Factors Affecting the Retention of NCAA Athletes

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Finance/Economics - Economics (College Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Session: Economics/Amateur Sport

Abstract 2021-106 Mode: Synchronous
Friday June 4, 2021, 11:20 AM - 11:40 AM

The National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) monopoly power has long provided it with control over the supply of labor and products in the college athletic marketplace (Kahn, 2007; Tollison, 2012). Long described as a cartel by economists, the NCAA’s enforcement of amateurism has been shown to exploit athletes, as elite performers have been found to generate revenues well in excess of the costs associated with their education (Brown, 1993; Brown & Jewel,, 2006; Eckard, 2010). As such, scholars have provided significant attention to exploitation, ranging from describing its existence within the power-dynamics of the NCAA cartel (Kahn, 2006), as well as in estimating the amount of rent that is extracted by the NCAA and member institutions (Harris, 2015; Roush & Johnson, 2018). However, one aspect of the enterprise that has not been widely considered is the turnover of athletes within this system, and the negative impacts that the monopoly can have on worker longevity. For example, during his 11 years as the head men’s basketball coach at the University of Kentucky, John Calipari has established a reputation for yearly roster turnover, with at least six players having left the program each of the last five years (Hale, 2020). Though some of these early departures left for the NBA and other professional opportunities, the sheer volume of turnover within this program demonstrates that athletes are often considered as expendable within this market (Cobb, 2020). Against this backdrop, the current research advances the examination of athletes, as workers within the monopolistic NCAA system, by analyzing their dropout rates and the factors that contribute to their attrition.

In order to examine the rate of college athlete turnover, this study utilizes data gathered from seven athletic departments competing in one of the Power Five conferences. Power Five institutions constitute a setting where significant emphasis is placed on revenue generation, brand exposure, and other important business functions (Grant, Leadley, & Zygmont, 2013; Marburger, 2015). In total, data was gathered on 8,012 athletes who were listed as members of athletic teams for the seven schools within the sample, including their gender (3,660 female, 4,352 male), country of origin, sport(s) played, as well as athletic and academic (All-American) achievements. From this, a survival analysis was first conducted by calculating Kaplan-Meier survival estimates to consider the rates at which athletes left their teams. Overall, the findings suggest a general “drop out” rate of about 25% a year for athletes, indicating that a majority of athletes were no longer with their teams within two years of joining a Power-Five program. Finally, Cox Proportional Hazard models were estimated to consider whether the rate of leaving programs was related to any specific demographic factors. The main results suggest that while academic and athletic achievement did not impact the rate of leaving, gender did have a significant impact. Specifically, the hazard rate for female athletes was negative, suggesting they were more likely to stay with their teams than their male counterparts.