
If You Plan to Play Sports in College, How Will You Prepare for ‘Real Life?’

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These questions are on the minds of so many high school student-athletes as they consider their future paths. Do I play a Division I sport in college? If I do, will I have a life outside that sport? Will I have time to study and choose a major? What if I get injured and can't play that sport any longer? Will I like the school anyway? Should I play Division II or Division III instead?

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I — D-I for short — is the highest level of intercollegiate athletics in the U.S. D-I schools, of which there are 335, recruit the best athletes, have bigger budgets and more scholarship money available than Division II or Division III.

But the promise of D-I or playing for any NCAA division in college is not without setbacks. It has become increasingly difficult for college athletes to balance school and sports, much less a social life, leading to serious economic, professional and emotional consequences for young people.

In a recent interview, UCLA football quarterback Josh Rosen said, “football and school don't go together. ... Trying to do both is like trying to do two full-time jobs.” His view highlighted the struggle facing student athletes in getting a good education and having a rewarding college experience while giving their all to their sport. The University of North Carolina dealt with this issue by letting student athletes sign up for fake classes where the only requirement was to submit one paper. It boosted their GPAs and kept them eligible to play. This “paper-class” scandal has led to calls for NCAA reforms.

*In a new book, Kenneth L. Shropshire and Collin Williams Jr. offer solutions to ensure that student athletes get a meaningful education since the vast majority will not end up playing professionally. Shropshire is the CEO of the Global Sport Institute, and Wharton professor emeritus of legal studies and business ethics, and Williams is the director of leadership and education programs for the Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality. They recently joined the [Knowledge@Wharton show on SiriusXM channel 111](#) to discuss their book, *The Miseducation of the Student Athlete: How to Fix College Sports*. Visit the [Related Links](#) section with this article to listen to the podcast of the interview.*

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.

Knowledge@Wharton: Collin, I understand the idea for this book came out of your dissertation here at the University of Pennsylvania.

Collin Williams Jr.: Yes, it did. In 2014, I set out on this path to talk to as many Division I student athletes in revenue-generating sports, specifically men's football, about what their student-athlete experience was like. What was it like to go to college and also be playing a sport at the second-highest tier possible in the United States? The conversation always began with time. It was impossible for most of them to do both, to be a student and to be an athlete. The time commitment had grown so much. The sports have become so big that the 40 to 50 hours a week that they spend on sports just did not allow them enough time to be dedicated students and engage in other purposeful activities on campus.

Knowledge@Wharton: When you hear the comments of Josh Rosen, what is your reaction?

Williams: He's completely right. My reaction is: how do we have this honest conversation? We are promising student

athletes a free education in exchange for the time and commitment that they dedicate to their sports. However, the very nature of the commitment does not allow them to be students fully. How do we be honest about that, first, and then reform the system to make sure they can do both in the times that they spend on their respective campuses?

Knowledge@Wharton: Can college sports be fixed?

Kenneth L. Shropshire: Not in your or my lifetime. Maybe Collin's, but it's going to take a long time. Our primary purpose is to redirect the conversation, to refocus it on a path that can serve to fix it. That gets away from the conversation about paying athletes, which is perfectly fine. It gets away from the conversation about whether people are spending too much money on facilities and that sort of thing. That is not the conversation. The conversation we need to have is, how do we ensure that these men and women who participate in college sports go on to have the best lives possible after investing this amount of time and energy into this activity?

Knowledge@Wharton: Is it fair to say that there is a difference between the revenue-generating sports and the non-revenue generating sports in terms of the athlete being able to handle both?

Shropshire: I don't think so. I think for the most part, at the highest level, if you look at places that have won the Learfield or Sears trophy, Stanford, you win the most national championships in all of these sports. These athletes are dedicated around the clock, year-round to their sport. The only difference is the amount of dollars that they bring into the university.

You can have a different philosophical conversation about allocation of resources and the like, but in terms of the time commitment, if you are a tennis player, if you are a lacrosse player, if you are a gymnast, you put in tremendous amounts of time. And none of these sports are seasonal anymore. You are working on that sport year-round in the hours allocated and, if you're going to be a champion, [you spend] hours that are not allocated specifically by the university and NCAA. You find time to do it on your own.

Williams: Ken is 100% right. The time commitment is consistent across all divisions. I think the point that sometimes gets lost is the outcomes. When we disaggregate the data based upon division and sport, we see that in certain places the outcomes are different.

For the most part, Division II and Division III athletes, as the NCAA touts all of the time, do graduate at rates higher than their non-sport peers. And they often have life satisfaction ratings that are higher than their non-sport peers. The difference is that for a lot of the Division I athletes, particularly in revenue-generating sports, the outcomes are not as ideal. There has to be some intentional focus in that space because we know that they aren't benefiting in the same ways that their Division II and Division III peers are.

Knowledge@Wharton: These young men and women are coming into an unfamiliar setting and adapting to college life. That's a daunting task for some.

Williams: Absolutely. For so many of these athletes, they're first-generation college students. They haven't been socialized into the college space the way their non-sport peers have. While a traditional student spends time researching and looking for schools and doing campus visits, a lot of the recruited athletes have folks coming to their homes and selling college to them. That makes it incredibly impactful. That makes a huge difference upon the ways in which they view the school space and how they think about their roles and identities, of whether or not they are students first or athletes first. It also impacts how the folks on their campuses view them, including their peers, their professors, faculty and the like.

Shropshire: That's absolutely right. I'm thinking back even in my time, a bunch of African-American guys largely

from South Central Los Angeles is where Stanford was recruiting at the time. We were all together one day and saw another one of our recruits with a group of white students coming out of class. This is the first time we saw somebody off on their own. He was coming out of a sociology class. I said, "What are you doing brother? He said, "I'm assimilating." We joke about that to this day, the formality of the language that he used and the idea of how unique it was to integrate into this community that we had no familiarity with.

That story recreates itself today, except the intensity is not just the racial background but the athletic background, that you've just been involved with athletes the entire time. Do you integrate into the rest of the campus or not?

Knowledge@Wharton: Who has the responsibility of helping these athletes acclimate to college life? Does that fall on the university, the coaches?

Shropshire: We are pretty clear that it takes everybody to refocus this. There are certainly those who have more power than others. In the book we talk about the sports power matrix. Certainly, there's a great deal of power in the NCAA, but there's a great deal of power in the college presidents, athletic directors, also the students themselves.

We began to see them wield some of this power with unionization and other activities over the past couple of years. There needs to be a real focus on making this change. As is so often the case with social movements, it may not be for them, but it could be for the future if the change begins.

Williams: We also have to add others in the ecosystem that goes down to the family, that goes down to the communities that these young men and women are coming from. Even to the media and the way they tell the stories. They are the folks that have the power to talk about athletes and what their stories are like. We need to talk about these stories more and really talk about where these folks are coming from and the struggles that they face. Because it really does take the village. There is no way for us to say that we can just put the entire onus of reform on another institution or just on the NCAA. It takes every stakeholder who says they care about student athletes and what happens to them after sports to really step up and do this together.

Knowledge@Wharton: Should the NCAA bear the brunt of responsibility on these issues that need to be dealt with?

Williams: The NCAA are the people that are most visible, and again it's not just on them. But I think as the folks who are most visible, as the folks who have taken up the onus to ensure fairness and safety in intercollegiate athletics, they have to reprioritize at times. They have to spend a little bit more time thinking about what types of examples and messages they're sending when we see students get away with certain things around academic fraud, and then see others get called out.

One of the major issues is that a disproportionate amount of the attention has been on impermissible benefits and defending amateurism, and looking at the money that they may be missing out on — that side of it as opposed to the education. I really think the conversation starts with the NCAA putting education at the forefront and having the decisions that they make indicate that. It's really setting that example that we are first and foremost educational institutions, and we as a policing body prioritize that.

Shropshire: People who are late to the party are those who are most likely to criticize the NCAA without setting forth a path to success, a path to change. The NCAA sits there sort of like the government. It's not going away, not from any circumstance that I can see. There are very good people there, and it's a very difficult change to make. It is a monolith. It is the enterprise. It's hard to move this thing around. I think we lose a lot of energy criticizing and focusing in on the NCAA rather than presenting changes we need to make in whatever way they can be made. There's a lot of independence that exists now among the individual conferences and the individual schools in terms of what they can do.

Knowledge@Wharton: In the book, you lay out a long list of recommendations, including mandating academic boot camps for entering student athletes and professional boot camps for exiting student athletes. Talk about that.

Shropshire: It makes sense, doesn't it? Before you go to a job, you get the kind of guidance that you need to be successful in your job. In college sports, the early time that you spend is largely early ball of whatever sport you're playing, as opposed to the academic setting that you are coming into.

Ideally, if you're going to spend the dollars, we're really focused on individual counseling. You're taking individuals in at all different levels. You're helping them to map out a game plan for success. For some, it's going to be that you can finish in four years or five years. For others, it's going to be an eight-year path or a 10-year path if you want to be a physician or something like that. It's to figure out realistically how that can be done. On the back end, everybody is not going to be a professional athlete, but there's the different kind of guidance to give to those who focus their entire life up until this point at 21, 22 on playing a sport. How do you help them transition into realizing you've got to live a real life?

Knowledge@Wharton: You also recommend making maximum use of summers for educational and professional development. A lot of student athletes are probably working towards their craft during the summer if they think they are going to be a professional athlete. But so many of them are not going to be, and that two-month window is a great opportunity to take more classes or work an internship.

Williams: I think what informed that is the response that I got from student athletes. In my dissertation, I spoke to 40 men across all five power conferences at 20 different institutions. One thing that practically all of them mentioned was the lack of ability to have an internship.

When we think about the different roles and identities that they have, there is an immense amount of hours spent on developing the athletic craft. They have to spend some time within the classroom. But when we get back to this issue of not having enough time, some of those guys have never been in a professional work environment. Not a job shadow, not an internship for a couple of weeks. The only job they've ever really had was being a student-athlete.

For some who are able to use the connections that they have through the university and land an opportunity, they don't cut it in those spaces because this is all new. They haven't had to use these transferrable skills. They've never been at a copy machine or sent an email with an attachment. There are some really essential skills that you've got to have to be competitive. For folks who are trained to think about competing, the way that they spoke about it was, "I am not able to compete with my peers who have had two to three or four years of internships, and now I don't know what to do because I'm not used to not being able to compete."

Knowledge@Wharton: Ken, you also talk about really enforcing the hour restrictions that athletes are supposed to have as a key ingredient as well.

Shropshire: Of all of the recommendations we make, this is probably the most difficult one. An NCAA official once said to me, "Well, the horse is already out of the barn." The idea is that the hours that you're not spending preparing to be successful on the field of play, you're giving the other side the advantage. You're allowing them to get greater preparation.

The idea of regulating precisely how much time the institution requires you to participate in practice is not even done very well. If we could at least handle that, the idea that these individual athletes are going to work like crazy and be in the gym and train on their own, that's going to be difficult to reel back. But that goes back to the whole counseling phase. That goes back to using the 24th hour of the day at least to think about your future, to think about your career beyond sports.

Knowledge@Wharton: Let's finish up with the issue of making sure athletes are going to classes and doing their academic work. That has been a problem for quite some time. Just look at the paper-classes scandal at the University of North Carolina.

Williams: That one is pretty self explanatory, right? There's no value to being in a class where you're not learning anything, where you're not gaining any critical thinking skills, or you're not being taught to look at different situations and decipher how to go one way or another.

We've got to be genuine about prioritizing education. We've got to say that these women and men are folks that we are going to teach and not just keep eligible. If we don't, they just get moved along this trajectory. That starts even before college. You see that at Amateur Athletic Union levels and junior and high schools where we're just passing folks along, hoping that the issue is no longer there by the time they get where we're hoping they get to. The reality is it's just not feasible. We've got to focus our energies on making sure that the courses are genuinely courses.