
Distance Learning: A Game Changer

Rodger Bates

Clayton State University
rodgerbates@clayton.edu

Bryan LaBrecque

Clayton State University
bryanlabrecque@clayton.edu

Abstract

Previous research identified a variety of special populations which may be serviced through online learning activities. These have included the military, Native Americans, prisoners, remote occupations, and others. This paper focuses the growing role of distance learning opportunities for student and professional athletes. Special attention is directed at the rules and regulations at the high school and college levels as well as the various types of programs and resources that have been developed for this population. Also, the development of online degree completion and graduate degrees for professional athletes are explored.

Introduction

Distance learning has been a significant component of education at all levels for more than a century. Through its evolution from correspondence courses, the advent of audio, video, interactive video, and now to internet-based learning, distance learning has provided asynchronous opportunities for an increasing number of constituencies (Moore and Kearsley, 2012). In particular, online learning is increasingly a part of the lives of student-athletes at the high school and college levels as well as those individuals pursuing careers as singers, actors, skaters, ballet dancers, golfers, tennis, gymnastics, and other careers that require extensive training from a young age. Because of demanding practice schedules, extensive travel for competition and at times, remote training locations many student-athletes are taking advantage of asynchronous learning opportunities at the secondary and college levels (Bates, 2012). Providing these learning opportunities requires not only creative and flexible program design, but also careful consideration of the rules and regulations associated with the agencies governing student athletes and the administration of these programs. Therefore, it is important that distance learning administrators developing or managing online learning programs for athletes be aware of the requirements and restrictions associated with serving these populations.

Secondary-Level

At the secondary or high school level there are a variety of distance learning programs available. The growth of home schooling has been a significant component of this growth. Online programs for K-12 students have grown significantly in the past 20 years. For example, in 2002, 1.6 million students were enrolled in distance learning courses. This number dramatically increased to 5.8 million in 2014 (Watson, 2016). This increase not only reflects the growth in distance learning supported home schooling, but also the rapid growth of distance learning courses and programs available in the public sector. Specifically, Watson, (2016) found that 28% of all post-secondary students were enrolled in at least one distance education course in high school and half of these were exclusively enrolled in distance learning and the rest in a mix of distance and on-campus courses.

These statistics also reflected a change in the sources of distance learning courses with a large increase in courses being provided by non-profit and public institutions.

In the public sector, distance learning is less an institutional accessory and more an institutional necessity. For example, in Georgia, the Georgia Connections Academy is an online program providing a complete program throughout the state. Many public school systems coordinate this through an Open Campus Program. Likewise, dual-enrolled college/high school students who receive credit for both high school and college course work has been another source of online learning at the secondary-level.

Distance education opportunities for high school students, however, is not limited only to local school district sponsored programs. Students may enroll in any number of online K-12 programs throughout the country. However, to be eligible for interscholastic activities and sports, students who are being either home schooled or taking a majority of the academic courses elsewhere, must be registered at the school at which they are seeking to participate. In addition, they must be enrolled in the equivalent of a minimum of 2.5 Carnegie Units of course work counting towards graduation.

In the case of Georgia (2015), GA Rule 1.20 states that:

“(d) All or part of the course load of a student may be taken online through a virtual school as long as the student’s grades are being kept at the school in which the student is enrolled. Grades from virtual school courses must be on file at the school by the first day of the new semester in order for the student to be eligible.”

Not all states, however, have the same requirements. In Florida for example, a distance learning student is only eligible for extracurricular activities by registering with the school district in a Home Education Program and meeting the requirements of s. 1002.41 F.S. A student cannot be enrolled/registered as a full-time student, working toward high school completion or a diploma with a Florida private school, at the same time he/she is registered in a home education program (FHSAA, 2017)

Achieving eligibility for participation in extracurricular activities and sports is increasingly possible, however, for online learners. This special population must also be concerned about the future acceptance of these academic credits for those seeking further education and participation at the collegiate level. Many states and local school districts accept grades from a variety of sources. Though they are considered legitimate for scholastic competition, they may not be accepted at the collegiate level. Therefore, distance learning based student-athletes seeking to further their academic and athletic activities at next level need to consider the source of their academic credits.

Online learning at the high school level is offered, as previously stated, by many states as part of academic diversity. All of these programs are accredited through the states and their regional accreditation agencies. Student athletes who are enrolled in out of district or state online learning courses and programs must have these courses recorded through their school of record. In addition, to count towards meeting high school requirements and to be acceptable as meeting prerequisites for college eligibility, these courses must be from an accredited source acceptable to future institutions and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

Regional accreditation agencies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) has a list of acceptable online high school programs and courses. Likewise, the Distance Education Accreditation Commission (DEAC) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) also evaluates the quality of online programs and courses at the secondary level. The top 4 schools cited were: Laurel Springs School in Maryland, Brigham Young University Independent Study Program (BYU), the University of Nebraska High School, and James Madison High School. However, because of past concerns with BYU, the NCAA has stated the students not fully enrolled

in the BYU high school program will not receive NCAA athletic eligibility credit for independent study classes (BYU, 2017).

Student athletes get involved in distance learning for a variety of reasons. For the fully home-schooled student, distance learning provides access to a full range of academic courses and enhances and enriches the home-school experience. By working with local school systems, distance learning supports athletic eligibility. Distance learning programs and classes offered through the local school district can also provide academic course work needed to achieve or maintain athletic eligibility. Furthermore, it may provide educational support for those student athletes who seek to graduate early in order to more immediately pursue collegiate competition.

An emerging trend among some elite student athletes is to consider early high school graduation and enrollment in college a semester or two early, especially those seeking to participate in spring football. For fairly obvious reasons, early enrollment and participation in spring drills may provide the incoming student athlete with a competitive advantage over incoming student athletes who enroll the following fall. It is in this context that distance learning has significantly aided the high school student athlete. Traditionally, the NCAA has been concerned with student athletes graduating late from high school, because of the need to complete course requirements that they had not done in their regular academic progression, or attempting to post-pone graduation by being held-back in either junior or senior high school, in order to gain an additional year to develop physically (Infante, 2013). However, with the pressure and attention of early recruitment and the offering of athletic scholarships to underclassmen in high school football and other sports, leaving school before an athlete's time rather than after, is becoming a greater concern to the NCAA. To help assure that this NCAA concern is allayed, a student athlete should consider graduating early only at his/her university's suggestion, since the coaches or compliance officer at the university would need to be in close contact with the prospect to make sure they meet the requirements ahead of time.

Until the advent and growth of online learning opportunities, graduating early or making up credit deficiencies were considerably challenging and frequently involved some questionable tactics. For a distance learning course to be used to create athletic eligibility at the college-level, the course must prepare students for academic work at a four-year college. The courses must be comparable in length and rigor to traditional classroom courses and the student must have regular interaction with the teacher for instruction, evaluation, and assistance during the course. In addition, the course must be completed in a defined time period and that these courses be defined as nontraditional on a student's official high school transcript (NCAA, 2017).

Deciding to graduate early is a major decision and one that can influence an athlete's eligibility and students, parents. Current and future coaches should be aware of the risks and rewards that may be associated with this process. Since this action would likely involve some level of distance learning, program providers must be cognizant of the types of activities provided and how they impact the student-athlete and their high school or future college eligibility.

In addition, for the elite student athlete, the decision to pursue early graduation is a decision that should be made as soon as possible. Once again, distance learning can play a key role in this decision framework. Infante (2013) noted that early graduation is a decision that will require meeting all of the required high school graduation requirements in a compressed time period. Taking high school credit courses as early as junior high school and accelerating one's education by enrolling in summer school or by taking approved online courses early in high school facilitate this process.

Finally, student athletes considering early graduation should verify that their school or district will permit this action. Many public schools limit or prevent early graduation (Infante, 2013). If early graduation is not possible, the student athlete may need to consider transferring to a different high school, often a private school, to finish early. Here again, online schools and distance learning are

particularly flexible models that can provide significant benefit to the student-athlete. Special sports academies, such as IMG Academy, a boarding school designed to address the academic and athletic needs of elite student athletes, many of whom are planning to graduate early (IMG, 2017). Regardless of the type of school attended by the potential early graduating student-athlete, they must make sure the NCAA has approved the high school program or course work taken. This is especially important for those choosing online course work or an online high school degree.

Collegiate-Level

College athletes, in dealing with their rigorous practice, travel and competition schedules frequently must choose academic programs and majors that allow sufficient flexibility. Wolverton (2007) noted that approximately 20% of college athletes are limited in their choice of academic majors. Likewise, due to time constraints, most college athletes only enroll in the minimum number of credit hours (12) during the primary semester of their athletic activities, thus almost requiring their attendance during summer or other compressed academic semesters. With the advent of distance learning courses, many athletic-academic advisors have encouraged enrollment in distance learning courses as a way to better accommodate the demands of a sport and the requirements for academic eligibility. Knowledge of distance learning practices, their strengths, limitations, and the institutional and NCAA regulations have increasingly been noted in the job requirements of athletic academic advisors (Indeed, 2017).

The NCAA (2010) has stipulated that student athletes cannot be extended any special opportunities that are not available to all students (Bates, 2012). In particular, special attention and emphasis is placed on academic classes in general and distance learning courses in particular. The NCAA, when investigating potential instances of academic fraud, frequently view course enrollments where a majority of the students enrolled are athletes (Willens, 2015). This is particularly important in distant learning or other forms of asynchronous learning. The accreditation probation and the ongoing NCAA investigation at the University of North Carolina has centered on potential academic fraud specifically involving course enrollment policies and documentation (Ridpath, 2016).

It should be clear then, that distance learning programs ought to consider student athlete participation when developing their program(s). In further support of this caution, in the fall of 2010, new requirements for nontraditional education were approved which stressed that distance learning courses must include regular and ongoing student/teacher interaction as a component of the learning experience. In addition, the same stipulations mentioned previously with regard to the acceptability on online courses acceptable for high school student athletes also applies to the content of college-level courses. This ruling specifically targeted correspondence-type courses, such as those made famous by BYU in the movie "The Blind Side." However, distance learning courses which combine offline learning with interaction and feedback by way of online access, are not prohibited (Bates, 2012).

Nevertheless, there has been a significant rise in the number of institutions sanctioned by the NCAA for academic fraud. Over the past decade, 15 institutions were sanctioned for academic fraud, many which involved fraudulent assistance to athletes that were frequently associated with online courses. The aforementioned investigation at the University of North Carolina has revealed that over an 18-year period, 3,100 students, about half of them athletes took classes, frequently online, that were created and graded without academic oversight (Kerkhoff, 2016). This and numerous other instances of academic fraud have tarnished the reputation of student-athletes and likewise the integrity of many distance learning courses and programs (Willens, 2015).

Despite the potential issues of academic fraud, athletic programs at the collegiate-level increasingly have embraced distance learning as a vital component of the curriculum options for their athletes. Kreb and Locker (2009), in studying the perceptions, practices, and concerns about distance learning among student athletes noted that the flexibility of time management was very important. In

particular, the ability to use their time away from campus for travel and competition, especially in revenue-producing sports, was very significant. Another noteworthy advantage of distance learning courses was that they did not have to deal with stereotypes about student-athletes from their professors and their fellow classmates. In fact, they felt that the distance learning environment helped them feel better able to express their views and opinions. The availability of some self-paced courses were also noted as helpful because of the flexibility of being able to take exams and quizzes during less demanding time periods. On the other hand, however, many of these advantages also were concerns in that the less-structured environment of online learning, and at times the lack of fixed deadlines were risks that they incurred. They noted that time management issues and the need for advanced planning and even limited interaction with some of their professors were constant threats to their academic success. Krieb and Locker suggested that blended or hybrid learning courses were an important option for many of these student athletes.

It is at the intersection of access, availability and concerns about academic discipline and effective time management that is increasingly of concern to athletic academic advisors. Martin and James (2012) stress the importance of developing these skills for all classes and to work with their academic advisors to keep on track for success in their courses, especially those distance learning courses which can easily slip under the radar during the heat of competition. They also stress that with international student athletes, they need to continually be aware of additional NCAA policies and regulations, such as signing I-20 forms when traveling.

As distance learning has become more sophisticated, the technology for its delivery has worked hard to keep pace. This has been an essential element in the appeal of distance learning for student athletes. For example, Mike Jarvis, a former college basketball coach, worked with V-Brick in developing i-Pod and MP4 based educational programs (V-Brick, 2006). Today, the use of multi-platform internet based delivery systems have been a significant factor in expanding the opportunities for all students, including athletes, to access online courses. The smart phone has made the mobile classroom a reality.

The role of distance learning and collegiate athletics is not restricted to the United States. The European Union has sought to address the educational needs of elite student athletes by scrutinizing the availability of academic services as well as post-athletic career services. Acquilina and Henry (2010) specifically note that the availability of distance learning is a critical component of the support of student athletes. Likewise, in a study of top level Croatian athletes, it was found that their technical knowledge of modern information technology contributed to their high rate of academic success in e-learning courses (ITI, 2010).

Professional-Level

Professional athletes comprise another niche population for asynchronous distance education. Confronted with the demands of long training/practice periods and extensive travel for competition, many athletes entering the professional ranks have not completed their higher educational goals (Bates, 2012). Increasingly, professional sports in the United States are promoting distance learning as an important means in preparing professional athletes for post-performance careers.

The National Football League (NFL), beginning with rookie orientation, stresses the importance of continuing education and degree completion. With the importance of preparation for the NFL Combines (tryouts), most college players do not complete their final semester in college. With many players now entering the NFL Draft early, they have even more course work to complete before earning their undergraduate degree. Tom Kowalski (2017), the NFL Consultant for Continuing Education, notes that distance learning requires a very different skills set than traditional classroom learning, and that while some athletes have been quite successful adjusting to the process, others have not. The more successful athletes have been those who have been self-disciplined, have sufficient computer skills, and can work independently and often with little interaction with

instructors. Also, they need to make sure that any courses they take online are from an accredited institution, and if it is not from their home institution, it can be successfully transferred.

In the area of professional basketball. The NBA specifies that teams cannot draft a player until one year beyond graduation of their normal high school class, though large majority of NBA players attend college for at least one year, and many for two or three years, though less than 70% have completed a degree program (Bates, 2012). Likewise, the WNBA requires that all players must have completed (not graduated) four years of college or two years of international competition. Both leagues have promoted degree completion programs which include academic advising, transcript evaluation, degree planning, graduate school entrance examination preparation and tutoring services (NBA, 2007). Additionally, all teams in the NBA have a player development assistant who works with players on their academic goals.

Unlike the NFL, NBA, and WNBA, professional baseball frequently recruits players directly out of high school, and as a result has not been as responsive to continuing academic needs of its players. In fact, given the minor league system and the frequent practice of trading players, higher education plans are left up to the individual. However, Richard Atros, academic adviser to the New York Mets, has worked with players within their system in conjunction with a distance learning program through Drexel University (Salemi, 2006). Further examples of individual efforts to complete their degrees include Al Leiter, a major league pitcher who completed his degree through the distance learning program at Penn State University as did Jamie Moyer at Indiana University, so the use of online programs in pro baseball is not unprecedented.

Because of its inherent schedule and logistics benefits, distance learning alternatives represent a significant opportunity for many of these professional athletes to return to college to complete their post-secondary educations. In fact, it may actually be the most appropriate avenue for a large percentage of professional athletes. To better illustrate this point, one only needs to take a closer look at the available player data.

According to the NCAA, Division I athletes in all sports combined boast a Graduation Success Rate (GSR) of nearly 85%. Broken by gender, this number represents 91% of female athletes and 79% of male athletes. Notably, Division I men's football athletes trailed the average for all sports, averaging 74%, while Division I men's basketball was slightly higher at 76%. Dropping down to Division II produces GSR of 51% for football and 58% for basketball (NCAA Graduation Rate, 2016). As stated above, Major League Baseball recruits the majority of its players directly out of high school so their college graduation rate is less significant to this study. In addition, since the overwhelming majority of professional athletes today are men, this illustration leans heavily towards assessing male athlete opportunities to return to college. Of course in recent years the number of women athletes having professional sports opportunities is growing and will most probably become a bigger part of this story in the coming years.

What this data projects is that in the NFL for instance, at least 30% of the incoming players have not graduated from college. Since the population of NFL players each year is 1,696 players and the average career length in the NFL of 3.3 years, over 25% (approximated 500 athletes) of the league is represented by first time NFL players. The vast majority of these come directly from the college ranks, which means that there are nearly 150 college football players joining the NFL every year who have not finished their degree requirements.

One of the biggest hurdles for pro athletes to return for their degrees involves convenience and logistics. Specifically, from a paperwork, application, and transcript perspective, it is a far simpler process for a pro athlete to return to their original college. The curriculum generally follows a consistent approach, the athlete has a certain level of comfort with their school, and there is minimal paperwork necessary to re-enroll. Unfortunately, pro athletes' residences are most frequently not a practical distance from their original college either during their playing career or after their time in the league is concluded. A review of NFL rosters indicates that of the 1,696 current NFL players,

only 5% percent play for teams that are even in the same state as their original college. Combine that with the fact that of the 5%, nearly half of those came from two states (California and Florida) which themselves are significantly large, it becomes clear that re-enrolling at their original college is most often logistically unrealistic without a more innovative approach. This is where distance learning programs can positively influence the number, and eventual success of their pro athletes wishing to finish their degree.

Conclusion

Previous research identified a variety of special populations which may be serviced through online learning activities. These have included the military, Native Americans, prisoners, remote occupations and others. One growing area suitable for distance learning opportunities involves the student and professional athlete populations.

At the high-school level, the availability of online learning opportunities has increased the learning resources and opportunities available to student athletes at the secondary level. It has provided supplemental learning for students in public and private schools as well as among home schooled students. The availability of online remedial learning opportunities has addressed the needs of some less prepared student athletes as well as providing accelerated learning opportunities for elite student athletes seeking to graduate early. Online learning is increasingly an intrinsic component of the high school learning environment. Online college courses for dual enrollment programs with local colleges lessen the demands of their first year college experience as they continue their athletic careers.

At the collegiate level, student athletes have embraced online learning as an important component of their educational programs. Its advantages are more flexible time management and asynchronous learning opportunities. The disadvantages of lack of structure and accountability are being addressed through active programs of advisement and counseling by athletic academic advisors. However, the almost complete immersion of student athletes into the uses of today's technology have established a firm foundation for further use of distance learning for this population. Finally, the NCAA is taking a more active and aggressive position in monitoring the role or potential role of academic fraud, with special emphasis on nontraditional learning programs.

At the professional level, professional athletes are exhibiting increasing desire to complete their degrees. The sheer number of collegiate athletes leaving school early, without completing their degree requirements, combined with the relatively short duration of professional playing careers, has resulted in a significant number of pro athletes searching for a means to complete their degrees. To meet this demand, the availability of online alternatives is rapidly expanding. More and more, universities that develop and place athletes in professional sports should expand their distance learning options, as the demand, simplicity and convenience of degree completion for their alumni will continue to grow.

Regardless of the level of competition, distance learning is a game changer for athletes and the institutions seeking to serve them. Distance learning administrators at high schools, universities, or even professional franchises need to consider the range of distance learning options and the specific needs of their athletes. At the school and collegiate levels, numerous rules and regulations must be considered as part of the equation of service. At the professional level, the athletes and advisors must continually be aware of the changing options available and the best strategies for degree completion or the pursuit of advanced degrees. For distance learning to be a game changer, it must play within the boundaries of the game.

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