Reimagining the Role of Intercollegiate Sports in Higher Education

Introduction
The goal of this paper is to help reimagine the role of intercollegiate sports in higher education and to identify options for enhancing and extracting the relatively untapped educational value of participation in college sports. For decades, there has been a disconnect between the learning valued in the athletic realm and the learning valued in the classroom. Meaningful education occurs during athletic participation, but this form of education often gets overlooked, unused and uncredited and is overshadowed by the explosive commercialization of big-time college sports.

There are many different learning styles, varied ways to effectively measure and test knowledge, and opportunities to teach and learn inside and outside the traditional academic classroom. Higher education has increasingly recognized the value of individualized and innovative education through experiential learning, clinical education, composition studies, performing arts, and many other academic fields, but the academy remains resistant to including intercollegiate athletics under this educational umbrella. Part of the resistance may stem from a history of academic abuses related to athletics, but the faults of the past should not serve to prevent the search for future solutions that can better integrate education and college athletics.

This paper proposes a model for using intercollegiate athletic participation as a vehicle for—and not an obstacle to—higher education. We advocate for creating rigorous, formalized, and structured academic programs centered on the athletic participation in sports by the athletes themselves. Although there are a number of different possible models that can use athletics participation as a pedagogical centerpiece, this paper focuses on two related ideas: first, providing academic credit for athletic performance, much like academic credit is awarded for music or theater performance; second, creating a course of study centered on the literacy embedded in sports through plays and other sports “texts.” In addition to aligning athletics with the educational mission of universities, elevating the educational components of athletic participation can help solidify the distinction between college and professional sports, a distinction that is at the heart of ongoing legal attacks to the intercollegiate model of sports.
Early History of Intercollegiate Athletics as Part of Higher Education

It is helpful to examine the origins of intercollegiate sports to understand the role athletics can play in higher education. The ancient Greeks first recognized athletic participation as a key aspect of a true education. More recently, the benefits of intercollegiate athletics participation have become well-established. Among other things, athletic participation can improve educational engagement and graduation rates, self-esteem and improved character development, life and time-management skills, rate of growth and cognitive development, and enhanced marketability upon graduation.12

These benefits helped popularize sports on college campuses, and despite the fact that college sports quickly grew into a commercialized product, early on it “maintained an aura of respectability because it was supervised by trained experts who regularly proclaimed that sport was pedagogical in nature and pure in conduct.”3 Progressive era psychologists and social scientists claimed football could teach young men physical, moral, mental and social discipline and could educate spectators.4 As early as 1869, a representative of Amherst College observed that the school “intended physical culture to become part of the curriculum, just like Latin, Greek, or mathematics,”5 marking one of the first instances when physical activity was given equal weight to traditional academic subjects.

Additionally, football coaches “often employed the rhetoric of science and pedagogy,” and several football coaches, including Walter Camp, the “father of American football,” published didactic football manuals with diagrams of plays designed to educate both players and fans about the complexities of the sport and to emphasize the sport’s pedagogical potential. Similarly, Amos Alonzo Stagg, the football coach at the University of Chicago, published the “Scientific and Practical Treatise on American Football for Schools and Colleges.”7 Through these writings, athletic coaches “started to claim a quasi-disciplinary university space by arguing that they were athletic experts and educators, not agents of popular culture or mere entertainers.”8 Football was also used as a direct vehicle to educate fans. Among other notable examples, uniform numbers were added to the backs of football jerseys to help fans “watch in a disciplined manner that would help them better enjoy [and] understand...football. In this way, spectator sport could be universally accessible and educational, teaching ethical self-control to all of society—not just developing a few bodies or providing entertainment for the masses.”9

Nevertheless, college sports became commercialized quickly and the tension between athletics and higher education followed. Here is a sampling of the criticisms of the disconnect between college athletics and education from the end of the 19th century until today:

• Charles Eliot, Harvard University President, 1893: “With athletics considered as an end in themselves, pursued either for pecuniary profit or popular applause, a college or university has nothing to do. Neither is it an appropriate function for a college or university to provide periodical entertainment during term-time for multitudes of people who are not students.”10

Among other things, athletic participation can improve educational engagement and graduation rates, self-esteem and improved character development, life and time-management skills, rate of growth and cognitive development, and enhanced marketability upon graduation.
THE PEDAGOGICAL VALUE OF ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE SHOULD BE MORE CLOSELY STUDIED so that a meaningful and legitimate academic course of study centered on athletic performance can be constructed.
performance can be constructed. This section outlines two possible paths for universities to center education on intercollegiate athletics.

**Academic Credit for Athletic Participation**

The first path is for universities to provide academic credit for college athletics, just as music students receive academic credit for learning to play their instrument, practicing, and performing in the school symphony.24 This approach would treat intercollegiate sports—like music, dance, theater, and other performing arts—as rigorous academic disciplines centered on performance and would enhance the legitimacy of athletics as an educational endeavor. Although this approach would require a significant shift in how universities view the educational value of athletic performance (and would require additional education-focused training for coaches), such shifts have occurred as the breadth of serious academic disciplines has expanded exponentially from traditional subjects to performative, professional, and technical fields. As one researcher has put it, "we might consider asking, why, for instance, is it beneficial capital for a student to read sheet music, but not beneficial for a student to read Xs and Os?25

Providing academic credit for athletic participation is consistent with Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which “emphasizes the crucial role experience plays in the learning process.”26 The pedagogical model of ELT begins with a concrete experience (e.g., playing football), then moves to reflective observation and abstract evaluation (e.g., reviewing game film and learning from the experience) and ends with active experimentation (e.g. practicing new skills and techniques or using them during a game). More broadly, ELT demonstrates that knowledge, skills, experience, and education can be obtained outside of a the traditional academic or classroom setting. The growing recognition of the value of ELT has led to an explosion in experiential learning (and credit-bearing) opportunities for students through externships and internships, clinic-based work, and service learning.27

The educational value of experiential learning through sports participation can be enhanced by pairing the play, reflection, and experimentation with a traditional educational component. For example, while a music major pairs the experience of musical training with music theory, composition, and music history, the sports major can pair the experience of strength training with exercise physiology, kinesiology, and sports history. In both cases, the combination of experiential learning, reflection, traditional classroom experience and coursework, and holistic development can provide a well-rounded and meaningful education. This course description for a “Jazz Improvisation” class at MIT highlights the overlap between music and sports performance—among other things, both require tryouts, extensive practice and reflection/review, performance, and collaboration—and is illustrative of the type of class that could be created around athletic participation:

_In this course, students study concepts and practice techniques of improvisation in solo and ensemble contexts. The course examines relationships between improvisation, composition, and performance based in traditional and experimental approaches. Hands-on music making will be complemented by discussion_
of the aesthetics of improvisation. Weekly lab sessions support work on musical technique. Guest artist / lecturers will engage students through mini-residencies in jazz with film, Indian music, electronic music, and blending improvisation with classic music; and an accompanying concert series will feature these artists in performance. Open by audition to instrumental or vocal performers.28

Writing and Literacy Through College Sports

Another related path for integrating education with athletic participation is to examine the form of literacy required to utilize scripted plays in basketball and football. There is untapped pedagogical value in asking how these scripted plays are created, written, communicated, learned, and executed, and how these plays can be used to provide educational opportunities through intercollegiate athletics. Put more simply, universities can extract meaningful educational value from athletic participation by asking: “How do college athletes engage with the text (the scripted plays) of their sport?”29

Although researchers have paid very little attention to the pedagogical possibilities embedded in sports plays, the emerging cognitive science field of “embodied learning” (or “embodied cognition”) which examines how the body and the environment are related to cognitive processes,30 provides a helpful platform for exploration of these possibilities. Embodied learning views physical activity as “fundamental to learning, knowing and reasoning” and examines the “role of physical movement in conceptual learning.”31 Researchers in this field have emphasized the failure of higher education to integrate the learning embodied in physical activity into the classroom. This failure has contributed to the unfair dismissal or undervaluation of the learning and studying required to play college sports and the education embedded in athletic participation.

A promising embodied learning approach for converting athletic participation into a rigorous and meaningful field of academic study has been introduced by Dr. Michael Rifenberg, whose research begins with the premise that college football and basketball players “operate in a space marked by constant engagement with text,”32 and that college athletes can and do learn through their athletic participation.

The educational value of scripted plays in college athletics can be illuminated by focusing on a few key points about these scripted plays. These points can also help create a pedagogical roadmap to provide a sustainable connection between athletics and education. First, scripted sports plays are “multimodal texts, dialectically constructed, historically situated, and anticipative of competitive bodily enactment.”33 Second, execution of scripted plays in athletics often requires a complex, rapid, and secret transmission of the play from one medium (the scripted play itself) through a series of other mediums (e.g., hand signals, verbal cues, signs with pictures and text, etc.) before it is received and understood by the athletes34. Third, some football playbooks contain more than 400 individually-labeled, intricate, and complex plays. Fourth, the majority of the “action” in a football game is the deliberation, distribution, transmission, and comprehension of text (i.e., deciding and calling plays), while the significant minority of the game is the embodiment of the text (i.e., executing the plays).
Universities can better incorporate education within college athletics. If we better understand how college athletes currently engage with, write, study, understand, and perform text during practices, film study, and games. Or, perhaps more accurately, a better understanding of the literacy involved in college athletics can help us better understand the education that is already incorporated within college athletics and allow universities to recognize, formalize, and enhance that education and transfer it to other fields of study. For example, Dr. Rifenburg notes that metacognition helps writers develop “the ability to perceive the very steps by which success occurs [by helping them in] discerning the structure of a draft; delineating patterns of error; or discriminating between what is necessary in a draft and what in the end serves little purpose.” According to Dr. Rifenburg, this same metacognitive educational process can operate as a powerful teaching tool in college sports if we simply substitute the word “draft” with “play.” This reframed examination of the use of text in college sports can help leverage the largely overlooked literacy skills of college athletes used in sports to a broader set of literacy skills outside of sports.

Once again, the field of music provides a framework that can be adapted to formalize education through athletic performance. There are clear parallels between improvisational jazz and athletics, as described by musician and author James Lincoln Collier:

The process of improvising has some very interesting analogies to sports. Both the improvising jazz musician and the athlete must train intensely to build up sets of conditioned reflexes that enable them to respond without thinking to events that are unfolding around them in fractions of seconds. A quarterback usually has no more than three or four seconds to check his receivers, decide which one to throw to, if any, and get the ball off; a batter has about a second, or less, to decide what to do about an oncoming baseball. Similarly, the jazz musician must frequently deal with chord changes coming along as fast as one a second. Like the athlete, he must deal with them now. There is no tomorrow, no rehearsing.... Today...professional jazz musicians have studied their instruments formally, can read well, and have a good grasp of music theory. Thus, when inspiration flags or the ear fails, they can fall back on their knowledge of chords, scales, modes, and the like for notes to play.

Despite these parallels and the overlapping educational opportunities between jazz and athletics, jazz and other forms of music performance are fertile ground for formalized academic study, while intercollegiate athletics performance remains bifurcated from higher education.

**Maintaining Academic Integrity**

Big-time college sports are uniquely vulnerable to academic integrity issues because of the pressure to keep athletes academically eligible, either through clustering them in “soft” majors or boosting their grades through academic fraud or cheating. There have been several high-profile academic scandals involving college athletics, and sports-centric majors have often been accused of lacking academic rigor. One potential concern with this paper’s proposal to provide academic credit for athletic participation may be that it will exacerbate any real or perceived issues with academic integrity and rigor. Although academic integrity may always be a concern, there are a number of ways to address and minimize these risks.
First, a process can be created to provide specialized accreditation for sports-performance based courses, faculty, curricula, and programs. For example, the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) was created to provide external verification of the quality of sport management programs. A similar entity can be created to ensure that sports-participation based education is sufficiently rigorous and includes appropriate levels of each element of the generally accepted standards of academic rigor: "critical thinking, challenge, mastering complex material, and producing credible work in a way that is time and labor intensive." 

Second, these programs should be managed and supervised like other academic units on campus, maintain independence from the athletic department, and should taught by instructors or professors who have the same hiring, promotion, and tenure standards as other academic units.

Third, identifying and enhancing the pedagogical value of athletic participation and treating it as a serious academic discipline—taught by trained academicians—will help alleviate some of the skepticism about the integrity of athletic-performance based courses.

Fourth, coaches should receive additional training and education to allow them to contribute to (and learn from) the educational value of athletics.

The incentive to compromise academic standards in exchange for athletic success in big-time sports may always exist, but recognizing and extracting the educational value from athletic participation gives athletics a better opportunity to enhance a college athlete's education. Academicians encourage musicians to major in music. Athletes could be encouraged to major in athletics if we can find a way to transform athletic participation into a serious field of academic study.

**Conclusion**

Any approach to integrating education with intercollegiate athletics should start with an exploration of the educational opportunities already embedded in athletic performance. There is an opportunity for universities to engage on an academic level with athletics like they do with music, theatre, and the performing arts. College sports can provide a vehicle for individualized, innovative, experiential and traditional classroom learning. Recognizing, extracting, and enhancing the educational value of sports can be an important step towards transforming college sports into a key pillar—rather than an obstacle—of higher education.

**About the Author**

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These pedagogical models can supplement bigger picture proposals that would, for example, alter shared athletics revenue distribution to better align college athletics with the broad educational mission of NCAA Division I sports. See Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics “Connecting Athletics Revenue with the Educational Mosel of College Sports.” https://www.knightcommission.org/2021/09/knight-commission-releases-new-report-in-its-transforming-the-d-i-model-series/

See, e.g., Weight, E., Navarro, K., Huffman, L. & Smith-Ryan, A. (2014). Holistic Education through Athletics: Health and Health-Literacy of Intercollegiate Athletes and Active Undergraduate Students. Journal of Higher Education Athletics & Innovation, 1(1), 38-60. “Demonstrative of this, some corporations specifically seek to hire former athletes because of the skills they practice through sport including goal-setting, competition, leadership, and team-building (Chalfin, et al., 2015; Gould & Carson, 2008).”

Ingrassia, Brian M. The Rise of Gridiron University (CultureAmerica) (pp. 3-4). University Press of Kansas, (noting “that intercollegiate football was maintained and reformed in the early 1900s because many university professors and administrators, as well as writers and politicians, saw it as a cultural ritual that, besides training young men in the strenuous ways of modern life, would publicize universities and disseminate prevailing ideas about the body and social order”).


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There have been many instances of questionable academic rigor, but one of the more notable ones was a physical education course taught by an assistant basketball coach at the University of Georgia. Students were graded, in part, through multiple-choice test questions that included, “how many points does a three-point goal account for in a basketball game?” Clotfelter, Charles T. Big-Time Sports in American Universities (pp. 60-61). Cambridge University Press.

As discussed above, one notable exception is the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, who have introduced proposals to better align college athletics with education.

There has been no shortage of commentary on big-time college sports, but most of this commentary focuses on college sports itself, not the role of college sports as part of higher education. As Professor Clotfelter notes, most of the commentary about college sports indicates that “college sports stands on its own as a topic worth studying, but the activity has little to do with the other things universities do.” Clotfelter, Charles T. Big-Time Sports in American Universities (pp. 60-61). Cambridge University Press.


Id.

For example, former NCAA president Myles Brand proposed an “Integrated View” of college athletics that would provide academic credit for students who participate in athletics just as it is for students who participate in music, dance, or dramatic arts.


Id.


Rifenburg, The Embodied Playbook.

Id.

Id.

Id.
