

# The Relationship Between Athletics and Student Life at St. Olaf College

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## **Abstract**

Collegiate student athletes have a unique experience that differs from non-athlete students. Research on this subject is quite contradictory, showing that students' participation in collegiate sports have varied impacts on their college experience. Our research examines the effects of the participation in varsity athletics on student life at St. Olaf College. To investigate this relationship our research team conducted 31 interviews with members of the 27 varsity sports on campus, focusing on three aspects on student life: academics, social networks, and community service. Through our analysis of interviews, the research team quickly found that there were clear and consistent responses generalizable to the St. Olaf student athlete body. Most athletes did not see their competition schedule as an infringement on class time. In addressing social support networks, athletes stated that they would mostly interact with teammates during the season. When explaining their involvement in community service, athletes found that participation was rarely due to team requirements, but rather individual involvement. Although there existed a degree of similarities, there were also significant differences among responses. The athletic season encouraged academic success for some students but was a burden for others. Some students are more involved in extracurricular activities and participate more in community service than others. We speculate that the vast spectrum of effects is caused by the dynamic nature of St. Olaf college sports and suggest focusing on a single sport for future research.

## **Setting**

It is important to distinguish between St. Olaf College and other collegiate institutions that provide athletic programs. St. Olaf is a small, private four-year liberal arts college, in Northfield, Minnesota, a small town forty-five minutes away from Twin Cities Metro Area. Often referred to as "The Hill," St. Olaf is a residential campus with 29 student residences and 10 athletic facilities. It has a population of 3,156 students, with students from 47 different states and 49 different countries. The college "focuses on what is ultimately worthwhile and fosters the development of the whole person in mind, body, and spirit," as set forth by the mission statement. (<http://www.stolaf.edu/about/mission.html>).

More than one-third of students are involved in several musical endeavors at St. Olaf, which include: eight choirs, two orchestras, and two bands of the highest quality and dozens of

smaller ensembles from Japanese Taiko drumming to jazz to lyric opera. Outside of music, there are approximately 190 student organizations, which range from political, volunteer, and multicultural clubs to religious groups and club sports teams. At St. Olaf there are 14 men's teams and 13 women's teams which make up the 27 varsity athletic teams on campus. All of the 27 teams participate in NCAA Division III intercollegiate sports. All of the teams compete within the MIAC conference, excluding men's and women's alpine racing and nordic skiing, and men's wrestling. (<http://www.stolaf.edu/about/StOlafProfile.pdf#zoom=100>)

## **Methods**

We sought to interview 40 student athletes at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. From the 27 varsity athletic teams on campus, two team members were selected from each team to contact. These athletes were chosen at random and assigned to one of the four interviewers. Whenever possible, one captain and one general team member were selected from each varsity team, regardless of class year. In the end, we conducted a total of 31 interviews. Interviewees were selected from every Men's and Women's varsity sport at St. Olaf College. Men's sports at St. Olaf include: Alpine Skiing, Baseball, Basketball, Cross Country, Football, Golf, Hockey, Nordic Skiing, Soccer, Swimming and Diving, Tennis, Track and Field, Wrestling. Varsity female athletic teams at Olaf have many of the same options as men except that Softball replaces Baseball, and St. Olaf has a Women's Volleyball team in place of Men's Wrestling. Athletes who were chosen to participate in our study were contacted by the research team via email. Uniform emails were sent to their school accounts, which prompted potential participants to provide three dates of interview availability. Students varied in their responsiveness and in

their willingness to participate. Some members of the research team personalized their approach to obtaining interviews. Following emails, they confronted interviewees in person to receive responses. Interviews ranged from 10 to 45 minutes in length and responses varied in the degree of intimacy provided. Some were audio recorded, while others were directly transcribed into electronic documents. Interviews were also held in a variety of locations on campus. Participants' names were in no way recorded or connected to their responses for safety and security purposes. As the interviewing process progressed, questions evolved in accordance with the student athlete's responses. We pursued questions that supported common themes arising from previous interviews and reformed those that were unclear or unhelpful.

## **Problem Statement**

Collegiate athletics play a momentous role on many college campuses. The excessive funding of sports teams at large Division I research universities and other changes pertaining to collegiate athletics have long been the source of discussion. Our research examines the effects of the participation in varsity athletics on student life at St. Olaf College. Findings are based on three components which address the various aspects of student life. The first component is academics and how it is affected by involvement in athletics. The second component of our findings is social life and social networks. The last component is how community service plays a role on student life while being on an athletics team.

## **Literature Review**

### *Happiness*

Most student athletes manage a complex collegiate career full of stress, strains, and exceptional demands (Denny and Steiner 2009: 55). With such high demands, it becomes difficult to recognize where happiness is found in the lives of athletes. Past studies have shown that internal factors such as “locus of control, mindfulness, self-restraint, and self-esteem contribute more to happiness than external measures of success such as playing time and overall athletic achievement” (Denny and Steiner 2009: 55).

Other studies assess the happiness of student athletes based on their opinion of their college experience. Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) show that most Division I athletes are satisfied with their participation in collegiate sports, although they often have to miss out on other aspects of college life (both curricular and co-curricular). When asked about their involvement in sports, many athletes reported that they value “athletic participation and believe that it both instills values independent of those derived from other aspects of college life and enhances particular skills and their overall college experience” (2). Within this study, the general positive assessment held true for different cohorts of student athletes; male/female; African American/White; individual/team sports, however this claim has been contradicted across scholarly research.

### ***High Profile vs. Low Profile Athletes***

In collegiate athletics, there is an obvious divide between the sports that attract a significant amount of attention and those that do not. Gayles and Hu refer to these as “high profile sports and low profile sports” (2009: 317). Studies have shown that athletes’ level of student engagement, such as extracurricular involvement (student organizations and service activities), participation in academic related activities, and interaction with other students vary

depending on the sport they play. Gayles and Hu (2009) used the *Social and Group Experiences Scale*, a sub-scale of the Basic Academic Skills Study, to measure a variety of college student experiences. Their results revealed that there are considerable to moderate differences in the experiences of high profile athletes versus low profile athletes stating, “compared to student athletes in low profile sports, those in high profile sports had lower levels of interaction with students other than teammates, and had lower levels of scores on the measure of cultural attitudes and values” (323). Regarding athletes’ involvement in academic activities, there is also an apparent difference between high and low profile sports. Activities such as “writing papers and completing reading assignments had a smaller effect on reported gains in learning and communication skills for athletes in high profile sports compared to athletes in low profile sports” (329). Gayles and Hu infer that further research is needed to examine the kinds of academic activities that lead to positive gains in this area for high profile athletes (329). Moreover, research illustrates that there is an obvious difference of student engagement in other collegiate activities outside of athletics depending on the profile of their sport.

### ***Extracurricular Involvement***

Collegiate student athletes often undergo public criticism regarding their participation in college life outside of athletics (Gayles and Hu 2009: 315). Time is a huge concern when participating in athletics at the collegiate level. Many student athletes find it difficult to engage in other academic or extracurricular activities. A survey of student athletes’ experiences on college campuses reported that “football players at Division I institutions spend well over 40 hours per week on athletic related activities” (Wolverton 2008:page). The vast amount of time dedicated to a sole activity could be detrimental to student’s overall college experience. According to a

study done by Astin, student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is one of the most important factors in personal development and student learning. This finding reflects Astin's theory that students learn from being involved. Nonetheless, students who become intensely involved in athletic activities show smaller than average increases in political liberalism, religious apostasy, and artistic interests.

Gayles and Hu (2009) examined four areas of student engagement in their study on the influence of student engagement in the lives of student athletes. These areas included: 1) interaction with students other than teammates; 2) interaction with faculty; 3) participation in student groups, organizations, and other service activities; 4) and participation in academic related activities. It was found that of the four engagement measures, student athletes most commonly interacted with students other than teammates. Overall, Gayles and Hu concluded that "engagement has positive and significant impacts of a set of college outcomes for student athletes, suggesting that college students can benefit from increased college engagement in ways similar to the general student population" (329). While there is a stigma, which holds strong to the time student athletes spend engaged in athletic activities, research shows that there are positive effects that come from student involvement in athletics.

College athletes have been characterized as being isolated from the rest of the student population. However, studies have shown that isolation is not necessarily always the case. Of the four engagement measures used by Gayles and Hu, student athletes most frequently interacted with students other than teammates. The authors' conclusion contradicts public assumptions that intercollegiate athletes create a separate subculture on campus. Alexander Astin's development theory illustrates the positives of student involvement in athletics. He

reports, “Participation in sports, particularly intercollegiate sports, has an especially pronounced, positive effect on persistence” (523).

Looking at the relationship between athletic participation and community service, Marks and Jones (2004) focused on the change of involvement in service activity throughout the transition from high school to college. The study mostly considers schools that would more likely have trends of community service participation (like private schools, urban schools, and schools in the Northeast and Midwest). Researchers inferred that there is a positive correlation between participation in community service and athletics because both require leadership skills. The study finds that the likelihood of attending graduate school and volunteering increases dramatically for athletes who participate in community service at college. According to the above research, students who participate in a fraternity, sorority, or on a team are likely to both begin and continue volunteering in a collegiate setting, whereas they are unlikely to discontinue service.

### ***Academic Performance***

The relationship between academic performance and athletics participation has been an assiduous topic amongst critics. Research on this relationship has not only proven divergent in approach and focus, but also dissonant in its findings. Considering the academic performance of male student athletes at multiple Canadian Universities, McTeer (1987) found that athletes take longer to graduate, but on average perform academically as well as non-athletes when GPAs are measured (McTeer 1987). In accordance with McTeer, a study on the graduation rates of 252 Division I universities, found that athletes graduate from college at higher rate than non-athlete students (Rishe 2003). Research that *does* find a positive correlation between athletics and

academics, links academic success to the extra tutoring, more attention, and special ‘breaks’ athletes receive because of their schedules and status (Rishe 2003, Adler & Adler 1985, McTeer 1987).

In opposition to McTeer and Rishe’s research, most studies focused on the negative relationship between athletics and academic success. Adler and Adler (1985) defined the negative relationship as a process that develops slowly throughout an athlete’s college experience. Initially, students hold high academic expectations for themselves, as they chose demanding majors and classes despite warnings from upperclassmen and coaches. One student reported, “You come in, you want to make money. How do you make money? You go into business. How do you go into business? You major in business, and you end up having to take these business courses, and you really don’t think about it” (Adler & Adler 1985: 243). However, after their sport is professionalized, student athletes recognize the lack of time they have to study and watch their grades plummet. They grow to dislike their academic experience, and embrace the media and social status, part of the professionalization process. After the beginning of their college experience, athletes receive no further reinforcement or encouragement to perform academically. As Adler and Adler write, “Athletes progress through a pattern of experiences, which first raises their hopes and then diminishes their opportunities for attaining the professed goals of the educational system” (Adler & Adler 1985: 249). Furthermore, a study at Ivy League and Liberal Arts colleges found that when athletes are heavily recruited, the academic performance of the entire university decreases as athletes tend to dominate the bottom third of a graduating class (Bowen & Levin).

In examining the effect of athletic participation on academic success, Maloney and McKormic (1992) considered the GPAs of nearly 280,000 undergraduate students at Clemson

University in the late 1980s. The authors coin the term “the In-Season Effect,” a phenomenon that student athletes, playing revenue sports, on average do not perform as well as student athletes involved in non-revenue sports (Maloney & McKormic 1992). Also student athletes who have “well defined seasons” have a higher rate of academic success than those who do not, especially in the off season (Maloney & McKormic 1992).

In their article, Sellers et al. included race and gender as important variables in their research on the negative relationship between athletics and academics. Looking at 39 predominantly white Division 1 universities, they consider the experiences of African-American male and female students and White female students. As Sellers et al. states, “African-American athletes participate in revenue-producing sports...at a rate that is greatly disproportionate to their population on campus...” (Sellers et al. 1997: 786). The study found female African-American athletes earn lower grades than their White counterparts, but significantly higher grades than African-American male student athletes (Sellers et al. 1997). In accordance with this study, Rishe (2003) illustrated that women tend to be better prepared academically, are more successful academically, and face less pressure to perform athletically than men.

## **Findings**

### *Academics*

When investigating the relationship between athletics and academics, we found that there was a significant amount of variety between the athletic teams. To avoid discomfort, questions about academic performance were more focused on satisfaction. Also, to address a concern within the research group regarding the range of time commitment for different teams, we asked

about absences and hours per week of study. One of the most prominent responses dealt with both the alpine and nordic skiing teams. The ski teams compete at a national level and miss a week of class for the competition. They also miss a day per week during their season for other competitions. Softball and baseball players often have to miss classes due to weather related delays or canceled games, which may occur at unexpected times. Cancelled and rescheduled games force athletes to be extremely flexible, eliminating the opportunity to plan ahead for other commitments and causing an extreme strain on academic preparation. The experiences St. Olaf softball and baseball players are consistent with Maloney & McKormic's "In-Season Effect," which notes that student athletes who have "well defined seasons" have a higher rate of academic success than those who do not.

Student athletes who felt that they missed many classes due to sporting activities reported a negative effect on their academic standing in some courses. Additionally, one team member of the Men's Soccer team stated that he had missed three consecutive classes due to games and travel, which affected his overall academic performance in the classes he missed. The same soccer player also stated that he must tailor his academic schedule to fit around games and practices. Almost all other athletic teams seemed to miss one or two classes a semester and did not find this to be problematic. As one female basketball player states, "I would probably miss one or two classes a semester anyways, so it doesn't affect me."

In addition to missing classes for competitive events, student athletes are forced to spend a significant amount of time every week at required and individual practices. Time management becomes a crucial skill during the season, as days become heavily scheduled and time is limited. Many St. Olaf student athletes thrive academically in these conditions. A wrestler reports, "I actually get better grades when I wrestle. I think it has something to do with my

mindset and focus.” A male track and field runner states, “The track team is academically strong...being around more studious people helps me perform better academically.” However, this sentiment is not the same for all student athletes. A male soccer player felt that although he is usually more academically successful during the season, it is easy to fall behind. As he states, “I have no time to ever catch up with anything. I either have to take care of my work, or else I’m screwed.” A female alpine skier reports, “I do better during second semester than during the season...I just don’t have time.” Athletics’ effects on academic experiences differ from student to student. While for some, the athletic season better schedules the day and encourages academic success, for others, the lack of time increases stress levels and provokes academic decline.

Another aspect that is a part of a student’s academic life at St. Olaf College is the great opportunities to partake in a study abroad program. Some students do an Interim program, a semester, or even yearlong program. However, some athletes found studying abroad incredibly difficult due to time constraints or season conflicts. Another aspect that affects students’ ability to study abroad is their level of commitment for each team. Players that face great difficulty in studying abroad are mostly participate in the winter sports, as their season spans from November to March. Some of the particular teams that were mentioned to fit this category were the Men’s and Women’s Hockey teams. Students from these two teams reported that being on an athletic team has affected their decision to not partake in a study abroad program.

### ***Community Service***

Through interviews with student athletes, it became apparent that there was little priority placed upon athletic teams to participate in community service at St. Olaf. For teams that did

participate, a coach or specific teammate, as opposed to the St. Olaf Athletics Department, was necessary to prompt team participation in the community events. Even then, initiatives were often an afterthought whenever time would allow. The Athletic Department at St. Olaf did host an all-varsity event with Feed My Starving Children earlier in the school year, but no did not follow through with any other programs or events. However, there were cases of some teams coaching or hosting games on a regular basis. Several teams were active in hosting camps and coaching through the Northfield Public School system. Those exceptions tend to be sporadic but some participation included: Men's Soccer (hosted games and volunteered at Feed My Starving Children), Alpine Skiing (coached Northfield Alpine Team and helped with some events in Minneapolis/St. Paul), Football (Helped at Feed my Starving Children, Hosts Camps for kids in Northfield, and Relay For Life), Women's Hockey (very active in Relay for Life and visit Long Term Care facilities), Men's Hockey (volunteered with Feed My Starving Children and coach Northfield Hockey Twice a Week) Nordic Ski Team (help occasionally at the Northfield High School with technique) Softball (participates in Feed My Starving Children and hosts camps in Shakopee). More often than not, community service activities served a dual function such as fundraising for the general team budget or training trips. Additionally, most athletes commented that they were proud to wear their team apparel in the Northfield community and events because they felt they had the community's support.

There is an important distinction to be made between team and individual community service. While teams tended to see community service as an occasional supplement to their season, there were some individual team members that participated actively on an on-going, regular basis. Often time individuals who were very present in the community tended to be on a pre-med track or other organization that required participation. Generally those who were

heavily active in community service did so as a part of another requirement. An inference can be made here that due to a lack of time for outside events, for team members to engage in community service, it must be seen as a requirement. Many student athletes expressed some remorse in missing out on community service, but felt they needed to spend time outside of athletics on academics or social life.

### ***Social Life & Social Support Networks***

Social life is also an important part of the student athlete life at St. Olaf College. Athletics often create a unique social support network for student athletes unlike other student organizations or groups that exist on college campuses. This social support is seen in most athletic teams because of how teams bond during preseason, in-season, and post season. Team bonds are considered to be one of the most valuable aspects of being on an athletic team. During the fall season, sports teams have the opportunity to foster their social networks. Student athletes arrive at campus one month before all other students to focus and train on their sport. This allows first-year students to meet teammates quickly, giving them time to make friends across grades and create friendships that are long lasting. Many student athletes report that this was incredibly helpful during their freshman year. While conducting interviews, one question sparked an multiplicity of responses, unique to the student athlete perspective at St. Olaf College. The question, “What is the place of athletics in the St. Olaf Community?” created a stir amongst interviewees. Their responses examined the position that the Music Department holds at St. Olaf. Most student athletes’ interviews suggested that St. Olaf places a much higher priority on music. One male golfer stated, “Student athletes that do not partake in Hockey, Basketball or Football are not perceived as being student athletes.” It was evident that some

students feel that as athletes at St. Olaf they are less appreciated than those involved in the music program. As a baseball player added, "Once you are considered an athlete or a 'Baseball guy' you are lumped into this group that has a generally negative reputation at St. Olaf." If one athlete is perceived as a "jerk," it then reflects poorly on the entire team and sport. There is less of a negative attitude on campus about students who participate in music. Many athletes also believe that the music department is not only overly supported by the student body but by the administration as well. There was a general perception that the administration chooses to put music as a priority, while under supporting the athletic programs.

Another area that is important to student athletes and social support is the time they spend working out and doing extra work for their sport. Most athletes report that they did very few individual workouts, as they preferred to do the extra work with their teammates. Many athletes also state that because of time constraints, it becomes difficult to plan extra workouts before or after practice. Only a few individuals report doing workouts that were different from required team practices. Two cross country runners say they work out for two hours on top of practices and the basketball player mentioned doing two hour shooting drills.

In college another part of social life is partying and dances. Most athletes did not mention going to Pause dances because their upper classmen teammates do not partake in these weekend activities. On the contrary, many athletes mentioned that they attended events at the Eagle, the Grand, or the Legion, all of which are dance halls in Northfield. There are some athletes that state attending these events or not attending is usually based on personal preference rather than their athletic involvement. Women's Basketball, Men's Soccer, and Women's Soccer all reported attending these events as a team. In contrast, some teams, including Women's Hockey and Women's Alpine Skiing, said that they were unable to attend these dances

because of games or meets during the weekends. These student athletes mentioned that their athletic involvement had a great impact on their social life. They were unable to attend such events, perceived as an integral part of the college experience, due to their athletic seasons. All other student athletes did not attend these types of dances because of disinterest or the prevalence of alcohol consumption seen before and during these dances.

Other aspects that were part of the social support networks and social life section focused on participation in other extracurricular activities and student work. Most student athletes stated that they were not involved in other types of organizations. The general lack of participation in additional organizations resulted in a dialogue about the contrast between the “Over-Achiever” vs. “Strictly Athlete.” One Women’s Soccer player mentioned being involved in many organizations spanning from Special Olympics, Inter-Hall Council, to the Hall Council of her dormitory. Her vast participation was an extreme contrast to other athletes who did not feel they had the time or desire necessary to be involved in other activities. Some student athletes also felt that because of the time they spend practicing and playing that they do not have sufficient time for other organizations. In terms of work, there was great variety in the amount that student athletes worked on top of their studies and athletics. Some students have work through their athletic networks, which include working in Skoglund and Tostrud, the athletic centers at St. Olaf College. Those jobs include refereeing intramural matches and weight room assistant. In contrast, there were student athletes that reported having student work at various locations such as, the Rolvaag Library Circulation Desk, the Sophomore Leadership Institute, the Tudors, and being Resident Assistants. These jobs also reflect the amount of time that students may dedicate to having a well-rounded student experience at a liberal arts college.

## **Potential Uses for Research**

The research conducted on the relationship between athletics and student life at St. Olaf College is applicable in many ways to exploring student life at college (particularly a Division III institution). The topic of athletics and the effects they have on student athletes is becoming a much more important topic as the job market becomes more competitive. A recently prevalent research topic includes how athletics assist student athletes in their future endeavors, such as career placement. The research conducted at St. Olaf applies to how athletics play a part in a Division III setting. Especially at liberal arts institutions, our research reveals the value of the experiences and perspectives of student athletes. Most research on student athletes focuses on large Division I research universities. Our research gives insight on the role of athletics at a small, religiously affiliated Division III liberal arts college, but is applicable to other schools as well.

As a religiously affiliated liberal arts college, it was astounding to see how little involvement there was in community service among the athletic community. Another use for potential research would be to investigate why community service does not hold a more substantial role in St. Olaf athletics or at other religiously affiliated institutions. It would be interesting to see how this paradigm between the lack of community service in athletics at St. Olaf came to be. Research could compare the definition and role of “community” at various institutions, specifically aiming to examine the differences between Divisions I,II, and III.

## **Research Limitations/Further Research**

As we moved through the research done by others on our study, there were obvious inconsistencies within our findings. While conducting interviews, we also found discrepancy among the responses of student athletes, including discrepancies within and among teams. The variance in questions asked and settings of interviews may have played a significant role in the diversity of responses received from interviewees. The range in interview length may have also added to the vast array of responses, as longer interviews allowed researchers to find more areas of congruence across interviews. Unfortunately, because of time constraints, we were only able to interview approximately two members from each team, so we were unable to obtain as clear of a picture of the lives of student athletes as we had hoped, due to how dynamic the teams are. Along with the inconsistencies we came across, this proved to be limiting to our research which led us to acknowledge that there is a need for further research to be done in this field.

In order to attain a more holistic view on the lives of student athletes participating in collegiate sports, specifically at St. Olaf college, we feel that there a need for further research as well as more specific details or variables observed. The divergence amongst athletes led us to believe that looking at specific variables such as race and gender would give us a more concrete perspective of individual students. The variety in responses of those on different teams, illustrates that a comparison between individual sports and team sports would eliminate some of the discrepancy. In an attempt to gain a more holistic view of the athletic atmosphere, we believe interviewing coaches and athletic directors would prove beneficial. We believe the further research recommended can assist in obtaining an all-inclusive assessment of the role that intercollegiate varsity athletics has on student life.

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