
Career Insight: Author Collin Williams Jr. on What It Takes To Be a Collegiate Athlete

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*Collin Williams Jr. is an educator and researcher who recently co-authored the book *The Miseducation of the Student Athlete: How to Fix College Sports*, along with Wharton professor emeritus Kenneth Shropshire. Williams graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in sociology, Africana studies and consumer psychology and went on to get his doctorate in higher education at U of Penn's Graduate School of Education. He is now a regional director at RISE, a nonprofit organization dedicated to harnessing the power of sports to improve race relations and drive social progress. KWHS caught up with him to ask a few questions about the demands of playing college sports.*

Knowledge@Wharton High School: What is your best advice for a 17-year-old who has excelled in her sport for years and is considering whether or not to play sports in college?

Collin Williams Jr.: Start putting more time and effort into school and sports than you ever have. Spend much less time with friends, family, and minimize your social life. If you do that and are genuinely happy, play. If you're not, you should know college will be a more intense version of that.

High expectations lead to stronger outcomes, so I wouldn't tell a talented 17-year-old to give up on their sport unless they've given it their best shot as a student-athlete. At worst, they're forced to make a tough decision and give up on their sport. At best, they find out they're capable of being a student and an athlete at a high level and reap the incredible benefits of both. Instead of focusing on what they won't be able to do, my advice to parents and educators would be to increase academic rigor, assess how college-ready they are, and prepare them, as soon as possible, for college-level coursework. *Don't give up, get ready.*

KWHS: What factors on both the athletic and the educational sides should a student athlete consider when making this decision to play collegiate sports?

Williams: TIME. Time and sacrifice. As a collegiate athlete, you will spend 40-50 hours a week on your sport. That's a standard adult work week. Then you have school. Being successful at both means there is practically no time for other extracurricular activities and interests. Thus, the decision ultimately comes down to the sacrifices. How important are study abroad, student government, internships, Greek life, etc.? Success hinges on handling sacrifice and managing time.

KWHS: Is playing in college always the right decision for a student who is considered an elite athlete?

Williams: This is a great question, but one that has so many different variables and outcomes (for example, is college even a possibility with sport?). Playing in college is not always the right decision for a student who is considered an elite athlete. In the end, the decision is about the individual and what their long-term goals and aspirations are. As mentioned earlier, an elite athlete has to decide for themselves what they will have to sacrifice to compete in college athletics, as well as if — down the road — they will be happy they made those sacrifices. Core to answering that question is another question: what is it that you want most out of college? For professional athletes, especially in the NFL, it is often said that “sport is an experience, not a career.” Thus, at the core of the *Miseducation of the Student Athlete* is helping student athletes make informed decisions by asking the tough questions earlier on.

KWHS: What do you wish more high school students understood before committing to play competitively at a college

or a university?

Williams: Few students have people to fully and honestly explain to them the extent to which they will labor. In the two sports that generate the largest sums of money (men's basketball and football), these recent high school graduates are overwhelmingly black and poor; their coaches are mostly white and outrageously well compensated. Because of NCAA policies, they are not allowed to have agents to negotiate terms of their engagement and relationships with multimillion dollar enterprises to which they commit to live, learn, and work.

So many of these students are first in their families to attend college. They do not know what questions to ask when coaches seduce them and their parents with what sounds like life-changing opportunities and sure pathways to the NFL, NBA, where in reality, less than 2% will be drafted. Because of this, they start their freshman year thinking they have full scholarships, four years of guaranteed financial support; they do not understand that coaches determine whether their scholarships are renewed from one year to the next, or what happens if they get injured and can no longer play. Too little information is given to them about academics, campus life outside of athletics, and the importance of participating in enriching educational experiences (for example, study abroad, internships in their fields, and collaborative research projects with faculty members). They are teenagers who do not know enough about exploitation – they just want to play the sport they love while taking advantage of a “free” college scholarship.

Many colleges and universities take advantage of the limited information that prospective students and their families have about the business of intercollegiate athletics. While institutions of higher education are supposed to be hallmarks of enlightenment and learning, too many athletics departments are driven by ticket sales, television contracts, alumni donations, and winning seasons that protect coaches from termination. This often occurs at the expense of academic success, personal development, and the accumulation of professional skills and experiences that poise student athletes to compete successfully for meaningful careers and admission to graduate schools. By the time they realize they have been manipulated, it is too late.