

Why student athletes continue to fail

By Daniel Oppenheimer

Seventy-four college underclassmen have been declared eligible for the NFL's upcoming draft, but Ohio State's quarterback Cardale Jones won't be among them. A few days after winning the national championship game in January, Jones shocked fans and football analysts by saying he wasn't ready to go pro, that it was important for him to graduate from college first. What made the announcement all the more surprising, beyond the fact that Jones may never again be as desirable an NFL prospect as he is the year he won a national championship, was that his previous claim to fame was a notorious tweet posted two years ago in which he complained about the "college" part of being a college football player. He wrote that he'd gone to Ohio State to play football, not "to play school," and that classes were pointless.

Jones now regrets and disavows that tweet. Earlier this month, he was tweeting that nothing is more important than education, under the hashtag "StudentBeforeAthlete." It's hard to know how sincere his attitude adjustment has been, or how sincere his initial dismissal of academics was. What is clear is that Jones and his conversion represent a messaging coup for his university and for the NCAA, which has maintained for decades that its primary goal is to help scholar-athletes receive an education that would prepare them for life beyond sports.

Despite the NCAA's insistence that it is concerned about student athletes' academic growth, it often feels as though "student" plays second fiddle to "athlete." Indeed, on a typical day, a visitor to the NCAA homepage will be overwhelmed by the articles (and videos) about athletics but will not find a single article (or video) about the academic

achievements of the athletes.

This also seems to hold true for many of the NCAA's member schools. The University of North Carolina and Syracuse are just two of the most recent universities to be under the spotlight for academic scandals involving student athletes. UNC offered a "no show" class for student athletes (where students received grades for phantom classes that they didn't attend), and Syracuse allowed academically ineligible athletes to compete. And while these cases are the ones currently grabbing headlines, they are hardly unique; the "Chronicles of Higher Education" is reporting that 20 additional schools are being investigated for academic fraud.

And what about the student athletes themselves? Student-athletes tend to take easier classes and get lower grades than non-athletes. This is not only true for schools from power conferences in big-money sports, it has been observed in Division III liberal arts colleges and Ivy League schools, neither of which even offer athletic scholarships.

It's tempting to believe that student athletes care only about their sport, and not about their schoolwork, as many popular commentators have suggested – and as Ohio State's Jones once tweeted – except that in the dozen years that I've been teaching in university settings, that hasn't been my experience at all. I've taught hundreds of Division 1 student athletes at several different schools, and they have been among the hardest working students I've encountered. The student athletes I've worked with have viewed their sport as a complement to, not a replacement for, their studies.

My observations were hardly unique. One of my students, Josh Levine, ran a youth hockey clinic and was upset by the widespread perception that the students he worked with did not care about school. After several conversations about the issue, we decided that the only way to find out the truth was to run a study. And so we did, surveying 147 student athletes

(including some still in high school) involved in various team sports from football and basketball to lacrosse and golf about how much both they and their teammates cared about sports and academics.”

Here’s what we found: When student athletes were asked how much they care about athletics, they rated their interest a healthy 8.5 on average, on a scale of 1 to 10. But when asked the value they place on academics, the result was higher than 9 on average. If anything, the average student athlete cares *more* about his studies than his sport. #StudentBeforeAthlete indeed.

So why do they underperform in their classes?

One possible and intriguing reason suggested by our study is that student athletes don’t think their teammates take academics as seriously as they do. When asked to assess how much their teammates cared about athletics, the athletes were close, guessing 8.8. However, when asked to evaluate how much their teammates cared about academics, those same athletes guessed only 7.8 – far below the 9+ average.

Why is this important? Because when an athlete thinks that the rest of the team doesn’t care about academics, that athlete tries to fit in by pretending not to care either. In a perverse form of peer pressure, Cardale Jones’s tweet about classes being worthless may be what student athletes tell each other in an effort to fit in, based on the mistaken belief that if they care about academics, they are in an uncool minority.

All of this creates a distressing and self-perpetuating cycle. Tight-knit student athletes will seek ways of fitting into a culture that they perceive as neglecting academics (by defaulting into majors of dubious merit and spending less time doing homework), knowing that their habits are observed by teammates. When their teammates observe those habits, it

reaffirms the (false) conviction that caring about academics is an unfortunate aberration, best suppressed.

One of my co-authors on this project, Sara Etchison, has described this process particularly well: “There are student athletes who want to excel in the classroom, but think their teammates would judge them for it, so they study a little less, or take an easier major. And it turns out, that’s how virtually everyone on the team feels, but there’s never an opportunity to realize, ‘Oh wait, all of us really care about what’s happening on the academic side.’”

This is a phenomenon that psychologists call “pluralistic ignorance” – when private preferences differ from perceptions of group norms. It leads people to engage in public behaviors that align more with the perceived norms than with their true preferences. The tragedy is that the norms are false – in reality, everybody would be happier if they just behaved in line with their true preferences.

Pluralistic ignorance has also been shown to underlie the phenomenon of binge drinking on campuses. A study conducted at Princeton University revealed that a majority of students who drink excessively did so not because they wanted to, but because they felt that was what their friends wanted to do. Once they all had a more accurate assessment of what the group norm was, the amount of alcohol consumed declined.

This suggests that helping student athletes do better in the classroom may be as simple as letting them know that their teammates care as much about academics as they do. Many of them care deeply about the education they are receiving, and should care, because financial success in professional sports will elude the vast majority of them.

As the NCAA and the media focus more attention on athletes’ academic performance, one of the best ways to improve the education of student athletes is to give them license to

pursue their academic goals by making it clear that their teammates, and society as a whole, support them in their academic endeavors. For this to happen, we will need many more stars like Cardale Jones speaking out about the importance of education, instead of tweeting about the pointlessness of going to class.

Daniel Oppenheimer is a professor of psychology and marketing at the Anderson School of Management at UCLA. He is the author of over 30 peer-reviewed journals, and several books, including Democracy Despite Itself: Why a System that Shouldn't Work at All Works so Well. In addition to numerous awards for his teaching and research, he won the 2006 Ig Nobel science humor award. He wrote this for Zocalo Public Square.