparts, they are less likely to want to pursue additional education beyond the minimum that are needed for a job. Student-athletes identified some impediments to their academic development and reported that they are less developed in academic skills than are non-athletes.

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## APPENDIX

### DEMOGRAPHICS

The following are tables that show the demographics of Ohio State's Columbus campus for the two terms in which the surveys were offered.

#### WINTER 2012

These tables are for undergraduates only because the MSL was administered to undergraduates only, during the winter 2012 quarter.

Gender	Athletes count (n=1342)	Athletes percent	Non-athletes count (n=39,400)	Non-athletes percent
Female	693	51.6%	18526	47.0%
Male	649	48.4%	20868	53.0%
Unknown			6	.0%

Ethnicity	Athletes count (n=1342)	Athletes percent	Non-athletes count (n=39,400)	Non-athletes percent
American Indian/Alaska Native	7	.5%	219	.6%
Asian	31	2.3%	3321	8.4%
Black/African American	168	12.5%	2679	6.8%
Hispanic/Latino	34	2.5%	1189	3.0%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	5	.4%	48	.1%
Other	3	.2%	50	.1%
Undisclosed	81	6.0%	1975	5.0%
White	1013	75.5%	29919	75.9%

Honors student	Athletes count (n=1342)	Athletes percent	Non-athletes count (n=39,400)	Non-athletes percent
No	1240	92.4%	34581	87.8%
Yes	102	7.6%	4819	12.2%

Scholars	Athletes count (n=1342)	Athletes percent	Non-athletes count (n=39,400)	Non-athletes percent
No	1254	93.4%	35566	90.3%
Yes	88	6.6%	3834	9.7%

## SPRING 2012

These tables are for undergraduate students, masters students, and students studying for professional degrees because the ACHA-NCHA II was administered to students earning these degrees during the spring 2012 quarter.

Gender	Athletes count (n=1338)	Athletes percent	Non-athletes count (n=49,955)	Non-athletes percent
Female	693	51.8%	24257	48.6%
Male	645	48.2%	25683	51.4%
Unknown			15	.0%

Ethnicity	Athletes count (n=1338)	Athletes percent	Non-athletes count (n=49,955)	Non-athletes percent
American Indian/Alaska Native	7	.5%	274	.5%
Asian	33	2.5%	5056	10.1%
Black/African American	166	12.4%	3163	6.3%
Hispanic/Latino	33	2.5%	1545	3.1%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	6	.4%	58	.1%
Other	3	.2%	109	.2%
Undisclosed	80	6.0%	3625	7.3%
White	1010	75.5%	36125	72.3%

Honors	Athletes count (n=1338)	Athletes percent	Non-athletes count (n=49,955)	Non-athletes percent
No	1232	92.1%	44625	89.3%
Yes	106	7.9%	5330	10.7%

Scholars	Athletes count (n=1338)	Athletes percent	Non-athletes count (n=49,955)	Non-athletes percent
No	1251	93.5%	46096	92.3%
Yes	87	6.5%	3859	7.7%