Strategies for Academic Improvement at Rutgers University

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Abstract

A college athlete has the unique opportunity to both play their sport at a competitive level, while at the same time balancing the work that goes into earning their degree. College athletes that graduate, as compared to their non-athlete counterparts, experience more positive long-term outcomes (Gallup, 2020) and because of this, Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey has placed emphasis on this for their student athletes. Rutgers, as well as every other college/university have their own standards in place for student athletes that are overseen by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Academic standards have become more important over the past two decades and since it affects eligibility, academic departments began focusing on the quality of academic support student athletes were receiving (Dilley-Knoles et al. 2017). Interviews were conducted with members of the Rutgers University Football Academic Support Staff to understand what strategies they implemented to raise student-athlete GPA. Findings from these interviews determined the strategies that were implemented that lead to an increase in overall team GPA. The specific strategies discussed in chapter 4 are improved infrastructure, operation and approach, top-down cohesion, and advisor connection. Using the strategies from the findings, recommendations were then formulated. These recommendations are for any sports team at any collegiate level looking to improve their teams academic success.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Collegiate sports are a very important part of our society because of the extracurricular experience for kids but also the popularity that surrounds them. These sports have consistently become more populous and have even reached an all-time high this past year with nearly half a million student athletes spread across the country (Meyers, 2018). In 1982, which is the first year this data was tracked, there were only 231,000 student athletes, so in less than 40 years the amount of student athletes has nearly doubled (Meyers, 2018). This boom in collegiate sports is due to a combination of more recognized sports for women but also due to the addition of sports teams to different universities across the different divisions. These sports create a culture for student athletes in which they become part of a group that is diverse and attracts attention that others want to be part of. It makes kids grow up wanting to be skilled enough at a sport so they will one day be able to call themselves a collegiate athlete. A Gallup poll conducted on behalf of the NCAA found that, "college graduates who participated in NCAA athletics experience a host of positive long-term life outcomes at greater rates than non-athletes" (Gallup, 2020, para 1). Sports are also economically important to universities because of the revenue they bring in for the school. These are all reasons that influence the rise in college sports and the participation in the number of athletes.

A college education is crucial for most individuals because it provides the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful in a career. Creating the appropriate skill set can prepare an individual for their career but also help advance them in that career or propel them into a different occupation (The Art Institutes, 2018). It also provides great networking opportunities, in many instances career paths can be influenced or created by the people met along the way. The main goal is working towards a high paying job and according to the US Bureau of Labor

Statistics, when an individual earns a bachelor's degree, they earn 64% more than those with a high school diploma per week (The Art Institutes, 2018). An even more impressive statistic is that student athletes have an advantage in this even while balancing education and athletics. The Gallup poll found that, “39% of NCAA student athletes earn an advanced degree, compared with non-athletes" (Gallup, 2020, para 4).

Being a student athlete is an extremely time consuming, exhausting, and difficult task due to the many hours dedicated to focusing on their sport, combined with the strive to get good grades and earn a degree. Student athletes have to deal with all the normal struggles of the average student, while also meeting the responsibilities and demands of the sport they chose to play (Thomas, 2019). However, unlike regular students the NCAA requires student athletes to maintain a certain GPA in order to be considered eligible for their season (Thomas, 2019). Changes to the GPA requirements are common for the NCAA and universities have become accustomed to this as well; preparing their academic staff to assist and guide the student athletes they oversee. Penn State is an example of a school that has consistently adjusted to these GPA increases, and has demonstrated a gradual rise in student athlete GPA. In 2017 they broke multiple of their own records for fall semester scores and overall GPA averages. Penn State recorded 520 student athletes with a GPA above 3.0, 253 of them on the Dean's List, both these numbers being the highest since 2013 (News, 2018). The impressive semester for Penn State was also the highest overall GPA since 2014 (News, 2018). This kind of success is a combination of the student athletes’ effort and push from their respected coaching staffs but most importantly due to the support and guidance they receive from their academic support staff. Sandy Barbour, Penn State Director of Athletics praised the academic staff for their support in helping these student athletes obtain high academic achievements (News, 2018). A fellow Big10 University

located right beside Penn State has also seen this kind of achievement and rise in GPA by their student athletes.

Rutgers University located in New Brunswick, New Jersey has demonstrated a gradual rise in football student athlete GPA from 2004-2019; many of these years have also seen record-breaking semesters and benchmark highs. Similar to Penn State, Rutgers Football student athletes have demonstrated an effort to hit these highs, but the academic support staff has provided some much needed help. An academic support staff is comprised of a variety of members who specialize in support inside and outside school facilities to ensure academic success (American Institutes for Research, 2020). The purpose of this paper is to understand the specific changes and strategies the Rutgers Football Academic Support staff implemented which led to this GPA increase.

Definition of Key Terms

- Academic Progress Rate (APR): Holds institutions accountable for the academic progress of their student athletes through a team-based metric that accounts for the eligibility and retention of each student-athlete for each academic term.
- Academic Support Staff: A variety of staff members who provide specialized support to students while they utilize school facilities.
- Athletic Director (AD): Administrator who supervises and oversees athletic programs at a college, high school or private institution. They are responsible for budgeting, promotion, and scheduling for sports teams.
- GPA (Grade Point Average): Number representing the average value of the accumulated final grades earned in courses over time.

- Graduation Success Rate: Student athlete graduation success rate is the proportion of first-year, full time student athletes who entered a school on athletics aid and graduated from that institution within six years.
- NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association): Non-profit organization that regulates student athletes and organizes the athletic programs of colleges and universities helping over 480,000 college student-athletes.
- Strategy: A plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall goal.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project is to explore the programmatic strategies used by the Rutgers University Football Academic Support Staff, which lead to student athlete GPAs to increase from 2004-2019; The specific question is to describe the strategies for student athlete academic improvement at Rutgers University from 2004-2019

Limitations of the Project

There were three limitations that occurred during this project. First, there have not been many studies done on specific strategies that revolved around an academic support staff. There is plenty of data released by either the NCAA or Universities about academics and statistics but not strategies that influenced it. This kind of study and the information gathered could lead to other studies that look to further understand the complexities of academic support.

The next limitation was that this study was specific to academic improvement for the Rutgers Football Team from the years 2004-2019. There was a very limited number of people that could answer the questions pertaining to this topic and it was necessary to gather enough information during the interview process in order to be considered saturated (Rowley, 2012).

Getting in contact with these individuals and finding time to do the interviews was difficult due to their limited free time.

The third limitation is that this project does have an interpretive standpoint that may not be aware of larger dynamics that could be at play. The effective strategies that will be conveyed were implemented by the academic support staff but certain levels of instructional support come from a higher department which will not be discussed in this project.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this project is to explore the programmatic strategies used by the Rutgers University Football Academic Support Staff, which lead to student athlete GPAs to increase from 2004-2019; The specific question is to describe the strategies for student athlete academic improvement at Rutgers University from 2004-2019

The goals of this literature review are to define the necessity of student athlete academic success, investigate what universities around the country have done to improve student athlete success, and the changes made by the NCAA in terms of academic standards. This study is primarily focused on NCAA athletes and the improvement made from an academic standpoint, specifically regarding the cumulative GPA of sports teams.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is an organization that oversees and regulates the athletic programs of colleges and universities with their oversight extending into academics as well. The NCAA periodically makes changes to their academic standards policy; one of the largest in recent history came in 2011 (Hosick, 2019). The changes the NCAA handed down revolved around higher GPAs for current players, higher standards for new/transfer players, and penalties for not hitting specific benchmarks (Hosick, 2019). NCAA President Mark Emmert claimed this was a necessary change the NCAA needed to make because it demonstrated a focus on the values of intercollegiate athletics and was also a signal to the world about their care for academics (Hosick, 2019). With academic performance set to a new high, universities needed to comply with these new standards, which would require strengthening their academic services for student athletes. Every institution has an academic support staff for their student athletes who are responsible for keeping track of the athlete's academic progress. Since academics was now in the spotlight the athletic departments were a lot more focused on the

quality of support given by the academic support staff (Dilley-Knoles et al. 2017). The NCAA was pushing the need for student athletes to succeed in the classroom by claiming, “decisions about academic standards have never been more data-based” (Paskus, 2012, p. 51).

The universities not only needed their student athletes to perform better, but also wanted them to perform better (Dilley-Knoles et. al., 2017) because by doing so would satisfy the NCAA requirements so they would not raise the standards again. For example, a study done in 2003 of 69 institutions across six of the major conferences found that adequate academic support and advising resulted in student athlete graduation rates greater than or equal to the NCAA national average (Gaston-Gayles, 2003). This positive boost in academics at the time held the NCAA off of universities' backs for a few years, but inevitably the NCAA would raise standards a few years later, putting more pressure on the athletes. Pressure to perform in the classroom is tough but the constant pressure to perform on the field often affects the student athletes’ ability to perform in the classroom (Dilley-Knoles et al., 2017). A study done by Gary Burns of Wright State University and Steve Dunn of the University of Wisconsin showed that academic support staff’s work, and not only for GPA but also for things like self-confidence and their futures (Burns et. al., 2013). The study evaluated 158 student athletes from 11 D1 programs and found that athletes who gave positive evaluations of their academic support staff showed a relationship with positive self-efficacy and career decision-making (Burns et. al., 2013). This is proving to be true at the University of Georgia where academic success for student athletes has been on a continuous rise. In 2014 the graduation success rate of their student athletes hit an all time high of 84% (UGA Today, 2014) followed by an even higher rate in 2020 when they posted an 87% graduation success rate (University of Georgia Athletics, 2020). Athletics director J. Reid Parker commended the student athletes of Georgia but also highlighted the hard work and dedication of

the Georgia Academic Support staff. The Georgia staff has demonstrated their approach to academic support is working and even documented the overview and strategies they implemented in 2017. Their staff consists of various counselors, specialists, and coordinators who all have a different role in providing the support necessary for the student athletes. This staff also introduced what they call "The Objective Based Academic Support System" which based on their PowerPoint is how they teach their student athletes to approach and manage their studies especially when it comes to tutoring (UGA.edu, 2017). This system teaches the student athletes to treat this as a job in which they must be goal oriented, have a solid routine, be purpose driven, and focus on a particular topic (UGA.edu, 2017). The Georgia Academic Support staff places a lot of focus on their tutor system and even combines it with task coordinators who make sure the tutoring is effective and the student athlete is benefiting (UGA.edu, 2017). The strategies implemented by the Georgia Academic Support staff have demonstrated why these staffs are effective and crucial for a student-athlete's academic success.

Theoretical Framework

For this project the research that will be conducted will be in the form of interviewing specific individuals from the Rutgers Football Academic Support staff to analyze the specific strategies that went into paving the way to an overall GPA improvement from 2004-2019. Many student athletes, specifically football players, often require significant assistance and leadership from their academic support staff in order for them to adequately balance their academics and sport (Dilley-Knowles et al. 2017).

CLT, or Complexity Leadership Theory is a theory related to this field that examines complex adaptive systems and the dynamics that specifically go into creating administrative synergy in order to achieve positive results and reduce chaos (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). Complex

adaptive systems are the driving force in understanding how to create a social structure, be flexible, and solve new problems (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). This theory, which is normally applied to bureaucracy and the administrative expertise that goes into running big business or government, can be used to explain smaller versions of a team or business. Organizational administrators are the key point in understanding these adaptive systems and how they are capable of creating order. These administrators are required to formulate relationships in order to deal with factors such as external changes, organizational coordination, and allocation of supplies (Baltaci & Balci, 2017).

CLT can help explain the possible outcomes from this research due to the fact that when assessed at a smaller scale it helps explain how chaotic environments can be turned into high functioning organizations. The academic staff will act as the complex adaptive system discussed in CLT, otherwise known as the organizational administrators. It is expected in this research that over the years the staff was able to take control of the chaotic environment of more than 100 football players with a range of strengths and weaknesses in classroom performance. Due to the steady rise in GPA over the years it is expected that order was created, techniques and relationships were formed, and the administrators were able to take control of the situation.

Another theory that relates to this field and expands on the research that will be conducted is Social Capital Theory. Social Capital has been examined for years and there are multiple different branches of the theory, but the core values of social capital are what relate very well. A broad definition of social capital consists of any facet of social structure that has the purpose to create value for the individuals in that structure (Seibert et al., 2001). This definition plays off the ideas of physical capital and human capital but says that relationships and interactions that create positive changes for people are specifically what social capital is all about

(Seibert et al., 2001). This specific theory attempts to apply social capital to career success by creating a network of paths with different structural holes that will end up determining the success of the individual. One of the structural aspects that help determine success is called social resources. These resources consist of access to information, access to resources, and career sponsorship (Seibert et al. 2001), which depending on the level of resources is a key factor in determining success.

The core values of Social Capital Theory are possible driving factors for the possible outcomes of this research. A pivotal part of the student athlete experience is the relationship that is formed with the academic staff. The trust that is built in the relationship and the social resource knowledge that the staff has in order to push for success is necessary. Social Capital Theory could potentially explain the positive outcomes of relationships and interactions that lead to an overall GPA increase from 2004-2019.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this project is to explore the programmatic strategies used by the Rutgers University Football Academic Support Staff, which lead to student athlete GPAs to increase from 2004-2019; The specific question is to describe the strategies for student athlete academic improvement at Rutgers University from 2004-2019

Designing and Planning Interviews

Interviews were conducted with members of the Rutgers University Football Academic Support Staff and one individual who was Director of Operations in order to explore the specific strategies they implemented to raise GPA. The interviews conducted were intended to collect factual information each individual possessed in regards to their current tenure with the staff. Each individual was interviewed one on one in a semi-structured format in order to promote longer, more descriptive answers pertaining to the strategies used (Rowley, 2012). The semi-structured format is defined as, "varying number of questions, and varying degree of adaptation of questions and question order to accommodate the interviewee" (Rowley, p. 1, 2012). This style allows for flexibility and for a more improvisational structure so dialogue that opens other areas of discussion could be explored.

The questions that were asked to the interviewees were specifically intended to gain insight about the research question. The interview script was ten written out structured questions intended to prompt a response about a specific topic. The semi-structured format of the interview allowed for other questions to be formulated and asked on the basis of the answers received. The interview questions were designed to answer the research question; what strategies has the Rutgers University Football Academic Support Staff implemented to improve their student athlete GPA? Most of the structured questions asked were in regards to specific years, fluxions in

data, and the strategies implemented at the time. Certain interview questions had sub-questions to make sure the interview stayed on topic and the main questions were answered sufficiently (Rowley, 2012). Prior to the interview an expert reviewed the questions. The questions were also re-examined prior to conducting the interviews in order to prevent unnecessary jargon (Rowley, 2012). The four interviews conducted were about 30 minutes each on average, long enough to understand all the information they were willing to convey and short enough that each interviewee was fully engaged and avoided fatigue. According to the Journal of Medical Imaging and Radiation Sciences interviews conducted via phone or screen as a rule, "should be fairly short, after 30 minutes or so fatigue or inattention may impact the quality of the data " (Bolderston, p. 72, 2012). Some of the interviews were a little over 30 minutes while some were a little under 30 minutes due to the fact some of the individuals were more knowledgeable than others and they deserved more time to explain their information. The interviews that went over 30 minutes were just a few minutes longer and none of the interviewees displayed signs of fatigue.

Choosing Participants

The individuals selected have been at Rutgers for many years and are still employed as part of the Football Academic Support Staff. These four participants have a very close relationship with Rutgers and have an established rapport in their respected fields. The first interviewee is Steve W., Executive Director of Academic Support and has been on staff since 2004. Second is Rick M., a former football player and wrestler for Rutgers who joined the academic support staff in 2010. Third is Brian B., another former football player who joined the academic support staff in 2005. Fourth is another former football player Wyatt G., Wyatt spent the past 19 years working as Director of Operations before recently being promoted to Associate

Athletic Director of football. The availability of each of the interviewees was limited due to their busy schedules but by working into their personal schedules time was found in order to conduct the interviews. Contact was initially made through email (Appendix A) to indicate who the researcher was and to provide a brief description of the researcher and purpose of research. A second email (Appendix B) was then sent to obtain consent and assure confidentiality as well as to schedule interviews via zoom call.

Conducting Interviews

At the beginning of the interview a recording app called "Temi" was started in order to capture and save all the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. The Temi app records the interview and creates a transcript as it records. The Temi app does collect personal data about the user of the app but none of the recorded data or transcripts is ever sold or given to 3rd party companies. The app was used only to assist the researcher in creating transcripts of the interview. All interviewees were given knowledge that the interview was going to be recorded and their consent was provided. Once consent had been provided the app was started in order to begin the transcription process and interview. The interview began with some brief regards about how the individuals were doing since all four are previously known and have an established rapport with the researcher. This means no warm-up questions were necessary prior to the interview going into the specific questions needed to answer the research question. Once the brief regards concluded the researcher began with the structured questions (Appendix C) but was never restricted to just those specific questions. As previously stated these were semi-structured interviews so oftentimes the interview expanded on different topics which kept both parties engaged. All interviewees were interested and enjoyed explaining the information they had, considering it has been their job for years and many of the suggestions were their own. Allowing

them to speak freely and detail whatever they chose was a technique which not only garnered more information but is what allowed for branch off improvisational questions. The branch off questions helped gather more information about topics that were quickly discussed by the participant but of high interest to the researcher. When the structured questions concluded and there were no other topics that needed further explanation, the interviews finished. When the interview finished the Temi app was turned off so that the transcription could be processed. Notes were taken during the interview and immediately following the conclusion of the interview the researcher wrote down extensive notes about their feelings and observations. After the interviews concluded the recording was played back and the transcript was checked for any misheard words and corrections. The Temi app does a good job at transcription on its own but it was necessary to go through the transcription multiple times with the audio recording to ensure accuracy. The interviewees were given the opportunity to review the transcript post interview if they found it necessary.

Data Analysis

Immediately after the interviews concluded the transcripts were reviewed and prior to data analysis were re-reviewed twice more to ensure accuracy. The process of re-review was done in order to create codes that allowed for a more accurate and easily documented structure of the data. The steps laid out in the academic book “Research Design” by John and David Creswell were used to analyze the data from the interviews. Specifically used was the “coding” technique which is defined as, “the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks and writing a word representing a category in the margins” (Creswell, p. 193, 2018) The analysis began by using the coding process to find consistencies between the interviews. From this process 61 codes emerged from the data. Once the codes were organized the process continued by putting these codes into

12 different categories that were identified. These categories were then condensed into themes, which is the final step of the coding process. Using this technique allowed for an easier understanding of the interview data and creates common ground between all the interviews. The four interviews were transcribed verbatim by the Temi app and checked for accuracy by the researcher multiple times so that the coding technique provided for accurate data analysis. Four themes were found between the interviews that assisted in determining the most useful strategies that aided in GPA improvement.

This project was submitted to Virginia Tech IRB (Appendix D) and was determined to not infringe on any HHS or FDA regulations. Participation by the interviewees was completely voluntary and the consent form provided to them assured them of their rights and the option to withdraw at any point was always open.

Chapter 4: Findings and Conclusion

The purpose of this project is to explore the programmatic strategies used by the Rutgers University Football Academic Support Staff, which lead to student athlete GPAs to increase from 2004-2019; The specific question is to describe the strategies for student athlete academic improvement at Rutgers University from 2004-2019

The interviews were conducted with the participants mentioned in "Methods", Steve W., Rick M., Brian B., and Wyatt G.. These four participants are males with a combined 63 years of experience at Rutgers University. Five potential participants were sent invitations, of which five responded positively for a 100% response rate. Of the five respondents, four were interviewed until saturation was reached. Once the interviews were completed and the data was analyzed it was determined that there were four themes that were the most influential in raising student-athlete GPA. The four themes were derived from the original 61 codes that were identified, resulting in 12 categories which then emerged into themes. These themes will now be referred to as strategies. The GPA data begins in 2004, which is when Steve W. was hired to be the Director of Football Academic Support. Steve was very useful in understanding which specific strategies were implemented and how this affected the team because he was one of the key members in orchestrating these changes when he arrived at Rutgers. At the time of Steve's arrival the team GPA was 2.570. Over the next 15 years the Rutgers Football Team produced an upward trend in GPA improvement highlighted by record breaking Academic Progress Rate (APR) and GPA scores. From 2013-2014 they achieved a team GPA of 2.951, the highest ever documented. The final year of the data 2018-2019, the team recorded a cumulative GPA of 2.845 demonstrating that the strategies that began in 2004 helped the Rutgers Football Team gradually raise their cumulative team GPA. It was determined that the specific strategies implemented that caused the

team GPA to rise were improved infrastructure, operation and approach, top-down cohesion, and advisor connection.

Strategy 1: Improved Infrastructure

Appropriate educational infrastructure provides the necessary environment for student athletes to be successful in school while also balancing their sport. Evidence is strong that high status infrastructure creates better instruction, student outcomes, and many other benefits (Teixeira, 2017). In 2004 the Rutgers Football academic support center also known as, "The Hale Center" was lacking in appropriate infrastructure. For a team and staff over 120 people there were only six meeting rooms allocated for academic support to conduct all of their daily operations. The teams' computer lab was a small room that only had eight computers, continuously causing the problem of lack of equipment to provide for everyone. With digital learning and e-classes on the rise the lack of computers did not create an effective ecosystem to support a team of this magnitude (Dong et. al., 2009). The lack of human labor was also prevalent for the academic staff with only 2 full-time employees prior to the changes in 2004. Steve W. discusses first impressions of Hale Center:

"2004 is when they first started putting money and resources and manpower into football academic services…I got there in February…there was like eight computers and that was the computer lab…there was no rooms down on the left, the building stops. So if football was having a team meeting, my office was in the back and you were not supposed to walk through the position rooms or team room. We had no place. I mean, we were operating out of about six rooms and like I said, no computer lab, so to speak, so it was crazy.

2004 is when this all began to change, starting with the hiring of Steve W. as Director of Football Academic Support. For the first 2 weeks on the job Steve simply observed the day-to-

day operations to understand where and why things went wrong, very quickly realizing the Hale Center's inability to provide for the student-athletes. Updates to an academic support center such as the Hale Center, will enhance and strengthen the services and attention the academic staff can provide to their team (Southeastern, 2009). Renovations and updates were immediately started due to the shared vision and solid relationship between the Athletic Director (AD), Head Football Coach (HC), and Steve.

Wyatt G. on shared vision and renovation:

"I think when the renovation happened in 04, you know, Steve and Coaches (Head Coach) vision. We had two computer labs to work out of, academics had their own area with advisors, additional meeting space. We had our own academic center, which we never had. So I think when you're able to do that stuff in-house and then be able to have study hall monitors in place, tutors in the building, and advisors being able to check on how tutoring is going or that the players are there. That type of stuff was so different than what is was before, because the space wasn't available."

A brand new wing was built in the Hale Center to provide plenty of room for the academic staff to conduct their business. This wing featured brand new rooms for the entire academic staff as well as enough rooms for separate tutoring and personal meetings. The renovation also included two brand new computer labs with over 30 computers for the athletes to use. Along with the hiring of Steve W. they hired two more full time academic advisors as well as a true learning specialist. Steve took the assessment of learning disabilities very seriously and the specialist was able to help student-athletes who would normally have their condition go undiagnosed. The renovation allowed the academic staff to conduct all their operations in house because prior to it they would have different obligations spread across campus because there was

not enough room at the Hale Center. For example, multiple tutor sessions would be occurring on different parts of campus while simultaneously an advisor was meeting with an athlete and study hall was in session.

Rick M. on structure changes:

"Yeah, the structure was much less, put together. So once we got the building change it really did open up a lot more things for academics. We got the two computer labs, we got more rooms for one-on-one tutoring along with supplemental instructions. So that really did help catapult the support."

Prior to 2004 there was simply not enough room or employees to accommodate all the responsibilities of an academic support staff. This renovation allowed all academic operations to be conducted in one area and the staff was able to monitor everything that occurred which as Wyatt G. says, "Prior to renovation none was possible". Infrastructure renovation was a key discussion point during all the interviews conducted and was emphasized by all participants as a key strategy, which is why it is considered the beginning strategy to the teams' increased academic success.

Strategy 2: Operation and Approach

Before the changes implemented in 2004 the day-to-day operations and the approach to academic support was disconnected. The strategies that were implemented were direct support, book check/time management, required study hall, and the summer bridge program. These strategies were implemented and outlined by Steve and confirmed by the other participants.

Brian B. discusses direct support:

"I think what happened was they started working with the students more directly…It's for your wellbeing, and for me that's most important. Whether you're a walk-on or whether

you're a starter, scholarship, whatever, so fourth. You're part of the Rutgers family. And my job is to make sure you feel secure, and that you feel comfortable coming to talk to me about whatever it is. We might not always agree, but we can agree to disagree."

Direct support was a much more personalized way of keeping track of the student-athletes to ensure each individual received the attention and support they needed. In 2004 the academic staff started providing things such as course selection and degree process, priority registration, and the assessment of learning disabilities. They put more focus on each individual and built a relationship with them so that there was no more disconnect. The academic advisors were now aware of every facet of the athletes' academic progress and were better equipped to closely monitor each individual.

Steve W. discusses his vision:

"After 2 weeks of observing, then it was like, okay here is how I want to run things, you know, with all the football kids this is how we're going to operate. It was just having the ability to connect and kind of say, okay, to be successful on the field, you've got to do extra lift, extra treatment, you know, all the extra effort, you've got to be organized, you've got to have your time management laid out. And it's the same thing academically, So being able to have that one-on-one Sunday, was a big part of it."

Advisors would meet on a weekly basis to review each player to make sure they were staying attentive to their academics. This was reinforced by a daily book check of the athletes' time management sheet. Every Sunday the players would meet in the team meeting room with the academic staff to review the week ahead and address any issues or concerns. During this meeting every athlete would also be given a personalized time management sheet that had every obligation marked down with time and date. Time management sheets were viewed very highly

by the academic staff and were not allowed to be lost, which reinforced personal responsibility. Monday-Friday the athletes would briefly meet with their advisor to go through the process of book check. This process required the athlete to schedule their day by bringing their time management sheet to their advisor with written details about how they planned to use their time. This would allow the advisor to be aware of the athletes' obligations as well as help the athlete learn how to be successful. This was regarded as a very important and necessary step in the team's academic success and ultimately began a culture shift in the program that will be discussed later.

Rick M. discusses specific operation changes:

"I think the biggest thing that stands out is we had required study hall, the book check was something that was major that we still do today. So every morning we have breakfast bookcheck, we'll meet with our advisor or it would just be Steve, where we have to check-in with him daily academically. And then the study hall is definitely a constant one thing."

Study hall also had a new approach and with the renovations to the Hale Center the advisors were better equipped to monitor and track daily operations. Athletes were allowed to come and go as they pleased to get their weekly-required study hall hours completed. Now that it was taking place in the same building, advisors and study hall monitors were able to make sure the athletes were staying on task and not cheating the system. There was also a system put into place that would require different amounts of required hours depending on an individual athlete's academic success. As a freshman the required hours were set at 10 per week specifically to help teach time management, work ethic, and college workload. As an athlete progressed in their degree they could have hours reduced or added depending on their GPA. The staff wanted to reward those who did well in school but also needed those who did not to know why they had

hours added; the ultimate goal was for them to succeed. These operations however were in some cases very personalized, if a student was working to their max and demonstrating care and dedication to their studies but still not hitting grade benchmarks they were not punished. This is in part how trust was built between the Academic staff and their players and ultimately one of the most important parts that caused the GPA. Staff relationship and connection will be discussed in length in a later section.

Rick M. discusses summer bridge:

"It literally is a bridge from highschool to college, it is a nice smooth transition and gives the athletes an opportunity to dip their toe in the water and not be fully entrenched with a full schedule. All our kids who come in the fall, they're going to be playing their first season and also starting their first semester, which can be very overwhelming and challenging"

The summer bridge program was found to be one of the most discussed and useful strategies that were implemented in 2004. Summer bridge is when a team brings in their freshman recruits at the beginning of the summer to start workouts but also to get them acclimated to the college experience. These three months are quite literally a bridge from high school to college that exposes the student-athletes to college lifestyle, school work ethic, and athletic and academic balance. The athletes take classes in the summer that specifically work on their math and writing skills that they will need to begin their degree. At the time these classes did not count towards their degree but they were required to even be admitted to begin their degree. A few years later this began to change and these classes started counting towards their degree but were still Rutgers requirements. Either way it benefited the athletes to get these classes taken care of so during the fall and the season they were not overwhelmed by the workload. Understanding the work that goes into a couple classes during the summer will help

the athlete realize how difficult 12-15 credits can be during a semester. The summer bridge program started in 2004 and quickly became one of the most important strategies in the success of the Rutgers Football team.

Strategy 3: Top-Down Cohesion

The relationship between the academic staff, the coaching staff, and the athletic director is crucial in creating the right culture as well as maintaining it in order to create long lasting success. For the academic staff to be successful in overseeing 100 18-23 year old college football players they need to have the support and same vision as those at the top. For Rutgers, this is exactly what occurred during the 2004 transition. The AD and Head Coach were committed alongside Steve W. and provided him the resources he needed in order to be successful. They all had the same hope and vision to create a successful team on the field but also a successful team in the classroom.

Steve W. discusses AD and Head Coach relationship:

"The Head Coach sets the tempo for the sport right? So that's where it all starts. And when I got hired the athletic director was fully on board with we're going to take the APR and be number one in the country…I mean, that was him spending money to help us with what we needed. It was important to the athletic director. It was important to the football coach."

The Head Coach and his assistant coaches had just the right amount of involvement in academics, enough to emphasize and push the players but removed enough that Steve had full autonomy to run things his way. Steve understood that even in the world of academics, the coaches set the tempo and have plenty of influence. They understood each other and this assisted in their common understanding and shared goals. The coaches and Steve created a blueprint together starting with a ranking system of all the players based on how much attention they

needed. The categories were labeled as “no problem, “keep an eye on”, “hot”, and “super hot”. The coaching staff and academic staff used this to be in sync with each other so they were always on the same page. This also affected requirements like study hall hours, tutoring sessions, and class attendance checks. They also developed relationships with different Rutgers departments and professors. They did not want any special treatment but certainly wanted the faculty more involved with student-athletes. The Head Coach was adamant on his players being scholar athletes and demonstrating respect across campus. They would even do a professor appreciation each weekend during games to emphasize they were all in this together.

The Head Coach and Steve had a good relationship and were able to develop a culture that promoted intelligent football players. This in part was due to the fact Steve was a Division 1 football coach prior to getting involved with academic support. He understood both aspects of developing a student-athlete and was considered by many as the best man for this kind of position.

Rick M. on the hiring of Steve W.:

“I just think about coach (Head Coach) hiring Steve and knowing that he had a coaching background. I think he trusted Steve just on that fact alone, that he knows what the coaching life is about and knows what the football life is about. And I think Steve was the perfect guy to be in that position, to kind of be the bridge between the coaches and the academic world.”

This allowed Steve to develop a relationship with the coaching staff but also with the players. He was relatable to the players and drew them in because in their eyes he was an academic coach. The culture shifted, academic success began and goals previously set were finally being reached. When the 2004 transition began the AD and Head Coach told Steve they wanted Rutgers football to be #1 in the country for Academic Progress Rate or APR. Introduced

in 2003 by the NCAA, APR "holds institutions accountable for the academic progress of their student-athletes through a team-based metric that accounts for the eligibility and retention of each student-athlete for each academic term" (Thomas, nd. 2020). In 2009 they accomplished this goal and ranked #1 in the country for APR across all universities, edging out schools such as Duke and Northwestern. They recorded an APR score of 992, which at the time was the highest ever-recorded in college football. This was also the 3rd consecutive year Rutgers Football was #1 in APR for state universities across the nation. Due to the top-down cohesion and shared vision of the AD, Head Coach, and Steve, they were able to produce some of the top results in the country. The strategies they implemented in 2004 worked and many of them are still in effect today.

Strategy 4: Advisor Connection

Rick M. on advisor connection:

"The relationship is built on trust and closeness, just opening up to each other in a collaborative nature. And the more you get to know a student I think the better off the relationship is going to be."

Academic advisors develop many different types of relationships in their profession but the most important is the one they develop with the players they oversee. When Rutgers Football transitioned in 2004 and hired a larger academic staff they were able to divide the advisors to oversee smaller groups of players. This allowed the advisors to develop even closer relationships and spend more time with each individual player. The depth of relationship will always vary, in some cases it is just keeping a student-athlete eligible and other times an advisor becomes their parent away from home. In this profession communication is necessary and when advising for a football team there are all sorts of different players that they will have to build a relationship

with. Being a football coach for 17 years, Steve W. knew the many personalities that can be represented on a team and that in some instances they may not always get along. This knowledge led him to the understanding that the appropriate diversity in a staff would be the best way to accommodate the many different types of players that will come and go.

Steve W. discusses staff diversity:

"When you're dealing with this, there's always personalities right? And so your staff needs to be, you gotta have some diversity on your staff, whether it's men, women, black, white. That certain kids can relate to…you're always looking to find that right fit."

During every interview this topic was discussed and it was unanimously agreed upon as one of the most important and necessary dynamics to improve academics. To build off of that, it was also found that a big majority of academic advisors during these years were former athletes. It is important to point out how much this impacts the relationship between player and advisor.

Brian B. discusses relationships:

"It's the relationships that you build with the students to kind of give them the encouragement and the wherewithal to go out and achieve. Its like, you can do this, I'm living proof of it, I was a walk-on, I earned a scholarship, I played, I have done all this stuff"

The former athletes, many of which were football players, have lived the player lifestyle and know what exactly it takes to be successful. It builds trust between the two and demonstrates that what the advisor is asking the player to do is certainly doable and possible, because they've done it.

The strategies implemented by the Rutgers Football Academic Support Staff produced record years in APR and team GPA, but more importantly influenced an upward trend in GPA over a span of 15 years. These strategies worked for Rutgers Football and can work for other

collegiate teams as well. Most of the strategies that began in 2004 are still in effect today and all those interviewed are still working for the Rutgers Football Academic Staff.

Conclusion

Four interviews were conducted with individuals who have all been employed at Rutgers University since at least 2004. Steve, who at the time was the Director of Football Academic Support, was widely considered by the other 3 participants to be the main reason behind the GPA increase. He was responsible for coming in and quickly understanding the problems in order to create the plan and strategies that were directly implemented in 2004. Steve was very humble during his interview and would always give the credit to his staff and to the players for their hard work and determination. Steve and the academic staff were able to take these strategies, build effective relationships, and lay a solid foundation that resulted in years of academic excellence.

Steve W. and the Rutgers Football Academic Support Staff are excellent examples of the theories explained in the Theoretical Framework of this project. Their representation of organizational administrators capable of creating social structure, formulating relationships, and solving problems perfectly encapsulates Complexity Leadership Theory. The main focus of Complexity Leadership Theory is complex adaptive systems and how they create synergy. The individuals mentioned in this paper can be considered the complex adaptive systems creating the administrative synergy between the coaching staff, the student-athletes, and the rest of the academic staff. Social Capital Theory was also represented in this project and explained some positive outcomes through the findings. The social resources and structure created by the academic advisors that build trust and a relationship with their student-athletes was very present in the findings. Social capital consists of any facet of social structure that has the purpose to create value for the individuals in that structure (Seibert et al., 2001). In the case of the Rutgers

Academic Support Staff the social structure was created by the staff and specifically designed to create value for the individuals in that structure. Complexity Leadership Theory and Social Capital Theory were both represented in the findings of this study.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

The purpose of this project is to explore the programmatic strategies used by the Rutgers University Football Academic Support Staff, which lead to student athlete GPAs to increase from 2004-2019; The specific question is to describe the strategies for student athlete academic improvement at Rutgers University from 2004-2019

Based on the research and the information this study unveiled, there are four recommendations that can be considered by other collegiate teams looking to improve academic success. Following the similar path Rutgers Football took, the first recommendation would be to ensure the academic center provides the appropriate environment for success. Having adequate amounts of room for the student-athletes to be productive but also for the Academic Support Staff to be comfortable and to conduct their daily operations. As online learning and E-classes become even more prevalent it is absolutely necessary that a team have a computer lab or personal computers provided to them. Appropriate infrastructure and technology is an effective step in promoting team academic success.

The second recommendation is to develop an effective daily operation and approach around the idea of direct support. Direct support removes disconnect between advisor and athlete and places emphasis on a more personable attitude towards each athlete. The advisor that oversees his/her specific student-athletes should be the one assisting in book check and study hall hours. The tactics outlined in “Operation and Approach” and “Top Down Cohesion” should also be applied if not already being practiced at the university/college. Integral components within these strategies include book check/time management sheets, required study hall, tier based ranking system, department/professor outreach, and most importantly summer bridge. Most, if not all, Division 1 football programs have summer bridge now required but for other levels of

sports and other sports entirely, having this program for incoming freshmen can make a huge difference in their transition.

The third recommendation is crucial for the team's Director of Academic Support to understand. They need to develop a solid relationship with the coaching staff, specifically the head coach, and also the athletic director. Everybody may not have the same vision and the relationship may not be perfect but a common understanding of one another is necessary for getting certain things accomplished. If Academic Support needs something, being on good terms with these key figures can likely ensure respectful cooperation. Having a good relationship with the coaching staff will facilitate the acceptable level of involvement they have in terms of academics. The level of involvement a coaching staff has will vary based on how both sides operate. Too much involvement and the coaches may start to micromanage but too little involvement gives the impression they simply don't care about academics. This can be understood and explored through the relationship the two staffs build.

The fourth recommendation is the most important and should be considered by universities as the first and foremost step in academic improvement. If only one strategy could be implemented by a university this would be the one to choose. The recommendation is to develop the right Academic Support Staff that has the ability to work with and manage the different types of student-athletes represented on that team. Having academic advisors that can connect and build relationships with their student-athletes will be much more effective in promoting academic success. Former athletes, especially former athletes of the sport they're advising, make for excellent choices for an academic advisor. This promotes trust between the advisor and athlete, because the advisor has lived that lifestyle and was successful during their time.

As a researcher and former student-athlete for the Rutgers Football Team, I am confident in my results and recommendations. The general viewpoint is from my time as an undergraduate student at Rutgers as well as a graduate student at Virginia Tech. I have first hand knowledge and experience with academic support and it supports my trust in these findings. The strategies mentioned are all things that I went through and were real-life experiences for me. The renovated facilities of the Hale Center provided all the room necessary and encouraged academic success. The operation and approach Steve W. implemented in 2004 is still in effect today and summer bridge made my transition to college very smooth. The top-down cohesion and relationships were always on display during my time with the team and every academic advisor while I was there was a former athlete who understood us. The four individuals I interviewed are four of the most genuine, hard-working, and honest people I have ever met. They made my experience at Rutgers much more comfortable through the ups and downs of a college career. Rick M. was my academic advisor for five years and I speak so highly of him because of the assistance and attention he gave me through some very difficult years. Academic advisors are very important to a sports team but more so than that, they develop meaningful relationships with many of their athletes.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Initial Email

Verbal Script for Recruitment

Hello _____, it is Austin Rosa, and I am currently working towards the completion of my Masters degree and I will be conducting my research on the Rutgers Football Academic Support staff. Part of this project includes multiple semi-structured, zoom interviews with the academic advisors and football support staff of Rutgers University. Due to your involvement and knowledge within this program I am asking if you would like to participate. The interview would be no more than 30 minutes and will be conducted by myself.

Appendix B- Interview Protocol

Hello! Thank you for consenting to being part of my project as we continue the interview process. Again, I am Austin Rosa and I am a Leadership Master's Degree Candidate. As part of my Virginia Tech Master's Degree Project I will be conducting interviews. My graduation project is to understand the strategies the Rutgers University Football Academic Support staff implemented to increase student athlete GPA from 2004-2018. These interviews will provide knowledge and feedback to help guide my project. The entire interview will be recorded and transcribed for data collection and analysis.

Appendix C- Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. What did the Rutgers Football Academic Staff do to improve their student athlete GPA?

2. Since this takes place over nearly 20 years can you describe when and who implemented these different changes that helped increase student athlete GPA?

3. What specifically were the most important changes that have been made over this time frame and why were they the most important?

4. What kinds of changes occurred with the employees or infrastructure and did this help the GPA rise? (Ex: New Director of Academic Support or new computer lab)

5. Was this a coordinated effort by just the Academic Staff or did the coaching staff or athletic department have any influence?

6. If others coordinated with the Academic Support Staff what kinds of changes were considered and which ones were agreed upon?

7. Have these changes continued over time or have they continued to be refined or changed completely to adapt

8. Who initiated these changes and did they provide reasoning or document why these changes were implemented?

9. Were these changes immediate or happened over an extended period of time?

10. Did the NCAA cause any of these changes to happen?

Appendix D- Human Research Exemption Approval Letter

VIRGINIA TECH

Division of Scholarly Integrity and Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp

MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 20, 2020

TO: Richard James Rateau

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires October 29, 2024)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Strategies for Academic Improvement at Rutgers University

IRB NUMBER: **20-962**

Based on the submitted project description and items listed in the Special Instructions section found on Page 2, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) has determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by HHS and FDA regulations.

Further review and approval by the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) is not required because this is not human research. This determination applies only to the activities described in the submitted project description and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made you must immediately submit an Amendment to the HRPP for a new determination. Your amendment must include a description of the changes and you must upload all revised documents. At that time, the HRPP will review the submission activities to confirm the original "Not Research" decision or to advise if a new application must be made.

If there are additional undisclosed components that you feel merit a change in this initial determination, please contact our office for a consultation.

Please be aware that receiving a "Not Research" Determination is not the same as IRB review and approval of the activity. You are NOT to use IRB consent forms or templates for these activities. If you have any questions, please contact the Virginia Tech HRPP office at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu.

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As:	**Not Research**
Protocol Determination Date:	**November 20, 2020**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.