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Student Athlete Retention and Performance in Agriculture: An Analysis of a Mentorship Program

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Student Athlete Retention and Performance in Agriculture: An Analysis of a Mentorship Program

By

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Abstract

This qualitative research study focuses on the effectiveness of the athletic academic mentoring and advising program at Stephen F. Austin State University and its potential to replicate a similar program in the agriculture program. With emphasis on increasing the effectiveness of the current mentoring program, increasing student retention in agriculture, and improving the transition for high school students going into college, this study utilizes a questionnaire comprised of seven questions to determine how 14 former and current student-athletes that were enrolled in agriculture felt about the mentoring program and agriculture department. Many of the challenges faced by students, such as the high school transition and performing academically could be prevented or reduced if the students have a mentor that has already completed college or are further along in their degree than the students' they mentor. This study details the positives and negative aspects to the athletic academic mentoring program and the Department of Agriculture based on the results of the questionnaire sent to the student-athletes who were involved in both of them. The mentoring program and suggested implementation of a mentoring program to the agriculture department will improve students' academic performance, coping strategies, social awareness and retention. The completion of the study proved that former and current student-athletes that were enrolled in agriculture courses, felt that the athletic academic mentoring program helped them transition into college and perform well in many of their courses.

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Introduction

Background of the Problem

The transition from high school to college can difficult for many students and this transition period for athletes is even more strenuous. Learning how to balance class attendance, attending practice and having only the evening time to focus on studies can cause student-athletes to sink quickly into the realm of disheartenment. The same can be said for non-athlete students enrolled in Agriculture courses. Adjusting from high school course loads on to Agriculture courses with all the labs that it entails can be overwhelming. Time management skills that may not be fully developed can cause the lengthy class days to wear down on a student if they do not prioritize and organize their days out for studying, projects or homework.

At Stephen F. Austin State University, there is a solution to keep these student-athletes from stepping off the proverbial cliff; athletic academic advising and mentoring. It is a program on the campus that pairs freshman and junior college transfer athletes with a mentor when they first arrive on campus. The program is designed to pair an experienced mentor with these athletes, who meet weekly, to go over anything they are experiencing in their college transition that could be a cause of issues. Discussions between mentors and students include their sport, academics, on-campus involvement and personal life struggles; the well-being of the transitioning student-athlete is to be of utmost priority to the mentor during their weekly meeting. Mentors are chosen according

to their relative experience dealing with, or being around student-athletes, as well as their level of success through their personal college transition.

Stating the Problem

The problem to be addressed by this study is the lack of a mentoring and advising program in the Department of Agriculture at Stephen F. Austin State University.

The Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the athlete academic advising and mentoring program at the Stephen F. Austin State University in the Athletic Academic Center by means of a mentee questionnaire to determine its potential to increase student retention rates in the Department of Agriculture and to examine its effects on the personal adjustment of student-athletes in their first year college transition. The following two research questions will be examined in this study.

1. Does the athlete advising and mentoring program produce an increase in student retention of pursuing an Agriculture degree?
2. Does the athlete mentoring and advising program produce a positive shift in the athlete's' personal adjustment during the college transition period?

Significance of the Research

The research that this study will generate will be beneficial in several ways but most importantly in two specific manners. The first benefit of this research being that it should confirm that the Athlete Mentoring Program at Stephen F. Austin State University is an effective and efficient program that assists athletes in improving their grades and personal satisfaction at the university. The second benefit of this research will be the

potential of implementing a similar program in the Stephen F. Austin State University College of Forestry and Agriculture that will be equally as successful as the current program in place for athletes. The program should help improve students' grades and contentment with the Agricultural program, which, in theory, will improve student retention rates within the Department of Agriculture.

The review of literature will cover student mentoring, specific department mentoring, student well-being whilst being enrolled in college coursework, student personal development that may come as a result of mentoring programs and the difficult transition from high school academics to collegiate level academics as well as many other areas relating to the early college years for students.

Literature Review

Introduction

There have been many theories on how mentoring should be approached to improve performance and retention in high school and college students. Although the literature covers a variety of such theories, this review will focus on four major themes that are relevant to the research that is to be conducted. The four themes include: Transitioning from High School to College, Retention and Performance of Agriculture Majors, Retention and Academic Performance of Student-Athletes, and Mentoring Impacts. Although the literature presents these themes in a variety of contexts, this paper will primarily focus on their application to improving our current mentoring program and potentially creating a new program in the Department of Agriculture at Stephen F. Austin State University.

Transitioning from High School to College

The transition from high school to college is often what causes many students to struggle in their first year of college. This section of the literature review covers how the previous programs have attempted to identify the main problems with this transition and how they have assisted students through these issues.

Gayles and Baker (2015) examined the challenges for first year college student-athletes transitioning from high school into higher education. The authors describe the expectations and realities of the student-athlete experience at both the high school and college level. Using the existing body of literature on the student-athlete experience of

college transition, Gayles and Baker find that student-athletes represent a special population of college students that experience adjustment and adaptation challenges like their non-athlete peers. They face challenges balancing participation in college sport with academic responsibilities and social life.

Hurd, Tan and Loeb (2016) investigated associations between mentoring relationships and academic performance via psychological distress among underrepresented college student attending an elite predominantly white institution. They examined 336 first-year undergraduate students and found that a greater number of retained mentoring relationships across the first year of college were associated with improvement in students' GPA's via reductions in symptoms of depression from the Fall to Spring semester. Their study suggests that institutional efforts to support the maintenance of preexisting mentoring relationships may be an effective approach to promoting the academic success of underrepresented college students during the first year of college. To assist with the first-year students' transition they found that high school mentors may continue to be of importance as the student traverse their first year of college.

Bjornsen and Dinkel (2017) examined the transition experiences of Division I college student-athletes from the perspective of coaching staff. Fourteen coaches participated in interviews that revealed four major themes: Current practices, preparation for transition, transferable skills and resources needed for a successful transition. Their findings support the notion that the transition from high school to college school and sport is often a particularly complex process for student-athletes. They found that this

complexity stems from their focus on sport and the constraints that athletic involvement places on their time for development outside of their sport.

Radcliffe and Bos (2011) review mentoring approaches to create a college-going culture for at-risk secondary level students. Using the existing body of literature, it was found that many adolescents may not be adequately prepared for postsecondary education. The research collected from the authors' seven year study suggest that improvements in students' college perceptions, state mandated test scores, and high school perseverance may be associated with mentor-led initiatives including college visits, goal setting, tutoring, career investigations, role model presentations, writing projects, and presentations about college preparation and life.

Harris, Altekruse, and Engels (2003) explored how to help freshman student athletes adjust to college life using psychoeducational groups. 77 freshman student athletes representing multiples sports are placed into groups designed to help adjust to their first semester of college. Using the written feedback from their research, the authors founds that the student athletes enjoyed the group experience and were helped to adjust to the college environment. The students felt that the groups assisted to relieve stress and strongly recommended that the groups be conducted for the next year of incoming freshman student athletes.

Edwards (2010) examined the student-athletes' transition experience from high school to the community college environment as well as addressing the role of a head coach in the student-athletes' transition process and elements perceived by freshman student-athletes as contributing factors during transition. Edwards demographic for the

study was of seven sophomore student-athletes that indicated factors to a successful transition being the role of the head coach, athletic directors, administrators, transition programs and parental involvement. The study found that the head coach was the most integral part of a student-athlete's successful transition due to the head coach's role as a leader, disciplinarian, and teacher.

Downey (2005) explored the adjustment processes of freshmen student-athletes and non-athlete students. Using a basis of 78 student-athletes and 174 non-athlete students, the researcher evaluated the differences between the two groups and found that during the first semester, student-athletes were less committed to earning their degrees than their non-athlete counterparts.

Pelosi (2014) explored the design and implementation of a first year adjustment and development program for NCAA division I student-athletes in a university setting. The program was provided to eight first year, out of season, student athletes to provide participants with knowledge, skills, and abilities to facilitate the transition from high school academics and athletics to those of the college level. Through the research, Pelosi found that the program participants found it personally beneficial in areas of academic, athletic, and personal functioning.

Lubker and Etzel (2007) examined college adjustment experiences of first year students that pertained to disengaged athletes, non-athletes, and current varsity athletes. The authors acknowledge freshman year as a stressful time of social and academic adjustment where students face many social and intellectual challenges. They explore how adjustment patterns and disengagement affect successful transitioning for these first-

year college students. Through their study, they found that it is prudent to increase students' level of attachment to the university by increasing their involvement. Involvement through education, social and kinesthetic means causes the student transition to be eased and less stressful.

Tracey and Corlett (1995) examine the transition experience of first year university track and field student athletes. The authors explored the challenges faced by sixteen first-year student-athletes, especially in the fall semester. Probing their research they found that time management, organizational skills, and their sport were an anchor upon which the student-athletes counted on to maintain perspective on their successes and failures. The consensus from the study was that participation in a sport was a benefit to the student-athlete despite the commitment in time and energy it required.

Retention and Performance of Agriculture Majors

To improve the retention and performance of agriculture majors, this section of the literature review covers the different methods of approach to student learning and teaching methods. A common place in the research is that agriculture students typically handle their education and learning in a different manner than students in other areas of campus. The research found different ways of approaching learning and teaching in an agricultural setting.

Hauser (2001) conducted an examination of factors that predict student retention among agricultural majors. The author examined possible predictive factors of student retention in a longitudinal study of agricultural majors utilizing self-determination as theoretical framework. She found that academic major satisfaction significantly predicted

retention across all three levels of retention (academic major retention, academic college retention and institutional retention) while autonomous self-regulation and perceived competence were shown to be significant predictors of academic major retention and academic college retention.

Greene and Byler (2004) probed the effects of pre-college agricultural background on student performance in college introductory agricultural courses. Using 268 students enrolled in the School of Agriculture at Tennessee Technological University, the relationships between agricultural background and academic performance in college-level introductory agricultural courses were investigated. The authors found that some pre-college agricultural background may increase the probability of students making 'B's' or 'C's', depending on the level of difficulty of the individual course. There did not appear to be a strong relationship between background and students that made 'A's', and there appeared to be an inconsistent and limited relationship between background and student making 'D's' and 'F's'.

Garton et al.(2000) studied college agriculture students' academic performance and retention. Using more than 400 students over a two-semester period, the authors looked predictors of academic performance and retention such as ACT exams, high school core GPA, and high school class rank in addition to students' preferred learning styles. They found that the best predictor of academic performance during the first year of college was a combination of their high school core GPA and ACT score and that learning styles were not a predictor of students' academic performance during their first year of enrollment in a college of agriculture.

Barrett et al. (1987) examined how personality type of agriculture college students differs by major and how those results may have implications for recruitment, retention, and teaching strategies. Using the collected data from a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator that was given to nearly 2,900 students on campus, the authors concluded that agriculture students tend to be more introverted and perceptive than the other students on campus. They found that to keep good students in agriculture, the professors have to understand that students do not learn the same way that many other college students learn and they should adapt their traditional teaching styles to improve retention.

Skaggs (1992) explored implications for teaching, student recruitment, and retention at the university level. Examining the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the existing body of literature on student personality types, the authors found agriculture students to be quite different from the typical college student. While Skaggs recommended that colleges of agriculture adapt their curricula to accommodate learning styles, the authors also stated that clarification of student values and increased student self-awareness were better methods for enhancing learning, recruiting, and retaining students.

Dyer et al. (2002) aimed to identify the factors that most accurately predict a student's intention to complete a degree in a college of agriculture. The authors examined the similarities and differences of college of agriculture freshman from urban versus rural backgrounds, the relationship between a student's intention to change colleges and the demographic values, as well as if a combination of perceived effect components could explain the variance in students' retention plans. Through their research, they found that

students who have experience in agriculture, completed high school agriculture courses, were members of the FFA and/or 4-H, and lived in a rural setting are more likely to complete a degree in a college of agriculture than are freshmen who have not had those experiences.

Retention and Academic Performance of Student-Athletes

Student athletes face many challenges that non-athlete students never encounter. This section of the literature review looks the methods of improving college student-athlete success in and out of the classroom. The literature examines methods of advising and mentoring, the problems that athletes encounter in their sport and other variables that affect the retention and performance of college student-athletes.

Carodine et al. (2001) investigated ways to improve college student-athlete success both in and out of the classroom. The authors explored innovative programs designed to assist student-athletes who enter postsecondary education with a myriad of past experiences, current pressures and future concerns. Using their research on student-athlete support programs, they found that the ideal program should include academic support, career counseling, and personal development for student-athletes. With this blueprint to construct a student-athlete support program, the institution should set the precedence of developing life skills and promote academic achievement for all their students.

Comeaux and Harrison (2011) examined research on student-athletes and academic success to develop a conceptual model to understand and explain the cumulative processes and characteristics, as a whole and in stages, that influence

academic success for Division I student-athletes. They found that using factors such as: pre-college, initial commitments, social systems, and commitments, they could create a model for college student-athlete academic success. This model increased student-athletes' motivation and engagement to learn inside and outside of the classroom.

Homer (2013) explored academic support, social support, and coping strategies of first-year undergraduates and how these variables influence learner retention in higher education. Using interviews to question five academic advisor and ten first-year learners, the author found that programs and activities need to be developed and organized in a systematized manner so that first-year learners of higher education will participate in the ventures, and remain in school until they graduate.

Moman (2002) examined the effects of a mentoring intervention program on retention and grade point average of students at a two-year community college and determine the group of at-risk student that will benefit the most from the mentoring intervention based on retention and GPA. Using the at-risk students selected, Moman found that the mentoring intervention and demographic variables of ethnicity, age group, marital status, and gender did not have an effect on student retention and GPA over a three-year period. The author concluded that his research did not match that of previous research done and that the study results should be interpreted in the context of a much larger picture.

Drake (2011) examined the role of academic advising in student retention and persistence. The author described the expectations and realities the role of academic advising has when pertaining to retention at the college level. Using the existing body of

literature on an advisor's role in retention, Drake finds that academic advising is more than clerical recordkeeping; it is the very human art of building relationships with students and helping them connect their personal strengths and interests with their academic and life goals.

Doubleday (2013) examined academic advisors as an important tool for improving student retention. Looking at many universities around the United States, the researcher found that many of the universities were overhauling their academic-advising operations to helpguide students to majors that suited them to help set them on a firm path to graduation and beyond. While examining these differing universities the researcher discovered observations that many institutions are hoping to set student on track from the moment they walk on campus by scheduling appointments with their advisors so the student knows and understands what their options are. He concluded that investing in advising for students will increase retention and student performance during their first-year college experience.

Johnson et al. (2013) explored the influence of select demographic, academic, and athletic variables on the retention of student-athletes. Using these variables, the authors used a population of 674 first-year student-athletes from five successive freshman classes to best predict retention into the second academic year. They found correlations that revealed student-athletes were less likely to drop out if they were Caucasian, attended college close to their hometown, scored well on standardized tests, had a respectable high school GPA, were ranked high in their graduating high school class, were not a member of a revenue sport, and earned a considerable amount of playing time.

Mentoring Impacts

There are many theories on how first-time college students can get help through their process of transitioning from high school to college, and this section reviews how mentoring and advising programs specifically assist in this transition. Mentors, advisors, and freshman students were examined through these studies to find the effectiveness of mentoring or advising programs on improving success of freshman students.

Boyle (2014) examined the impact of peer mentoring on first-time college students in a student success course. The authors aimed to measure the effects of an intervention on the retention and academic success of first year students at the community college used in their study. Using upper class students who were trained to be mentors, two control groups were formed: students who took the class the previous semester and those taking the class without the peer mentor. Boyle found that there was no statistically significant difference seen in the course and the student's GPA that semester. These results contradicted the literature previously reviewed and could be faulted due to the lack of time the mentor had with the students during the study.

Asgari and Carter Jr. (2016) examined the relationship between peer mentoring and academic performance. The authors determined the influence of this relationship by comparing students in an introductory psychology class that received peer mentoring to those students that did not receive peer mentoring. Using their study of the relationship between a peer mentor and student, they found that a consistent improvement in performance of the students who were mentored occurred. Their average score on exam 4

as well as the final course grade was significantly higher for the mentored students, which indicated the potential benefits of prolonged exposure to a peer mentor.

Ego (2013) analyzed the expert/novice relationships in intercollegiate athletics between student-athletes and academic peer mentors. Using athletics programs that utilize a peer mentored study hall program, Ego evaluated how the thoughts and feelings about the purpose and outcome of study hall differed across the expert/novice spectrum. Evaluating 32 participants from a pool of student-athletes in study hall, peer mentors, and academic support staff, the researcher found that study hall was important to implement from day one and that the peer mentors were effective in guiding the student-athletes through their first year of college.

Curry (2010) examined the impact of a mentorship program on the academic and personal development of college athletes. The author describes the UCAMP programs' impact on first and second year student-athletes at a Big Twelve university setting. Using this program and existing bodies of literature, Curry found that having a mentor alleviates some of the social and emotional stresses of being away from home, learning to cope and deal with the demands of college life, and balancing a sports agenda. He also found that having a mentor increased the success of the student-athlete upon graduation as he or she entered into the career field.

Pfister (2004) explored the effects of faculty and peer mentoring on perceived stress and social support of college student athletes. The author described student-athletes experiences and changes from being involved in a mentoring program at a large university. The results on perceived stress from the study include the possibility that

faculty mentors provide higher levels of the social support needed by incoming student-athletes whereas peer mentors did not provide as much of the social support needed by these students. Action strategies discussed for peer mentors included improving the mentoring relationships through additional mentor training.

Sparks (2013) examined the effects of student coaching through an evaluation of a randomized experiment in student advising. Analyzing a peer mentoring program that helps students develop clear goals and build time management skills, advocacy, and study skills, Sparks found that the participating college students improved their retention rates after two years of peer mentoring and were found to be more likely to still be attending the college a year after the program ended.

Lynn (2010) explored student peer mentoring in a hospitality management program and its effectiveness. Evaluating five different mentoring program models, Lynn found that for a peer student mentoring program to be effective, the program would need mandatory participation from both the mentor and the student. The researcher concluded that the programs take time to design and administer yet are much more effective than a voluntary mentoring program.

Hoffmann et al. (2017) examine the experiences of peer mentored athletes competing in elite sport. The authors explored the experiences of elite level athletes who reported being peer mentored by other athletes during their sporting careers to identify the mentoring functions provided by athlete mentors and to examine the outcomes related to peer mentored athletes' mentoring experiences. Using the research, the authors indicated that athlete mentors provided a variety of specific functions that facilitated

protégés' progression through sport and development from a personal standpoint. Protégés benefit in terms of enhanced performance and confidence, and also demonstrated a willingness to provide mentorship to their peers.

Methodology

An Overview

The Department of Agriculture at Stephen F. Austin State University does not have a dedicated mentoring program for the students pursuing an agriculture degree. Using the mentoring and advising program utilized by the SFASU Athletic Academic Office as a reference of success, my assumption is that using this same program within the Agriculture department could increase the retention of students pursuing a degree within the department. The design of this study revolves around qualitative examination of student athletes that were enrolled in a full-time schedule based on having an agricultural related major in the last five years. This five year time period will pertain to students enrolled at any point between Fall of 2010 through Spring of 2018 at Stephen F. Austin State University.

These athletes were subjected to a questionnaire that will question their background, self-image, college adaptation and opinion of the student-athlete mentoring program. Using a qualitative approach to the study will allow an examination of these students' personal experiences for summary into detailed analyses.

Using the questionnaire method of student-athlete analysis is beneficial for a few different reasons. First, doing a questionnaire in which the student-athlete may complete in their own comfortable place of choice limits the stress that could be found in other methods of analysis. Second, using a questionnaire, there was no limit to the length of the answer the student-athlete could give. It provides the student-athlete with all the space

they feel is needed to adequately answer the questionnaire. Lastly, using a questionnaire, the potential of misinterpreting the data received is reduced. When the student-athlete sends their questionnaire back to the researcher, via email, a copy of it will always be accessible to the researcher to prove the data is viable and accurate.

The main goal of this research is to answer two questions: “Does the athlete advising and mentoring program produce an increase in student retention of pursuing an agriculture degree?”, and “Does the athlete mentoring and advising program produce a positive shift in the athlete's’ personal adjustment during the college transition period?” With these questions answered wholly, the research should be able to determine if the Athlete Mentoring Program is a meaningful program and if it can be successfully applied for use at the Stephen F. Austin State University Department of Agriculture.

The Participants and the Setting

The student-athletes to be selected will have gone through full or partial agriculture course work aimed towards earning a degree in one of the agriculture subject areas. The student-athletes chosen are currently attending the university and enrolled as agriculture majors or have attended the university within the past five years in which they were enrolled in agricultural courses. The student-athletes chosen that were not currently attending the university, yet were enrolled in agricultural coursework, were not required to have graduated from the university but to have experienced a minimum of one semester of agricultural coursework. The longevity in the agricultural program, bar the one semester minimum, is irrelevant for the selection of this study but will be later considered as a contributing factor in their personal experiences. The student selection for

this study is to be limited by this only. All students-athletes that fit within the five year time period, were enrolled in agriculture courses and remained enrolled for a minimum of one full semester are to be considered as potential participants to this study.

The Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study is to find the student-athletes who fit the requirements of the research parameters, design the study, conduct the study and analyze the data found from the study. To find the students fitting the requirements, the researcher is to utilize the SFASU student-athlete database that is available to him and gather the student-athletes to begin the study. The researcher is responsible for forming an ethical set of research questions that will probe the student-athletes for the information that will be used in completing the study. The researcher, being a former student-athlete, current graduate level agriculture student and current student-athlete mentor, is to remove all bias from the questionnaire and refrain from showing favoritism towards the university or the mentoring program as a whole. The researcher is henceforth responsible for using the questionnaire data collected to analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the Athlete Mentoring program and its potential effectiveness in the Department of Agriculture. The researcher, using the analyzed data, will then communicate the data to the Department Chair of Agriculture for potential utilization within that specific college department.

Data Collection

The researcher obtained approval for this research, in the form of a questionnaire, from the IRB. The case number for this research is AY2018-1181.Using a questionnaire, the researcher will gather the data needed to sufficiently answer the research questions.

This method ensures that the student-athlete feels safe and comfortable with giving their answers to the questionnaire that was pre-drafted. The answers given will then be discussed with the members of the researcher's committee only to ensure that privacy and confidentiality are maintained through the study. While the researcher will list out the research questions and questionnaire questions, the students' names will not be disclosed for their personal identity protection.

Data Analysis

Once all of the student-athletes have completed the questionnaires and the questionnaire answers are transcribed correctly, the research will identify themes within the transcriptions. Themes will be identified by finding common word repetitions, keywords within the context and metaphors or analogies used by the student-athletes in the questionnaire. Finding word repetitions helps to decode the questionnaire answers and identifies commonalities between the responses given by all of the student-athletes that complete the questionnaire. Examining key words from the transcriptions will assist the researcher in determining the student-athletes' thoughts towards the different questions asked and the areas that are implied through those specific questions. The researcher, to determine if the student-athletes are implicating a strong feeling towards a certain question, may review metaphors or analogies used by the student-athletes. The use of metaphors in a questionnaire may indicate a passionate feeling, whether positive or negative, towards the subject that a specific question is referring to.

Provisions for Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was attained through several methods that protect the student-athletes and maintain their confidentiality. When the researcher gave the questionnaire, each student-athlete received the same set of questions. The questions did not vary for any reason and this prevented any misinterpretation when analyzing the answers given for data collection. The researcher only transcribed what was said in the questionnaire and nothing more. Accurate transcription and complete research trustworthiness was obtained through using only direct quotes from the responses of the student-athletes.

Communicating the Findings

The researcher will rely on the analysis of the transcriptions to translate the findings of the study. The information and its significance were broadcasted using concise wording and transcription.

Results

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the athlete academic advising and mentoring program at Stephen F. Austin State University in the Athletic Academic Center by means of mentee questionnaire to determine its potential to increase student retention rates in the Department of Agriculture and to examine its effects on the personal adjustment of student-athletes in their first year college transition. The design of this study was a qualitative examination of the student-athletes' personal experiences and feelings towards the mentoring program and its relative effectiveness.

Data Collection

Using university data sites, the researcher went back to 2010 to find student-athletes that were enrolled in agriculture courses during the fall semester and this was done for each year, up until the current year of 2018. There were 22 total student-athletes that fit this criteria and of those 22, 19 (86%) initially agreed to participate in the study. Of those who agreed to participate, 5 did not respond to the questionnaire when it was sent out to them. Subsequently, a total of 14 student-athletes (64%) completed the questionnaire and filled out the consent form for the study. Of these 14 student-athletes, eight were Animal Science majors, two were agricultural mechanics majors, two were horticulture majors, and one each for both the Poultry Science and Agricultural Business major.

The questionnaire was formed in reference to the initial research questions:

1. Does the athlete advising and mentoring program produce an increase in student retention of pursuing an agriculture degree?
2. Does the athlete mentoring and advising program produce a positive shift in the athlete's personal adjustment during the college transition period? The responses to the questionnaire from the student-athletes are presented below.

Answers to Questionnaire

Question one was an introductory question to determine whether or not the student-athlete was involved in the mentoring program that is offered to athletes. Twelve out of the 14 respondents confirmed they had taken part in the mentoring program. A few of the students also reported what they were involved in this mentoring program such as study hall hours, weekly advisor/mentor meetings, and tutoring involvement.

Question two delved a bit deeper into the research questions and asked the student-athletes what they felt were the most helpful parts of the mentoring program. The common themes from this question were improvement in time management, organization skills, having constant class updates including grades, tutoring and the athlete-to-athlete relations, as well as the resources that the academic center offered. Many students reported feeling encouraged by the meetings had between them and their mentor: “The most helpful parts of athletic monitoring are that they were able to schedule tutors for you in classes you were struggling with. Also my academic mentor is very motivating and positive, so when I get a bad mark she does everything she can to make sure it doesn’t happen again by giving studying tips and just encouraging me.” Almost all of the students found the program helpful if only in one way like one respondent said: “The

only thing that I found helpful was the fact that the person tutoring me was an athlete and was able to understand that time management was a priority and that I needed to understand my assignments fast." One student-athlete had a very informative response: "It was a time where the students could get one on one help from a mentor and were able to put aside some of the distractions of studying alone or with friends. Also the student athletes could confide and ask questions from a student, who much like themselves, had to take this course at one point in time. Several had mentioned that preparing for tests, homework and projects in college was completely different from how they had prepared for things in high school. Mentoring helped them stay on track with the material and studying, especially for those that maybe only had a midterm and final. It also was helpful, because our hours were later and more frequent for availability than the professor designated times for mentoring sessions."

Question three asked what the student-athletes' opinions were on the less helpful parts of the mentoring program. Some of the topics the student-athletes mentioned were that of noise levels in the study hall area of those who were there to get hours and not academically focused, the repetitiveness of the meetings being annoying, time restraints of the tutors being as most of them are current student-athletes themselves, and the lack of agricultural assistance. Agricultural assistance is defined by means of having tutors for agriculture classes or mentors that are sufficiently educated about the Agriculture program for class registration purposes. One respondent had a particular issue with this by stating: "The less helpful parts of athletic mentoring was the lack of knowledge in the Ag department. Horticulture was definitely not a common major when it comes to

athletes therefore it just seemed very limited and minimal. As stated earlier, I felt like I basically just received a list of what was needed to graduate and not really any organization or direction. It was like it was left up to me to sign up for classes on my own. I felt like other students were provided information on what to try to take during certain semesters, options for best professors, and what to expect."

The issues with study hall were mentioned a few times by respondents with statements such as: "Less helpful parts were the noise level and amount of people in study hall. Sometimes it was very loud and full of people who were looking to log their study hall hours & not looking to get work done- very distracting at times." and "It can be time consuming to get in the required study hall hours at one location that tracks your hours, and less help when an athlete already knows how to manage their time and busy schedule."

Time available for student-athletes is always an issue with all of the obligations they are subject to and this was echoed in a response to the survey: "The time available for students to meet. I know and understand the challenge of being on the road attending practices and still finding the time to fit in a study session, not only as the tutor, but as a manager/student athlete too. As a student it was often hard finding a tutor with availability, because there were not many working for the athletic department. As a mentor it was often hard when students were continually cancelling and then not held accountable for repeated cancellations. Instead they were dropped from the tutor, which seemed to harm and not help the student who was seeking assistance."

The fourth question asked the student-athletes what they believed could be done to the mentoring program to further benefit their fellow student-athletes. There were two main improvements that were stated by the student-athletes from the survey: Increasing the number of advisors/mentors for the program and having more agricultural involvement in the advising center. Between this question and the last, the lack of agricultural knowledge within the advising program is a problem that most of the student-athletes have mentioned. Responses to the question that pertain to the lack of agricultural knowledge were: “I think that they should try to find people that are willing to tutor agriculture majors.” , “As an agriculture student I found that there was not a lot of options as of tutors in the athlete mentoring/advising program, because of this we would have to try to make their SI sessions which was usually difficult to do because of practice times.” , “I believe the advising program could have been more familiarized with all departments of the college when I was there.”, and “The biggest way I think advising could be more beneficial is just be more helpful when it comes to signing up for classes. If I could have had some idea of how all my classes that I needed are offered and consisted of would have been useful. The challenge with Horticulture classes is the the low number of students in this field and which results in some classes are only offered every other year. This makes it difficult being a transfer to try and obtain everything that is needed with the baseball schedule I have to work with.”

The lack of advisors/mentors was echoed multiple times between the last two questions as well. Statements made such as: “the amount of advisors should be increased so that one advisor does not have to handle multiple sports containing over 50 players

each." and "I think there could be more advisors, there are 4 people here trying to keep up with hundreds of athletes, they are swamped" point to the reality that many student-athletes have ongoing needs that their one personal advisor/mentor may not be able to get to due to their high number of student-athletes they're responsible for. In fact, for approximately 350 athletes there are only three full-time mentors and one graduate assistant mentor. Other issues such as remote study hall/tutoring locations and having more tutors that are regular students with less time constraints on them for increased availability were mentioned in relation to the mentoring program.

Question five started to branch over to improvements to the Agriculture program with the question of "Would an academic mentoring program for Agricultural majors have helped you while you were a major in the program?" Eleven out of the 14 student-athletes responded that yes, a mentoring program within the Agriculture program would be or would have been beneficial to them. The answers coming from this question repeated many of the concerns from previous questions such as the desire to have a mentor with Agriculture background and class knowledge. One student-athlete says, "Yes, because unlike many agricultural students, I did not know what I wanted to major into until I was a sophomore, which left me at a disadvantage. I joined a club just to make sure I knew what I needed to be doing to be on the right track to applying and getting into vet school. If I had an agricultural mentor, they would be able to help me in finding classes or books to buy to help me further my education and work on taking the GRE." Another student-athlete says "I think a program would help. If I remember right I basically just got with my professors and the Dean and they were able to help guide me.

They were actually extremely helpful. They were very understanding as of how my schedule proposed a problem with scheduling and taking necessary classes. I think if there was a program that had all these issues prepared and structured would save a lot of time and headache."

The student-athletes who said that the mentoring program would not be beneficial to them were confident in their current athletic academic advisor/mentor by stating: "Honestly with my athletic advisor there would be no point in having 2 advisors" and "I feel like the academic mentor I have now is perfect and that it wouldn't make a difference if I had an agriculture mentor or not."

The sixth question probed the student-athletes as to how they feel the agriculture department as a whole could be improved and the answers received were scattered. The most common answer received was another common theme throughout the entire questionnaire. Repeatedly, tutoring has been mentioned as being a largely deficient area in which student-athletes have concerns and student instructor sessions (SI Groups) were mentioned within this as well. "I would have people that are experienced with Agriculture classes help tutor or help students that are in need. There are many tutors for non-agriculture related classes which is a disadvantage for student athletes enrolled in Agriculture classes." Other statements of improvement include building/location improvements, having a more hands-on experience during coursework, advising that is more conducive to those unsure of their current major, and improving better degree awareness. "One thing I would say is to have your advisor actually discuss what options you have with the degree you are getting before you graduate. I received a poultry

science degree and even though I went to the conference twice, I still had no idea what I wanted to do with my degree and would have loved some advice. I needed to make money right out of college and didn't have time to spend on searching endlessly for a job that I was unsure about so I ended up with a non-agriculture job, then a nursing degree 2 years later."

Question seven read, "If you, at any point, were enrolled in agriculture courses and didn't graduate with a degree in agriculture from SFA, what could have been done to improve the likelihood of you staying in that specific degree plan?" There were three general results from this question: The student-athlete is still enrolled in an agricultural degree plan, they graduated with an Agriculture degree or found out that it really wasn't what they wanted to do. To the latter response, the student-athlete stated that "I initially majored in animal science to learn about exotic animals (since I wanted to own a sanctuary for circus and zoo animals) and when I realized that I wouldn't be learning about them, I changed my major to business management. I changed majors for personal reasons… not because the department needed to make adjustments."

Though this was the only student-athlete that responded they had left the program, the others who are currently still in the program or have already graduated offered a few of their thoughts. One student-athlete repeated their concern with the lack of class selection and knowledge of the classes they will take while two others had differing yet potentially beneficial statements: These statements were: "getting rid of the extracurricular classes that come with the agriculture program that aren't necessarily specific towards your degree. At times, it is hard to get a desired grade in an agriculture

class that has nothing to do with your major although it is on your degree plan. It requires a different type of knowledge and some professors expect student to have a decent amount of experience in that subject" and "I know that there are several Agriculture and Forestry classes that require specific programs on the computer that you cannot access in the academic center in the athletic department. These programs are often expensive and require licensing to acquire, so for these classes allowing the student and mentor to meet in the agricultural building would be ideal for some of these students. If there was a way for this to happen, while still remaining under the academic advisors supervision or keeping them in the loop."

Validity and Reliability

The researcher used a questionnaire that was sent to the participants' email for completion. The participants were comprised of student-athletes that were enrolled in at least one semester of agriculture courses from the fall of 2010 until the fall of 2017. The trustworthiness of qualitative research such as observations, interpretations, and generalizations have to be validated (Maxwell, 1992; Homer, 2013). The researcher determined the most effective way to achieve validity for this study was through the questionnaire answers that are coming directly from the student-athletes themselves. The researcher utilized credibility and confirmability of obtaining data directly from the student-athletes to ensure the opinions of these student-athletes were not made up or inaccurately interpreted or reported. The researcher quoted only the full sentences given by the student-athletes to ensure the research finding would be reliable.

According to Maxwell (1992), reliability is determined when a question produces the same or similar responses with multiple administrations of the same or similar instrument. The same questions were asked to 14 research participants and constant themes and patterns among the respondents were documented. Bracketing was utilized to ensure that the researcher was not bias, or acknowledging his own beliefs during the research process. The researcher suspended his personal beliefs and made sure that the readers were free to display the vigor that define their interpretation of the questionnaire questions (Homer, 2013). The researcher did not develop any personal or professional relationships with the participants, and the participants were not influenced during the research as to how to answer any of the questions (Homer, 2013).

Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of the 14 student-athletes that participated in the research study. The findings were reported with common themes and direct quotes from the student-athletes answers to the questionnaire. Information on how the principles of credibility, validity, and reliability were applied to the research study is included in the chapter. Qualitative devices such as bracketing and confirmability were practically applied to the research to ensure the data was properly analyzed and presented, so that it would be comprehensible to readers on various scholastic levels (Homer, 2013).

Discussion of Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of the athletic mentoring program and its potential to transfer over to the Agriculture department by obtaining the feedback of the qualified participants. There were many current and past agriculture student-athletes that felt as if the athletic mentoring program was lacking in one important area, obtaining assistance with their personal Agriculture degree plan and the classes that are included in it. The results suggested that student-athletes transitioning from high school to college often struggle and with a deficiency in agriculture assistance, the problem will continue to exist without proper program modifications or additions.

There are two main questions addressed in this study: “Does the athlete advising and mentoring program produce an increase in student retention of pursuing an agriculture degree?” and “Does the athlete mentoring and advising program produce a positive shift in the athlete's personal adjustment during the college transition period?” The questionnaire that was given to the student-athlete participants was aimed at answering these questions. The following section will address each research question and how the study results related to and answered the research questions.

Discussion of Results

The researcher found in this study that a mentoring program would and has shown to increase student retention of pursuing an agriculture degree. Since 2014, only one student included in this study left the agriculture program when participating in the

mentoring and advising program in the athletic academic center. Between 2010 and 2013, prior to the arrival of a mentor with experience in agriculture, 3 students left the agriculture program due to a lack of assistance and knowledge of the department.

The researcher also concluded, through the results of this study, that athletes who participated in the mentoring and advising program have shown to have a positive shift in their personal adjustment period during their college transition. The participants in the study frequently stated that the program helped them get used to college and become more comfortable with the strains of being a college student-athlete.

Being involved in the mentoring program, students stated that the responsibilities they had were to show up to weekly meeting with their mentor where they would then go over their current grades and upcoming assignments. The mentor would set up a tutor to assist the student if they felt the tutor would present the possibility of increased student comprehension in the class they are struggling with. During these meetings, the mentor would also emphasize prioritization of their lower performance classes when they are studying to ensure success throughout the semester. This program was shown in the results to be very helpful to the students. By improving time management, organization, class management and offering assistive resources in the academic center, the students' claimed that it helped them establish good habits and improve their grades.

It is important to remember that many student-athletes said that they felt that having someone with an understanding of their time constraints was helpful. Adding to that, having a mentor or tutor that has a student-athlete background was said to have been beneficial for not only the understanding of time issues but also to talk the athlete through

the transition period of high school to college. Having someone with an understanding of the struggles of making new friends, dealing with the demands of a coach and improving their performance in the classroom, as well as in their sport was stated to have been crucial to their mindset and happiness. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the mentoring program, as echoed by the questionnaire responses. Almost all of the respondents said that the motivation and tips gained from their mentor or tutor ultimately led to their personal success in and out of the classroom.

For application to the Agriculture department, if it is to add a mentoring program to struggling students, it is imperative to have mentors that are motivated to help others and that have been successful in the department. The transition from high school to college is possibly the most difficult variable for freshman to adapt to. To have a mentor in the agriculture department who is knowledgeable of the program as a whole and is prepared to assist however needed, could be the difference in keeping a student from straying away from an agriculture degree.

For the current athletic mentoring and advising program, there were many program improvements, but also areas that students felt were less helpful to them. While this was specific to the athletic mentoring program, the agriculture department can observe this area of discontent to increase awareness if or when it is decided to start up a similar program of their own. An overwhelming amount of the student respondents had an issue with the mentoring programs' lack of overall agriculture knowledge. The issues of agriculture in the athletic mentoring program were stated to be having a lack of agriculture class tutors, a lack of Agriculture course knowledge when registering and a

lack of agriculture knowledge when the student-athlete was being mentored. If the program increased its Agriculture awareness, it is possible that the current student-athletes, and those that will come after them, will show an increase in academic performance as well as their confidence in their degree selection.

Increasing the amount of mentors in the program was also described to be an area of concern for many student-athletes. The current program only has three full-time mentors with one graduate assistant mentor and these four mentors are responsible for over 300 athletes between them. If a particular students' mentor is busy helping other students, the student cannot seek another mentor for class assistance, as the other mentors are unfamiliar with the students' background and knowledge.

Some respondents had issues with the study hall location and the size of the building of which study hall and tutoring takes place. Having a larger mentoring facility would be beneficial for not only the amount of study desks for the athletes but also for increasing the resources given to the student-athletes. Towards the end of the week or later in the afternoon, once team practices are over, the mentoring building is completely full of student-athletes trying to get their study hall time in for the week. This swell of students creates a non-conducive study environment due to the amount of noise and distraction available. While most students are studying as they should during that time, some student-athletes are in the building just to get their time and are not being productive. One of the respondents described these students as an issue for study hall. There were suggestions from the respondents that study hall hours should be gained in other academic oriented areas of campus and not just the athletic academic center. If

these student-athletes with required, weekly study hall hours were permitted to complete their hours in, for example, the library, the athletic academic center would experience a must lower level of traffic and therefore create a more effective study area.

The last main area of criticism for the athletic academic mentoring program was the availability of tutoring services specifically targeted at Agriculture majors. A few respondents felt that if the program hired more regular student, non-athlete, tutors, it would be beneficial to themselves and others. Hiring our own student-athletes as tutors for their student-athlete peers is very helpful for the transitioning period of freshman and knowledge of what it takes to be a student-athlete, but the course knowledge and time available of these student-athlete tutors creates a strain on tutor scheduling. Hiring more non student-athlete students would increase the variety of courses available for tutoring and would increase the times available for tutoring the time-crunched student-athletes.

When asked if they felt like an Agriculture mentoring program would be beneficial to them, the vast majority of them agreed that it would be very beneficial to them. The main reasoning behind this answer was due to the lack of agricultural knowledge in the current athletic mentoring program. They felt that having a program, in which peers of their own likeness surrounded them, would help them focus on the end goal of a degree and improve their academic performance.

A mentoring program added to the Agriculture program could also be doubled as an integrated advising program as well. When the mentor meets with their mentee, the issues that were more advising specific could be solved as well. Many respondents stated that an increase in retention could be plausible if the students were made more aware of

what their degree plan encompasses in the sense of courses to be taken and what their degree will do for them when they graduate with it. There were statements that mentioned having more degree-oriented classes and not having such a broad course subject load. For instance, an animal science major would take more courses related to animal science and less about Agriculture mechanics or horticulture.

Lastly, when the student-athlete respondents were asked what they would suggest to improve the agriculture department as a whole, the resounding response was to increase the number of SI's (Student-Instructor) and tutors available for agriculture courses. Increasing the number of SI's and tutors will give the students the opportunity to seek out additional help after class to improve their performance in the class, which ultimately increases retention rates. A few of the respondents stated that they wished to have had a more hands on classroom experience. Many Agriculture students learn in the hands-on manner, as that is the nature of Agriculture as a whole. Increasing the activity levels of lecture and decreasing the amount of traditional lecture styles could lead to better comprehension of the subject matter for the students.

The last Agriculture department improvement that was mentioned was the lack of transparency on campus. A few respondents said that outside of the Agriculture department itself, agriculture was never seen on campus. They felt that if the department was a larger figure on main campus, more students would be interested in seeking information about agriculture. This could possibly increase the number of students enrolled in the Agriculture department and therefore ensure that the Agriculture

department stays alive and relevant on campus to the administration, as well as the general student body.

Recommendations

Homer (2013) stated that supportive academic and social atmospheres are essential to developing learners coping skills and key to increasing retention and graduation rates of first-year students. Not only does that apply to first-year students, it applies to every student on campus. The mentors have an obligation to look after the well-being of their students and their success. For the athletic academic advising and mentoring program, the researcher suggests that the program look into hiring more mentors as well as hiring more tutors that are knowledgeable in Agriculture. Doing such will increase the success rate of non-agriculture and Agriculture student-athletes alike. More research is needed to determine the appropriate number of mentors and tutors that would be efficient enough to continually increase student performance. The researcher suggests that a similar study is done at a larger university that currently has a large athletic academic center to determine the increased effectiveness of a larger staff and larger facility.

For the Agriculture department, the researcher would suggest implementing a similar program to the athletic academic mentoring and advising program. Bringing in this program could improve students' personal adjustment to the college atmosphere and could improve retention immediately. The research suggests conducting a study on the effectiveness of a mentoring program at a university of similar size that currently has a mentoring program in place. If this study is completed at a similar institution, validity

will increase and reliability would be more applicable in the qualitative research. If the researcher had to repeat the study, he would utilize more than one institution to determine the effectiveness of a mentoring program. The study would have a larger number of participants and would have more concise research questions to base data off. This type of differentiation would give a more detailed examination into how a mentoring program is ran and how effective the program truly is.

Conclusion

The overall student feedback from the questionnaire was positive about the effectiveness of the athletic academic mentoring and advising program yet had its suggested improvements. Increasing the cognizance of everything involved with agriculture was a huge point made and it is important to make improvements in this area of mentoring. The responses from the student-athletes were very encouraging of the Agriculture department as a whole, yet many were critical of the amount of additional help available for their agriculture courses. It was found that some respondents needed more guidance in which area of Agriculture they should focus their studies to and need clarity on what is available to do with the degree they will subsequently earn at the completion of their specific degree plan. A mentoring program added into the Agriculture department would help ease the minds of the students on this subject and could increase the retention of students enrolled in Agriculture courses.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. In your time at SFA, were you involved in an academic mentoring/advising program for athletes?

2. What were the helpful parts of athletic mentoring?

3. What were some less helpful parts of athletic mentoring?

4. In what ways do you believe the athlete mentoring/advising program could be improved to be more beneficial to you or other student-athletes?

5. Would an academic mentoring program for Agricultural majors have helped you while you were a major in the program?

6. How would you improve the agriculture program to help current or future students succeed in the major?

7. If you, at any point, were enrolled in agriculture courses and didn't graduate with a degree in agriculture from SFA, what could have been done to improve the likelihood of you staying in that specific degree plan?

VITA

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