

IN THE FACE OF CHANGE: DECISION-MAKING CHALLENGES FACED BY NCAA DIVISION II GULF SOUTH CONFERENCE SPRING SPORT STUDENT-ATHLETES IN THE COVID-19 ERA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on collegiate student-athletes, many of whom were scheduled to use their final season of competition and/or academic eligibility during the spring 2020 semester. This study investigated the decision-making process of these student-athletes regarding whether to return to play in the spring 2021 season. The researchers surveyed all 13 member schools of the NCAA Division II Gulf South Conference and found that 68% of student-athletes returned to play. The decision to return was influenced by factors such as gender, sport type, and 2020 graduation status.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, NCAA Student-athletes, Decision-making, Return to play, Gender Sport type Graduation status

Introduction

Collegiate student-athletes were faced with an unprecedented experience during the spring semester of 2020. As the world was facing the COVID-19 global pandemic, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) made the decision on March 12, 2020 to cancel all remaining winter and spring sport championships (NCAA, 2020c). This decision left many student-athletes searching for the next step in their academic and Athletic careers. As the spring semester evolved, the NCAA began adopting new legislation that would allow studentathletes in spring sports to receive an additional season of competition and academic eligibility if they returned to school in 2020-2021.

The focus of this study was to investigate the decision-making process for student-athletes that were scheduled to use their final season of competition and/or academic eligibility during the spring 2020 semester. The researchers chose to survey all 13 member schools of the NCAA Division II Gulf South Conference. Each school provided data related to the number of student-athletes ($N=305$) who were scheduled to use their final season of competition and/or academic eligibility during the spring 2020 semester and what decision each of those student-athletes made regarding returning to play in the spring 2021 season of their sport. The researchers analyzed the results to see if common choice factors influenced the decision to return based on gender, sport type, and 2020 graduation status.

National Collegiate Athletic Association

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was established in 1906 as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (NCAA, 2010). The name change occurred in 1910 and has remained the same to this day.

The NCAA is composed of 1,098 colleges and universities classified into 102 conferences spread across three divisions with distinctions based on size, number of Athletic scholarships awarded, and focus on academic and carácter development (NCAA, n.d.-b). There are currently 350 NCAA Division I schools with an average enrollment of 12,900 students and 170,000 student-athletes participating in intercollegiate athletics (NCAA, n.d.-

a). Division II is the smallest división with 310 member schools (median enrollment of 2,428) and 120,000 student-athletes (NCAA, n.d.-a). Division III is the largest división with 438 member schools (median enrollment of 1,740) and 195,000 student-athletes (NCAA, n.d.-a). One of the primary distinguishing factors between each división is the amount of Athletic aid student-athletes receive for their participation in intercollegiate athletics. Division I schools have the largest Athletic budgets and award more cost-of-attendance Athletic scholarships compared to Division II schools that primarily give partial Athletic scholarships and Division III schools which do not allow athletic scholarships (NCAA, n.d.-a). The NCAA is governed by a board of governors represented by college presidents and chancellors from each of the three divisions.

The emerging COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 presented a challenge the NCAA had never faced before. As the COVID-19 pandemic expanded around the world, the NCAA was faced with making decisions regarding the safety of the coaches and student-athletes involved in winter and spring sports. The culmination of many meetings resulted in NCAA president Mark Emmert and the board of governors cancelling all remaining winter and spring championships on March 12, 2020 (NCAA, 2020c).

As the situation with COVID-19 progressed throughout the spring and summer, the NCAA and board of governors developed policies regarding coaches and student-athletes impacted by the decisión to cancel winter and spring sports. On July 22, 2020, the NCAA (2020d) issued a policy related to Bylaw 14.2: Season of Competition Issues that:

Allowed institutions to self-apply season of competition waivers for spring sport student-athletes for the 2020-2021 academic year, provided all of the following criteria were met:

- (1) The student-athletes team participated in 50% or less of the sport's Bylaw 17 maximum contests/dates of competition during the 2019-2020 season due to ongoing impact from COVID-19;
- (2) The student-athlete used a season of competition during the 2019-2020 academic year; and
- (3) The student-athlete was eligible for competition when he or she competed during the 2019-2020 academic year.

(p. 3)

In addition, the NCAA (2020d) issued the following policy related to ByLaw 14.2: Season of Competition Issues that: Allowed institutions to self-apply an extension of eligibility waiver (two semesters/three quarters) for winter and spring student-athletes for the 2020-2021 academic year, as follows:

- (1) If the student-athlete qualified for the season of competition waiver;
- (2) For a student-athlete who was unable to participate due to a cancellation of the sport season; or
- (3) For a student-athlete who opted out of countable athletically related activities. (p. 4)

The NCAA (2020d) added on August 21, 2020 that: In order to qualify for the self-applied extension of eligibility waiver, the student-athlete must have been otherwise eligible for competition during the 2020-2021 academic year. This relief was applicable to all eligible student-athletes, regardless of year in school or number of semesters previously used. (p. 4)

The financial aid impact of these decisions was addressed by the NCAA (2020d) related to Bylaw 15: Financial Aid Issues when they: Issued a blanket waiver to allow student-athletes who would have used their fourth season of competition or exhausted their 10 semester/15 quarter period of eligibility during the spring 2020 term to receive Athletics aid for the 2020-2021 academic year without counting toward team equivalency limits. This relief only applied if the student-athlete remained at their original institution. If the student-athlete transferred, the Athletics aid received at the new institution would count toward team equivalency limits. (pp. 9-10) **Gulf South Conference**

The NCAA Division II Gulf South Conference (GSC) was established in 1970 as a football only conference (GSC, n.d.-a). The conference added men's sports championships in 1971-72 for baseball, basketball, cross country, golf, tennis, and outdoor track and field (GSC, n.d.-c). Women's sports championships were added in 1982-83 for basketball, cross country, softball, tennis, and women's volleyball (GSC, n.d.-c).

The Gulf South Conference is currently made up of 13 member schools representing the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee (GSC, n.d.-a). The Gulf South Conference also allows associate membership to 5 schools for specific sports that include: Florida Tech and North Greenville for football; Young Harris and Lander for lacrosse; and Spring Hill for men's soccer, women's soccer, and women's golf (GSC, n.d.-a). The Gulf South Conference (n.d.-b) recognizes 19 annual conference championships in the sports of baseball, basketball (men and women), cross country (men and women), football, golf (men and women), women's lacrosse, soccer (men and women), tennis (men and women), indoor track and field (men and women), outdoor track and field (men and women), and women's volleyball. The Gulf South Conference member schools have won 52 NCAA Division II championships (GSC, n.d.-a).

Academic Success Rate

One of the key aspects the researchers focused on was the Academic Success Rate of student-athletes and how the COVID-19 waivers may Benefit student-athletes who need additional semesters to complete their undergraduate degree. NCAA Division II uses the Academic Success Rate based on the partial Athletic scholarship model more commonly used in Division II as compared to Division I student-athletes and Division III student-athletes.

In the Gulf South Conference, the four-year Rolling Academic Success Rate for all student-athletes in the 2010-2013 reporting period was 69.5% compared to a national average of 74% (NCAA, 2020b). For this study, the researchers focused their attention on spring sport student-athletes (baseball, softball, men's and women's golf, men's and women's tennis, and men's and women's track and field). The four-

year Rolling Academic Success Rate for Gulf South Conference student-athletes in the selected spring sports from 2010-2013 was 79.5% compared to the overall Division II average of 82.6% (NCAA, 2020a). One of the unintended consequences of the COVID-19 policy changes is that Academic Success Rates may show a short-term improvement based on student-athletes being allowed an additional two semesters/three quarters to complete their academic programs along with an additional year of athletic eligibility.

COVID-19 Moving Forward

The NCAA has continually met to address the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on intercollegiate athletics. On September 2, 2020, the NCAA board of governors made the decision to cancel all fall sport national championships (NCAA, 2020d). The waivers provided to 2020 spring sport student-athletes were extended to fall sport student-athletes. The NCAA (2020e) declared on October 20, 2020 that Division II winter sport studentathletes would also receive a waiver for an additional year of competition and an extension of academic eligibility. Results from this study may help athletic administrators predict which student-athletes will most likely choose to return in 2021-2022 and the impact that will have on athletic budgets in coming years.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine which factors (gender, sport type, 2020 graduation status) were most influential in the decision-making process of NCAA Division II Gulf South Conference spring sport student-athletes that returned for an additional season of competition in 2020-2021. This information could provide insight to athletic administrators as they plan for the long-term impact of the NCAA guidelines for COVID-19 and how fall and winter sport student-athletes might use similar decision-making factors in future years.

Methods

The researchers began contacting athletic directors and compliance officers at the 13 NCAA Division II Gulf South Conference member schools in August of 2020. A ten-item survey was created that each institution was requested to complete providing the information related to 2020 spring sport student-athletes that were scheduled to use their final season of competition and/or academic eligibility in the spring 2020 semester.

The researchers collected data specific to gender, sport type, 2020 graduation status, and enrollment status for 2020-2021. All 13 institutions responded for a 100% response rate. The responses yielded 305 ($N=305$) total student-athletes that met the criteria to be included in the study. Data was entered into SPSS and descriptive statistics for the independent variables of gender, sport type, and 2020 graduation status were analyzed. Data was also produced to indicate student-athlete status for 2020-2021 as: taking undergraduate courses, completing undergraduate degree, or taking graduate courses. Data was also collected related to retention rate that indicated which student-athletes stayed at their spring 2020 school versus transferring to another school for the additional season of competition and academic eligibility. A binary logistic regression análisis was run on the data to determine which factor(s) had a significant impact on the decision to return for an additional season of competition for the 2020-2021 year.

Results

Statistical results that identified the most important choice factors for 305 returning spring sport studentathletes from NCAA Division II Gulf South Conference institutions are reported in the following section. Results were obtained following the administration of a 10-item survey to athletic directors and compliance officers at all 13 member institutions of the NCAA Division II Gulf South Conference.

Statistical analyses were performed to produce demographic results, descriptive statistics related to the 151 returning student-athletes, and a binary logistic regression. The results are organized by 1) demographics, 2) descriptive statistics, and 3) the binary logistic regression outcome.

Demographics

Demographic results are presented indicating the number of spring 2020 student-athletes (that were scheduled to use their final season of competition and/or academic eligibility) within each classification of independent variable and the percentage each group represents. Athletic directors and/or compliance officers provided demographic information related to gender, sport, and spring or summer 2020 graduation status. Each of the independent variables was categorical and required the administrators to indicate the status of each studentathlete. Demographic results representing the 305 spring 2020 student-athletes are presented in Table 1.

Table-1									
<i>Demographic Classification of Student-Athletes Scheduled to Complete Athletic Eligibility in the Spring Semester of 2020</i>									
Status for 2020/2021				Returned		Did Not Return		Total	
				<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender									
	Male			106	70.2	91	59.1	197	64.6
	Female			45	29.8	63	40.9	108	35.4
Sport Type									
	Team Sport			99	65.6	101	65.6	200	65.6
	Individual/Dual Sport			52	34.4	53	34.4	105	34.4
2020 Graduation Status									

	Graduated		42	27.8	111	72.1	153	50.2
	Did Not Graduate		109	72.2	43	27.9	152	49.8
Note. N=305								

Independent Variables

Gender

Male student-athletes represented 64.6% of the population for this study. Male student-athletes represented 70.2% of the returning spring sport student-athletes and 59.1% of the non-returning spring sport student-athletes for the 2020-2021 academic year. The largest sport population for spring 2020 student-athletes came from the male sport of baseball ($n=140$). Female student-athletes represented 35.4% of the population for this study. Female student-athletes represented 29.8% of the returning spring sport student-athletes and 40.9% of the non-returning spring sport student-athletes for the 2020-2021 academic year. The sport of softball ($n=60$) represented the largest sport population of female student-athletes that participated in this study.

Sport Type

For this study, baseball and softball were categorized as team sports while tennis, golf, and outdoor track and field were categorized as individual/dual sports. Team sport student-athletes represented 65.6% of the population for this study. Team sport student-athletes also represented 65.6% of the returning and non-returning student-athletes for this study based on sport type. Team sport participants from baseball ($n=140$) and softball ($n=60$) represented nearly two-thirds of the participants for the study.

The largest population for spring 2020 student-athletes in individual/dual sports came from women's track and field ($n=24$), followed by men's golf ($n=20$), men's tennis ($n=19$), and men's track and field ($n=18$).

2020 Graduation Status

For this study, 2020 graduation status was categorized as graduated spring or summer 2020 or did not graduate in spring or summer 2020. The graduation rate for spring and summer 2020 was 50.2% ($n=153$) for spring sport student-athletes using their final season of competition and/or academic eligibility. Of those returning to play for 2020-2021, 72.2% ($n=109$) were reported as not graduated during the spring or summer of 2020 while 27.8% ($n=42$) did report graduating and were returning for an additional season of competition to pursue a graduate degree. Of those not returning to play, 72.1% ($n=111$) were reported as graduated during the spring or summer of 2020. Male ($n=57$) and female ($n=54$) student-athletes were similarly represented in the group of spring sport student-athletes who chose not to return for an additional season of competition after completing their undergraduate degree.

Descriptive Statistics

Returning Student-Athletes for 2020-2021

The researchers included questions to determine the status of spring sport student-athletes that did return for the 2020-2021 academic and sport year. The total number of spring sport student-athletes returning for an additional season of competition was 151, which represented 49.5% of the participants for this study. One of the follow up questions was designed to investigate the academic status for spring sport student-athletes that returned in 2020-2021. Institutions reported that 62.9% of returning spring sport student-athletes were completing an undergraduate degree with an additional 9.3% taking additional undergraduate courses. The remaining 27.8% were either starting a graduate program or continuing graduate studies. Institutions were also asked to report the retention data for the returning spring sport student-athletes. Institutions reported 98.0% of the returning studentathletes stayed at their current institution versus 2.0% that chose to transfer to another institution for the additional season of competition. Table 2 illustrates the academic status and retention rate of the 151 returning spring sport student-athletes.

Table 2									
Academic Status and Retention Rate for Returning StudentAthletes									
							n		%
Academic Status									
	Completing Undergraduate Degree						95		62.9
	Taking Undergraduate Classes						14		9.3
	Taking Graduate Classes						42		27.8
Retention Rate									
	Stayed at Spring 2020 Institution						148		98.0
	Transferred Institutions for 2020-2021						3		2.0
Note. N=151									

Binary Logistic Regression

SPSS version 26 was used to determine if any of the independent variables had a significant impact on the decision to return for an additional season of competition in 2020-2021. The results of the binary logistic regression showed that 2020 graduation status ($p<.000$) was a significant predictor of return status for the 2020-2021 academic year. Gender and sport type were not significant predictors of return status for the 2020-2021 academic year. Results of the binary logistic regression are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3									
<i>Impact of Gender, Sport Type, and 2020 Graduation Status on 2020-2021 Enrollment of Student-Athletes for Spring Sports</i>									

			<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>		<i>Exp(B)</i>
Gender			0.268	0.268	1.006	1	0.316		1.308
Sport Type			-0.118	0.267	0.195	1	0.659		0.889
Graduated 2020			1.654	0.253	42.822	1	0.000	***	5.226
*** $p < .001$									

Discussion**Independent Variables**

The results of this study indicate that 2020 graduation status was the most significant predictor on the decision of spring sport student-athletes to return in 2020-2021 for an additional season of competition following the cancellation of the spring 2020 sport seasons due to COVID-19. Gender and sport type did not show a significant influence on the decision to return.

The results of this study indicate that spring sport student-athletes at NCAA Division II schools in the Gulf South Conference demonstrate a desire to earn their degree while participating in intercollegiate sports. The impact on Academic Success Rate over the next 4-5 years should be positively impacted by the additional season of competition and academic eligibility that is now granted to student-athletes in all fall and Winter sports along with the spring 2020 student-athletes (NCAA, 2020f).

Challenges Moving Forward

Colleges and universities are now faced with the task of funding additional Athletic scholarships to account for returning student-athletes along with incoming freshman student-athletes. Each institution Will have freedom to make the decision to either continue offering Athletics aid to all returning student-athletes, only allow student-athletes who need academic credits to complete an undergraduate degree to return, or not offer additional athletics aid beyond the four-year competition limit in place prior to COVID-19. How institutions fund these additional scholarships is outside of the influence of the NCAA and will be determined at the institutional level. The NCAA has provided the opportunity for these student-athletes to return for an additional year of competition and academic eligibility without counting toward the sport equivalencies for each sport impacted by COVID-19 during 2020-2021 (NCAA, 2020f).

The results of this study may Help institutions in predicting which student-athletes would most likely choose to return for an additional year of competition. The Gulf South Conference had over 400 student-athletes scheduled to use their final year of eligibility in fall 2020 and winter 2020-2021 sports.

These student-athletes have been granted an additional year of competition and academic eligibility by the NCAA (2020f), but institutions will be faced with the task of funding these athletic scholarships while also recruiting new students and studentathletes. This will create challenging times for institutions that are financially distressed and must choose between helping student-athletes return for an additional year of competition and academic eligibility or financially committing to the next class of incoming students. The researchers for this study plan to replicate this study for fall and winter sport student-athletes in the NCAA Division II Gulf South Conference in August 2021, when the enrollment status of those student-athletes will be known.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a situation the NCAA had never experienced. As decisions were made, and policies created, the goal of the NCAA was to ensure the best outcome for the student-athletes impacted by the pandemic. Allowing student-athletes an additional year of competition and extending the academic eligibility presented a scenario that allowed student-athletes to complete athletic and academic goals without impacting sport equivalencies at each institution (NCAA, 2020f). The institutions were then challenged with funding additional athletics aid for student-athletes that chose to return while continuing to recruit freshman students and student-athletes. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on NCAA sports is not finished, as of the writing of this article, and may continue to have an impact on policies until the pandemic is no longer a national health risk and collegiate sports return to a schedule more like what it was prior to 2020. The long-term impact on institutional finances, academic success rates, and student-athlete health will be areas of study that researchers should consider in the coming years. The researchers for this article hope that identifying which categories of student-athletes are most likely to utilize an additional year of competition and academic eligibility will assist institutions as they determine policy impacting student-athletes impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future Direction

The following questions are areas of research that should be addressed as the NCAA and its member institutions move forward making policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Would allowing student-athletes to transfer without counting athletics aid toward the equivalencies of the transfer institutions provide more portability for student-athletes?
2. Should the NCAA allow student-athletes to return for an additional season of competition if they have completed an undergraduate degree?
3. Which factors will be most significant to fall and winter sport student-athletes as they consider whether to return for an additional season of competition?
4. What impact will the season of competition and academic eligibility waivers have on academic success rates in NCAA Division II?

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