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Sacked for Dollars: The Exploitation of College Football Players in the Southeastern Conference

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Sacked for Dollars: The Exploitation of College Football Players in the Southeastern Conference

Abstract

This study seeks to answer if academic clustering occurs in the SEC and if race and field value are significant indicators of this phenomena. The academic majors players select or are steered towards may lend credence to the claim that universities possess an avenue for fast tracking an athlete's eligibility status. At stake in college football's competitive market are complex streams of revenue ranging from television exposure and merchandise sales to increased student applications and alumni contributions. This market places enormous pressure on SEC football programs to not only keep pace with other programs within the conference, but more importantly, to increase market share by ensuring only elite athletes are recruited, signed, and developed into top performers for the conference. The on-the-field product, then, serves as a means for top programs to access lucrative revenue streams made available through college football's popularity, marketability, and merchandising. The student-athlete becomes the lynch-pin driving this multi-billion dollar industry. Therefore, we asked the following questions: 1) Are SEC football players clustered into academic majors? 2) If clustering exists, does it differ according to race? 3) If clustering exists, does field value determine which players get clustered? Our findings, in which the majority of starters and key contributors were obtained from only a few majors, support the claim that Universities possess mechanisms that reinforce the systemic foreclosure of a student-athlete's educational freedom.

Keywords

NCAA, Exploited Athletes, College Football, Clustering, Education

Introduction

Previous studies have found academic clustering—defined as the grouping of at least 25 percent of students from a specific team, race, or other category into specific majors (Case et al. 1987)—occurring at extraordinary levels among football teams in various National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) conferences (Fountain and Finley 2011, 2009; Capriccioso 2006; Schneider 2006; Steeg et al 2007; Case et al. 1987). However, the grouping of 25 percent or more of a college team into the same academic major is not limited to football; academic clustering also has been found to exist in men’s and women’s basketball, baseball, and softball (Steeg et al. 2008). Even the NCAA, the governing body of collegiate sports activities, admits that academic clustering occurs (Stark 2015). NCAA researchers analyzed Division I student-athlete majors across all sports and conferences and aggregated their findings to suggest that clustering is a natural byproduct of common academic interest and career aspirations, rather than a path of least resistance to remain eligible for sports competition. According to the NCAA, business and management fields are the most popular majors for Division I student-athletes, followed by concentrations in the social sciences and liberal arts, respectively. The NCAA study states “those top three fields of bachelor’s degrees pursued by student-athletes are also the top three most common fields chosen by the rest of the student body” (Stark 2015). While the NCAA generalizes academic clustering by aggregating all sports and collapsing majors into broad general categories, I take a more in-depth look into the nature, character and dimensions of academic clustering unexamined in previous studies.

While a few studies examined the effects of race on academic clustering, this study is the first to consider field value (star player, starter, key contributor, etc.) as an indicator of clustering, specifically as it pertains to the Southeastern Conference (SEC). I focus on college football because Division 1-A football teams generated revenues in excess of \$3.4 billion dollars in 2013, which was 61 percent of the \$5.6 billion dollars generated by all varsity sports within Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools that year (EADA 2014). I chose to analyze the SEC for two primary reasons. First, the SEC is the top revenue-producing conference in the NCAA (USA Today, 2016). For the 2013-2014 season, revenues generated by SEC football teams ranged from \$22 million to \$88 million dollars (EADA 2014). Second, because 69 percent of all SEC football players who received athletic aid from their college or university in the 2013 fall semester self-identified as black, race differentials among declared majors could be assessed across a team’s depth chart (NCAA 2015). Accordingly, this study takes seriously the idea that clustering may constitute a method of masking the exploitation of college football players by ensuring that the best possible product is placed on the field.

This study seeks to answer if academic clustering does, indeed, occur in the SEC and if race and field value are significant indicators for this phenomena. The majors players select or are steered towards may lend credence to the claim that universities possess an avenue for fast tracking an athlete’s eligibility status. At stake in college football’s competitive market are complex revenue streams ranging from television exposure and merchandise sales to increased student applications and alumni contributions.

In the case of the SEC, its self-operated cable network enjoys over 75 million subscribers which, at an average of \$1.40 per subscriber, produces over \$611 million dollars in revenue

(Trahan 2014; Travis 2014). Advertisement on the network contributes another \$70 million dollars to this total, making SEC college athletic departments among the most profitable in the country (Travis 2014). This places enormous pressure on SEC football programs to not only keep pace with other programs within the conference, but more importantly, to increase market share by ensuring only elite athletes are recruited, signed, and developed into top performers for the conference. The on-the-field product, then, serves as a means for top programs to access lucrative revenue streams made available through college football's popularity, marketability, and merchandising. The student-athlete becomes the lynchpin driving this multibillion dollar industry. Therefore, I ask the following questions: 1) Are SEC football players clustered into academic majors? 2) If clustering exists, does it differ according to race? 3) If clustering exists, does field value determine which players get clustered?

Theoretical Framework

The commercialization of college football and the pressure to field winning teams are ongoing continuums that have given birth to the exploitation and commodification of college football players. "Universities are far more concerned with exploiting the athletic talent [of student-athletes] than with nurturing academic potential" (Staurowsky and Sack 1998:104). Sports sociologist Howard Nixon (2014) conceptualized the "commercial model" of big-time college athletics as a contradiction to the NCAA's reputed "collegiate model" centered on the personal well-being of the student-athlete. The commercial model, which Nixon argues is employed by the NCAA, gives primacy to a student-athlete's athletic role over that of a student because the universities' economic well-being and status are contingent upon producing winning teams. "Winning is necessary to attract fans, funding, media exposure, and corporate sponsorship and to generate significant amounts of revenue" (2014:6). Elite athletes, consequently, represent the key to winning consistently.

Much of the financial burden for producing college revenue disproportionately falls on the backs of the young black males who dominate the rosters of the nation's most successful college football programs. Blacks were barred from competing with and against whites in the 19th and early 20th centuries until all-white universities recognized the economic benefits of including talented black athletes on their teams (Singer 2009). This propelled colleges to recruit and obtain the services of the most talented student-athletes regardless of their color. And, once on campus, many were groomed to be athletes at the expense of their student identity and, therefore, often majored in "eligibility" (Hittle 2012; Lang et al. 1988; Adler & Adler 1985). Simply put, black athletes made the games better, more electrifying, and more spectacular. In the case of football, colleges and the NCAA maximized the field value of these athletes for capital gain and now control a billion-dollar industry centered on strategies that increase branding and market share rather than educating.

McCormick and McCormick (2006; 2012) charged the NCAA with blatant exploitation of revenue-producing athletes, claiming that the term "student-athlete" evolved from the belligerent efforts of the NCAA to cloak the relationship between athletes and universities for the sake of guaranteeing "athletes receive only a sliver of the economic value their labor helps produce" (2012: 19). Exploitation is a moral and economic construct that can be measured by unpaid surplus value from the worker (Reiman 2004). While workers labor beyond the value of their wages, the worker's surplus labor produces surplus value for the capitalist who, in turn, profits from withholding payment of said surplus labor. McCormick and McCormick (2006)

contend exploitation can be applied to NCAA revenue-producing sports such as college football. Players sign a binding, non-negotiable agreement with an NCAA school in which they exchange their physical labor for an athletic scholarship and the promised path towards upward social and economic mobility via a meaningful education or, in rare cases, the National Football League (NFL). However, this binding contract empowers athletic departments with the right to renew or revoke an athlete's scholarship after each completed academic year. College football players become the commodities of NCAA member institutions for the unequal exchange of limited academic engagement and a 1.6 percent long shot at a professional football career that has an average life expectancy of only 3.5 years (NCAA 2015).

NCAA bylaws state that student-athletes may engage in only 4 hours per day and 20 hours per week of countable athletically related activities. In the 2010 NCAA Goals Study, Division I college football players reported spending an average of 43 hours a week on their sport, leaving little time and energy to devote to academics. No matter how many hours a football player spends on athletics, his compensation remains the same. The athletic departments do not pay for this surplus labor but profit, nonetheless, from having a stronger, better conditioned and more practiced player on the football field. The physical specimen often translates into more wins, increased ticket and merchandise sales, broadcasting revenue and enhanced donor support for the university.

Marx tells us, "The secret of the self-expansion of capital resolves itself into having the disposal of a definite quantity of other people's unpaid labour" (*Capital*, vol. 1: 372). The National College Players Association, in conjunction with faculty from Drexler University, calculated that the average FBS player from a top program possesses a fair market value of around \$418,000 dollars (Huma and Staurowsky 2012). After deducting benefits received, the average FBS player is owed approximately \$1.5 million dollars over the 4 years of eligibility. Athletes that labor for less successful programs or in smaller markets are owed approximately \$450,000 dollars over the 4 years of eligibility. Not only is the overtime labor unpaid; but the labor is also coerced.

Many college football players are deceived into believing that true opportunities and real life chances are enhanced through revenue-producing sports rather than education. Lacking their own access to professional football careers, players are coerced to provide unpaid labor to U.S. colleges and universities, which monopolize the path to the NFL. With no feasible alternatives to a desired NFL career, today's college football player is a "man who is compelled to sell himself of his own free will" (*Capital*, vol. 1, p. 538). He signs a contractual agreement for much less than the worth of his labor. The players' athletic labor is transferred to the university and becomes a use-value commodity consumed by fans and exchanged by universities for money and status. However, in order to ensure that a player's value is maximized and translated into field value, a player's eligibility must be assured. Therefore, our expectation views clustering as a possible method for optimizing a university's brand, ensuring the best players suit up and contribute on the field.

While past clustering studies could not definitively state whether clustering practices were negative (Fountain and Finley 2009, 2011; Steeg et al. 2008), the Goals Study provides greater insight into student athletes' attitudes about their educational opportunities. According to the 2010 NCAA Goals Study, 30 percent of Division I football players reported they enrolled in the classes they were taking primarily to stay eligible; 32 percent said athletic participation prevented them from majoring in what they really wanted; 52 percent said athletic participation prevented them from taking classes they wanted; 47 percent took classes to fit with their practice

schedule; and 43 percent were discouraged by coaches and academic advisors from choosing certain classes. This indicates that football players' athletic labor often is prioritized over their academic learning and that clustering into specific majors is a mechanism that ensures that these priorities are met. It is for these reasons that this study views clustering practices as a possible means for commodifying college football student-athletes. In addition, primacy is given to the racial dynamics that drive college football since it is the black athlete who has been traditionally used to gain a competitive advantage on the field. Accordingly, race and field value serve as key aspects in our analysis of clustering practices.

Methods

I analyzed data from 11 SEC football programs; the remaining three programs did not provide sufficient data to permit analyses. Data were compiled from team media guides, university websites, twitter accounts, blogs, and internet sporting sites for the years ranging from 2013 to 2014. These various outlets provided biographical information on players as well as statistical information including, but not limited to, yards gained, number of catches, tackles, game appearances, touchdowns, yards thrown, pass completions, interceptions, and sacks. I paid close attention to the descriptive narratives that communicated on-the-field attributes, depth chart status, declared majors and academic areas of interest. Due to the sensitivities that surround racial identification, the reliance on photographs for classification of race carries limitations. For one, racial identity is often associated with how one perceives a common heritage with a particular racial group, based more on shared cultural experiences and meanings than skin color (Yinger 1976; Helms 1993). However, as O'Hearn (1998) notes, racial identification also stems from an individual's perception and categorization of others. Thus, racial categorization is, in itself, a complex endeavor. In order to determine if race manifests as a significant indicator for clustering practices, I formed racial categories based on a subjective perceptions of others. I used surnames, photographs, and information from biographies to determine racial categories. Accordingly, Whites were coded-1, Blacks-2, Hispanics-3, Asians-4, and Others-5.

Unlike previous studies that eliminated underclassmen from its analysis, this study included all players who possessed biographies. Holding underclassmen status or simply declaring "undecided" as a major did not warrant a student-athlete's omission. The appearance of a high number of undecided majors at a university contributes to the understanding of the academic nature and character of a team. More telling, in this instance, would be the absence of diverse majors or a shortage of upperclassmen on a team. The lack of diverse majors on a team could indicate that athletes are steered into certain fields; while an absence of upperclassmen speaks to a possible trend in which student-athletes forgo college for a chance to play professional football (Bedard 2014). In both cases, education is relegated by the economic benefits accrued through athletic activities. Players without biographies were excluded from analysis.

I identified 22 majors from the 11 universities and assigned a numerical value to each major (see Table 1). These majors reflected either a specific department at a University such as Business and History, or a specific subject such as Hispanic Studies. Most schools offered specialty areas within majors; therefore, I collapsed these specialty areas into an academic major category. For example, Universities offered logistics, finance, marketing, and management as distinct specialty areas. However, each of these specialties belonged to the Business department.

Therefore, players declaring these specialties as academic majors were coded as Business majors.

The 22 majors represent fields of academic study for 1,032 student-athlete football players, of which 36 percent were identified as white, 63 percent as Black, and 1 percent as other minority (e.g., Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander). While previous research (Schneider et al 2006; Fountain and Finley 2009) focused on academic majors, individual players, and interactions between race and major type, I expanded focus to include field value. Biographies and individual statistics distinguished starters and contributors from redshirted, limited and bench players. In the case of offensive linemen, I relied on descriptive information such as “starter,” “key reserve,” “fighting for starting time,” and “anchor” as guides for categorization. Because defensive lineman possessed statistical information, I relied on starts, game appearances and productivity—in the form of tackles, sacks, forced fumbles, and fumble recoveries—as indicators to help determine starters and contributors from limited reserves. Some reserves possessed biographies with phrases such as “limited field action” or “hoping for an increased role.” For skilled positions I relied on game appearances, number of touches, interceptions, passing yards, touchdowns, and yards gained in conjunction with biographical information. Highly touted players lacking statistical numbers (such as incoming or redshirt freshmen) but described as impact players, upgrades, rare talents, or expected front runners, were coded as key contributors based on expected contribution. Accordingly, I created four categories to operationalize athletic field value and coded them as follows: starters-1, key contributors-2, limited playing time-3, and bench-4.

Table 1: *Coded Majors*

| <u>Majors</u> | <u>Coded Values</u> |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| Business | 1 |
| Consumer Science | 2 |
| Undecided | 3 |
| General Health | 4 |
| Economics | 5 |
| Engineering | 6 |
| Education and Human Development | 7 |
| Sociology | 8 |
| Human Sciences | 9 |
| Kinesiology | 10 |
| Communication | 11 |
| Artistry | 12 |
| Biology | 13 |
| Interdisciplinary Studies | 14 |
| Environmental Science | 15 |
| Political Science | 16 |
| Agricultural Leadership | 17 |
| General Studies | 18 |
| Journalism | 19 |
| Accounting | 20 |
| Hispanic Studies | 21 |
| History | 22 |

Results

Table 2 reports the results for the clustering of athletes by major and university. Among each university, the top three majors were assessed to determine if the threshold of 25 percent was satisfied. Of the 11 athletic programs observed, 7 football programs possessed clusters of student-athletes into specific majors at a rate higher than 25 percent. Thus, our findings show that clustering occurs in the Southeastern Conference. However, more telling than the 25 percent threshold are the aggregates of the top three majors. Assessing the top three majors allowed us to determine if clustering practices created a dense population of student-athletes in few academic concentrations

Table 2 illustrates that all 11 universities possessed aggregate clusters of at least 60 percent of their student-athletes into three academic majors. Five of these universities showed clusters of more than 70 percent, while two programs developed clusters of more than 80 percent of its players in three areas. At University 4 and 8, one-third of all players held undeclared majors. More strikingly, half of the players at University 11 had not declared a major.

To determine if these findings were consistent with the general student population, I compared the student-athlete major aggregates to bachelor degrees conferred by each of the universities (see Appendix Table 1A) and found that, on average, student-athletes' concentration in their respective majors occurred at nearly a 200 percent higher rate than the general student body. I, then, compared the student-athlete aggregates to bachelor degrees conferred from the top three majors of the general student population at each university (see Appendix Table 2A) and found that, on average, student-athletes playing football in the SEC clustered at a rate 60 percent higher than the rate of the general student body. STEM fields consistently emerged as one of the top three majors for the general student population, yet these fields hardly registered as concentrations among the student-athletes playing football in the Southeastern Conference (USDE, 2015).

Table 2: *Clustering by Major*

| <u>University</u> | <u>Total (N)</u> | <u>Major</u> | <u>(N)</u> | <u>% of Athletes in Major</u> |
|-------------------|------------------|---------------|------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | 71 | Agriculture | 17 | 24% |
| | | Kinesiology | 14 | 20% |
| | | Business | 14 | 20% |
| 2 | 99 | Business | 28 | 28% |
| | | Sport Mngmt. | 19 | 19% |
| | | Communication | 13 | 13% |
| 3 | 88 | Business | 25 | 28% |
| | | Poli-Science | 19 | 22% |
| | | Kinesiology | 13 | 15% |
| 4 | 94 | Agriculture | 34 | 36% |
| | | Undecided | 33 | 35% |
| | | Kinesiology | 9 | 10% |
| 5 | 77 | Undecided | 21 | 27% |

| | | | | |
|---|----|--------------|----|-----|
| | | Business | 17 | 22% |
| | | Interdiscip. | 10 | 13% |
| 6 | 88 | Business | 29 | 33% |
| | | Undecided | 24 | 27% |
| | | Sociology | 10 | 11% |
| 7 | 86 | Interdiscip. | 22 | 26% |
| | | Business | 17 | 20% |
| | | Kinesiology | 14 | 16% |

Table 2: *Clustering by Major (Continued)*

| <u>University</u> | <u>Total (N)</u> | <u>Major</u> | <u>(N)</u> | <u>% of Athletes in Major</u> |
|-------------------|------------------|--------------|------------|-------------------------------|
| 8 | 96 | Undecided | 32 | 33% |
| | | Business | 22 | 23% |
| | | Agriculture | 11 | 12% |
| 9 | 106 | Business | 25 | 24% |
| | | Undecided | 20 | 19% |
| | | Sport Mngmt. | 15 | 14% |
| 10 | 118 | Sport Admin. | 41 | 35% |
| | | Business | 25 | 21% |
| | | Interdiscip. | 17 | 14% |
| 11 | 99 | Undecided | 50 | 50% |
| | | Human Sci. | 23 | 23% |
| | | Interdiscip. | 7 | 7% |

Note: Human Sciences entails nutrition and wellness studies. Table 2 represents the top three majors among players at each of the 11 universities.

Table 3 reports differentials among the racial populations of each university during the 2013-2014 season. Clustering differed according to race. On average, white student-athletes playing football in the SEC selected or clustered into business majors at a 50 percent higher rate than black student-athletes playing football in the Southeastern Conference. In extreme cases, as found in University 5, white players were eight times more likely to major in or become clustered into business fields than their black counterparts. Likewise, Kinesiology represented a major in which white student-athletes clustered at a higher rate than black student-athletes. Our findings show white student-athletes were 33 percent more likely to hold Kinesiology as a concentration than black student-athletes.

Conversely, I found two majors in which black student-athletes clustered heavily, Agriculture and Interdisciplinary Studies. Black student-athletes were 125 percent more likely to major in, or become clustered into, Interdisciplinary Studies than white student-athletes. In the case of Agriculture, black student-athletes held this concentration at a 60 percent higher rate than whites. University 4, for example, shows that black athletes are four times more likely to be clustered into Agriculture than their white teammates, while Universities 10 and 11 reveal a glaring disparity between whites and black student-athletes majoring in, or placed into,

Interdisciplinary Studies. All told, other than the undeclared majors, University 6 was the only university possessing clusters of both black and white student-athletes in the same major.

Table 3: *Clustering Descriptives by Race*

| <u>University</u> | <u>Major</u> | <u>% of all White Players</u> | <u>% of all Black Players</u> |
|-------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | Business | 29% | 15% |
| | Kinesiology | 29% | 15% |
| | Agriculture | 8% | 32% |
| 2 | Business | 47% | 13% |
| | Sport Mngmt. | 24% | 15% |
| | Communication | 4% | 21% |
| 3 | Business | 43% | 21% |
| | Kinesiology | 24% | 19% |
| | Poli-Science | 7% | 29% |
| 4 | Agriculture | 12% | 52% |
| | Undecided | 41% | 29% |
| | Kinesiology | 18% | 5% |
| 5 | Business | 59% | 7% |
| | Undecided | 5% | 36% |
| | Interdiscip. | 9% | 15% |
| 6 | Undecided | 23% | 32% |
| | Business | 42% | 32% |
| | Sociology | --- | 18% |
| 7 | Interdiscip. | 16% | 31% |
| | Business | 24% | 18% |
| | Kinesiology | 29% | --- |
| 8 | Undecided | 49% | 14% |
| | Business | 13% | 35% |
| | Agriculture | 11% | 12% |
| 9 | Business | 38% | 14% |
| | Undecided | 24% | 15% |
| | Sport Mngmt. | 9% | 17% |
| 10 | Sport Admin. | 22% | 43% |
| | Business | 31% | 15% |
| | Interdiscip. | --- | 20% |
| 11 | Undecided | 46% | 51% |
| | Human Sci. | 22% | 23% |
| | Interdiscip. | --- | 8% |

Note: (---) indicates $N > 0$ but not sufficient enough to register meaningful percentage.

Table 4 reports the distribution among starters and contributors within the top three majors across each of the university teams. The findings suggest that the top three majors were consistently comprised of starters and key contributors. Thus, these majors serve as the pool from which starters and contributors were drawn from or placed into during their college careers. As Table 4 describes, all 11 universities drew at least half of their starters and contributors from the top three majors. Five universities obtained at least 70 percent of their starters and contributors from three majors, with two of these Universities claiming more than 80% of their key players from three concentrations. In the case of University 10, nearly 100 percent of all key players majored in Sports Administration, Business, or Interdisciplinary Studies.

Business, Agriculture, and Interdisciplinary Studies consistently appeared as majors that not only differentiated by race, but also by field value. Six of the 11 universities obtained their on-the-field- talent from these majors. University 1 drew more than half of its most valuable players from Agriculture and Business, while University 8 acquired 60 percent of its vital players from these areas. Likewise, players majoring in Interdisciplinary Studies and Business comprised about 40 percent of the key players at Universities 5 and 7. In some instances, a specific major provided the majority of the players who contributed on game day. For example, University 4 pulled nearly 60 percent of its key players from Agriculture, while University 6 obtained more than 40 percent of its starters from Business. One unexpected finding revealed that whites majoring in Business did not make up an equal portion of starters and contributors.

Although white student-athletes clustered into business at significantly higher rates than black student-athletes, the majority of starters and contributors pulled from the business field were, in fact, black. For example, Table 2 shows that whites from University 2 were nearly four times more likely to cluster into Business than black student-athletes. However, findings from this same school show that black student-athletes majoring in Business were 10 percent more likely to either start or hold key backup roles than their white teammates (see Appendix Table 3A). Likewise, white Business majors at University 5 were eight times more likely than their black teammates to hold business related concentrations. Yet, both black and white student-athletes holding a Business major at this university were equally represented on the field.

Table 4: *Clustering Descriptives by Field Value*

| <u>University</u> | <u>Major</u> | <u>% of Starters & Contributors</u> |
|-------------------|---------------|---|
| 1 | Business | 12% |
| | Kinesiology | 26% |
| | Agriculture | 41% |
| 2 | Business | 36% |
| | Sport Mngmt. | 13% |
| | Communication | 13% |
| 3 | Business | 17% |
| | Kinesiology | 14% |
| | Poli-Science | 39% |

Continued

Table 4: *Clustering Descriptives by Field Value (Continued)*

| <u>University</u> | <u>Major</u> | <u>% of Starters & Contributors</u> |
|-------------------|--------------|---|
| 4 | Agriculture | 58% |
| | Undecided | 6% |
| | Kinesiology | 14% |
| 5 | Business | 21% |
| | Undecided | 18% |
| | Interdiscip. | 18% |
| 6 | Undecided | 21% |
| | Business | 42% |
| | Sociology | 21% |
| 7 | Interdiscip. | 29% |
| | Business | 12% |
| | Kinesiology | 12% |
| 8 | Undecided | --- |
| | Business | 35% |
| | Agriculture | 25% |
| 9 | Business | 24% |
| | Undecided | 14% |
| | Sport Mngmt. | 16% |
| 10 | Sport Admin. | 62% |
| | Business | 16% |
| | Interdiscip. | 19% |
| 11 | Undecided | 14% |
| | Human Sci. | 38% |
| | Interdiscip. | 16% |

Note: (---) indicates $N > 0$ but not sufficient enough to register meaningful percentage.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our core findings indicate that college football players clustered into specific academic majors associated with race and field value in the Southeastern Conference. Notably, the dissimilar distributions among the racial populations of each university have implications for career options for most student-athletes who never play football beyond college. Indeed, college academic programs are designed to develop the necessary skills that not only help individuals enter the labor market, but also empower them with specialized abilities. Thus, big-time college football, as in the SEC, may be interfering with the life opportunities of their student-athletes.

Increasingly, players are lured into top programs by the promise of playing time rather than an education. A 2014 *Sport Illustrated* report emphasized the growing problem already plaguing collegiate basketball in which players use college as a showcase for their athletic abilities rather than a means for a quality education. The article states, “College football programs are now taking a page from their basketball counterparts. They’re telling top prospects that they can get them out in three years and using the promise of playing time as freshmen as the biggest selling point” (Bedard, 2014). College football players in the SEC, particularly black players, possess little alternatives outside of football. Clustering keeps players eligible, keeps the talent on the field, and maximizes the potential for optimal financial gain. Every touchdown, every sack, every victory, comes at the expense of learning for these big time athletes. Indeed, mechanisms like clustering satisfy the desire to play early, bypass the rigors of college studies, and fulfill the NCAA’s 40-60-80 rule¹.

Prized recruits and star players are encouraged to take the easiest path to eligibility in order to maximize the on-the-field product and garner the socialized rewards most student-athletes enjoy through their athletic identity (Steege et al., 2008). Typically, the ramifications of such choices are not felt until many years after college football careers have ended. As student-athletes return to world that no longer views them as gladiators or heroes, and with deficient skill sets required for upward economic and social mobility, these former players are left reminiscing about their past, what they once meant, and what they could have been. Only recently, have these student-athletes fought back against a system that robs them of the possibilities of becoming more than a pass catcher, run blocker, or edge rusher. As case in point, a recent law suit filed by former student-athletes claims that the NCAA and a number of Universities have violated their promise of an education in order to profit from student-athletes’ physical abilities. Besides the NCAA, the lawsuit cites examples of academic fraud from the University of North Carolina, Berkeley, Michigan State University, University of Georgia, Syracuse, Auburn University, Florida State University, and the University of Michigan (Ganim 2015). In each case, student-athletes claim they were deprived of majoring in their desired fields, restricted from spending quality time on their studies, rewarded grades without fulfilling any work requirements, or funneled into specific majors. Each phenomenon, however, occurred in order to ensure eligibility. Our findings, in which the majority of starters and key contributors are obtained from only a few majors supports the claim that Universities possess mechanisms that reinforce the systemic foreclosure of a student-athlete’s educational freedom.

The promise of an education seems sacrificed at the altar of unscrupulous capitalism. No longer are the guarantees of a quality education, a college degree, and the nurturing of skills essential for career success sufficient recruiting tools to attract top talent. Rather, student-athletes have become conditioned to think playing time first and academic studies second. Meanwhile, college recruiters, coaches, alumni, and faculty have exploited these youthful desires for personal and institutional gains. Colleges have reaped the capital rewards at the expense of the student-athlete playing big time college football.

Certainly, further work is needed to elaborate these issues. For example, in-depth interviews of current and former players, administrative personnel, faculty and coaches could provide intimate details on what types of relationships exist, if any, between athletic programs and specific academic fields. Yet, the egregious clustering levels reflect the shady practices of

¹ The 40-60-80 rule demands that student-athletes complete 40% of the required course work towards a degree by the end of their second year, 60% by the end of their third year, and 80% by the end of their fourth (NCAA 2015).

college football. Simply, the billions of dollars at stake for the University system as well as for the NCAA, creates an environment detrimental to the student-athlete's academic aspirations. Therefore, some recommendations are provided.

Recommendations

There is no question that universities reap tremendous economic benefits from the labor of football players who work twice as many hours as the NCAA-mandated maximum without receiving extra compensation above the contracted amount in the form of tuition and room and board. But, there is more at play than the unfair financial exchange. Academic clustering is exploitive because many of the young men who play college football enter college unprepared for college level academics and have little choice but to major in eligibility and hope for an NFL career that can only be accessed via college football. With no other route to the professional ranks, high school bluechips become complicit actors in signing over their athletic labor for much less than market value before they graduate from high school due to the lack of alternatives. They "willingly" oblige to work overtime with no compensation, and the NCAA chooses to look the other way on its own findings. Race, class and unequal schooling have limited the life opportunities of black players and made them more vulnerable to exploitation and commodification than their white teammates, who are steered away from developing lofty athletic aspirations by parents and coaches (Harrison et al. 2007).

I am not advocating the elimination of college athletics but I do recommend that the NCAA, universities, athletic programs, coaches, faculty and parents take greater measures to ensure the long-term well-being of student-athletes. The NCAA is obligated "to integrate intercollegiate athletics into higher education so that the educational experience of the student-athlete is paramount" (NCAA Strategic Plan 2004:3). It's imperative that NCAA scrutinize the practice of breaking the 20-hour week rule so that players who need additional academic support can devote more time to their academic studies and be engaged with the general student body. Following the rules should be expected and enforced. Universities, football programs and coaches must be more committed to the academic success of their players and assess how clustering impacts post-career transitions. I also recommend that colleges and universities partner with local high schools to instill the importance of academic excellence to parents and their children who play sports. Unfortunately, black male football players receive mixed messages about who they are, what they should value, what they should aspire to, and what responsibilities they hold as student-athletes. Parents must construct the value of education early in their children's lives in the same way they prepare them for a possible athletic career. Youth football coaches, high school coaches and college coaches must recognize and acknowledge the role they play in the exploitation of revenue-producing student-athletes. They are part of the system and, therefore, part of the solution

APPENDIX 1A: Bachelors Conferred by SEC Schools in 2013-2014 Academic Year

| <u>University</u> | <u>Total Degrees Conferred</u> | <u>Major</u> | <u>N</u> | <u>% of Bachelors Conferred</u> |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|----------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | 3998 | Business | 616 | 15% |
| | | Kinesiology | 0 | 0% |
| | | Agriculture | 290 | 7% |
| 2 | 6609 | Business | 1438 | 22% |
| | | Sport Mngmt. | 186 | 3% |
| | | Communication | 673 | 10% |
| 3 | 4485 | Business | 874 | 20% |
| | | Kinesiology | 80 | 2% |
| | | Poli-Science | 117 | 3% |
| 4 | 9847 | Agriculture | 1017 | 10% |
| | | Undecided | --- | --- |
| | | Kinesiology | 432 | 4% |
| 5 | 3396 | Business | 789 | 23% |
| | | Undecided | --- | --- |
| | | Interdiscip. | 0 | 0% |
| 6 | 4928 | Undecided | --- | --- |
| | | Business | 1270 | 26% |
| | | Sociology | 66 | 1% |
| 7 | 4410 | Interdiscip. | 22 | .01% |
| | | Business | 824 | 19% |
| | | Kinesiology | 271 | 6% |
| 8 | 5769 | Undecided | --- | --- |
| | | Business | 884 | 15% |
| | | Agriculture | 274 | 5% |
| 9 | 3906 | Business | 773 | 20% |
| | | Undecided | --- | --- |
| | | Sport Mngmt. | 217 | 6% |
| 10 | 4692 | Sport Admin. | 170 | 4% |
| | | Business | 958 | 20% |
| | | Interdiscip. | 259 | 6% |
| 11 | 3225 | Undecided | --- | --- |
| | | Human Sci. | 53 | 2% |
| | | Interdiscip. | 176 | 6% |

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2015)

Note: (---) indicates $N > 0$ but not sufficient enough to register meaningful percentage.

Appendix 2A: Bachelors Conferred by Top Majors in SEC, Academic Year 2013-2014

| <u>University</u> | <u>Total (N) Degrees Conferred</u> | <u>Major</u> | <u>N</u> | <u>% of Athletes in Major</u> |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|----------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | 3998 | Business | 616 | 15% |
| | | Education | 437 | 11% |
| | | Engineering | 385 | 10% |
| 2 | 6609 | Business | 1438 | 22% |
| | | Soc.Science | 615 | 9% |
| | | Communication | 673 | 10% |
| 3 | 4485 | Business | 874 | 20% |
| | | Engineering | 734 | 16% |
| | | Biology | 419 | 9% |
| 4 | 9847 | Agriculture | 1017 | 10% |
| | | Business | 1649 | 17% |
| | | Engineering | 1480 | 15% |
| 5 | 3396 | Business | 789 | 23% |
| | | Health | 603 | 18% |
| | | Education | 261 | 8% |
| 6 | 4928 | Biology | 568 | 12% |
| | | Business | 1270 | 26% |
| | | Soc.Science | 393 | 8% |
| 7 | 4410 | Engineering | 464 | 11% |
| | | Business | 824 | 15% |
| | | Psychology | 375 | 9% |
| 8 | 5769 | Communication | 766 | 13% |
| | | Business | 884 | 15% |
| | | Health | 664 | 12% |
| 9 | 3906 | Business | 773 | 20% |
| | | Engineering | 375 | 10% |
| | | Health | 315 | 8% |
| 10 | 4692 | Engineering | 551 | 12% |
| | | Business | 958 | 20% |
| | | Education | 497 | 11% |
| 11 | 3225 | Engineering | 419 | 13% |
| | | Business | 609 | 19% |
| | | Education | 587 | 18% |

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2015)

Appendix 3A: Clustering Descriptives by Business Major, Race, and Field Value for Universities 2 and 8

| <u>University</u> | <u>Major</u> | <u>N</u> | <u>White Starters or Contributors</u> | <u>Black Starters or Contributors</u> |
|-------------------|--------------|----------|---|---|
| 2 | Business | 11 | 5 | 6 |
| 8 | Business | 9 | 4 | 4 |

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