

HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ELIGIBILITY POLICIES:
A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES
OF PUBLIC SCHOOL ATHLETIC DIRECTORS

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Education

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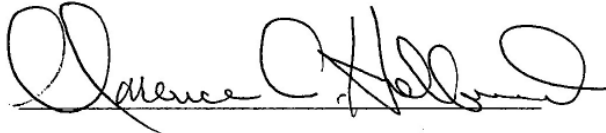
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April 11, 2007

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by Harlie G. Miller

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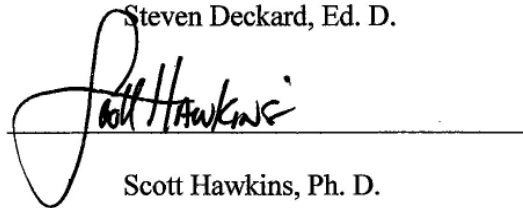
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ABSTRACT

Harlie G. Miller: HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ELIGIBILITY POLICIES:
A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL
ATHLETIC DIRECTORS (Under the direction of Dr. Clarence C. Holland) School
of Education, 2007.

High school students in North Carolina public schools must meet academic eligibility requirements in order to compete on school sponsored teams. While all districts must follow the state association guidelines, local education agencies may elect to create policies that are more rigorous. This mixed-methods study investigated the impact of the academic eligibility policies on high school campuses. The research relied heavily upon interviews with high school athletic directors, but also analyzed measures of student academic success. Interviewees were male and female, white and African-American. They had varied years of experience, and were from schools that were different geographically and demographically, including two districts with different eligibility requirements. The results highlight similarities and dissimilarities in the perspectives and opinions of athletic directors. The greatest variance of opinions concerned where the standard of academic eligibility should be established. This topic becomes increasingly important in an environment of high academic expectations and as participation in high school sports reaches unprecedented levels, both in terms of the number of students involved and the amount of money spent on athletic programs.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the following individuals, friends, and family members; for it is assured that no one reaches this peak in life without the support of many others who offer words of support and deeds of kindness.

First and foremost, to my Heavenly Father, whose strength, grace, and providence, through His Son, have always been abundantly evident;

To my wonderful wife, Kellie, and my beloved children, Houston and MaKayla, who lovingly and patiently endured the inconvenience of my absences, but always supported me in the goal of completing post-graduate education;

To my family: mother, Frances Miller; father, Harlie Miller, Sr. (deceased); and brother, Donald Miller (deceased); for supporting my endeavors and overlooking my shortcomings as I pursued them. Also to my sister Susan Koutsky and her husband, Dale, who provided encouragement and a great place to escape and write;

To my in-laws, Ben and Annette Bush, whose faithfulness was unparalleled;

To my friend and pastor, Rev. Paul D. Luttrell, who helped me over twenty years ago to see the opportunity of serving the Lord in the field of education;

To my fellow co-laborers at Gospel Baptist Church, Greensboro, N.C., who have been constant examples of biblical love and Christian encouragement;

To the many colleagues and mentors I have labored with at Vandalia Christian School in Greensboro, N.C., along with those at Salem Baptist Christian School and Piedmont Baptist College in Winston-Salem, N.C., who have been role-models and faithful friends, proving that iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17).

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction to the Study

America is a land of diversity, and yet at least one common thread runs through all regions of the landscape: High school sports. Urban or rural, large or small, affluent or meager, communities rally to support local high school teams. The overall level of community support and enthusiasm hinges on several variables, including both current success and past tradition. However, one factor is arguably the most volatile of all when it comes to high school sports, the academic eligibility policy. Such policies attempt to insure student-athletes are meeting an acceptable standard of scholastic achievement before they put on the team uniform. To most, this logic seems intuitively correct; however, these policies frequently generate questions regarding their value and usefulness to the educational purposes of school.

Problem Statement

Does a higher standard for academic achievement benefit or hinder the student-athlete?

To gain insight on the issue, this study seeks to analyze the perspectives of high school athletic directors from two public school systems. As interscholastic athletic administrators, these individuals offer authentic perspectives and insight into the struggles and successes they have experienced on their campuses. While several differences among the athletic directors and their schools are noted in the study, none is more prominent than the fact that one district imposes the academic eligibility

standard of the state's athletic association, while the other district enforces a more rigorous standard.

Virtually every high school, regardless of its size, is a member of a sports league or conference, and competes against those from other schools of nearby geographic locations (Rooney, 1974). While this description has changed very little over the past several decades, the educational demands imposed by law, economics, and academic expectations have changed. Thus, the issue of academic eligibility for athletes is not only more important than ever before, but also more complex. Some contend that athletic participation is a right, not a privilege, and therefore these policies are not necessary, and actually become a deterrent to the educational objectives of school. This research seeks to assist policy makers as they strive to implement guidelines that meet the demands of a challenging academic environment.

The significance of athletics in high school, and particularly the associated rules for student recruitment, participation, and retention remains a topic that generates much discussion. While research indicates that athletics offers many positives for the student, school, and community, there are often stress points, and even battle lines, created by its existence in an otherwise academically dominant environment.

Each year American high schools, as part of their extracurricular programs, sponsor thousands of sports teams involving millions of students, and for the most part, they share one common concern. Regardless of a school's location, or of the diversity of its athletes, teams, or win-loss records, every athlete, coach, athletic director, and principal must address the academic eligibility policy. In most cases,

without meeting the qualifications set forth in this policy, students find they are unable to participate, regardless of their athletic ability.

Athletic eligibility policies are characteristically a significant part of interscholastic sports. Thus, to understand the cultural and educational trends that have molded these policies, it is necessary to examine the history and development of athletics as a high school phenomenon. This study first traces the origin of high school sports in America, including the educational influences and social pressures that came to bear on schools as they began to embrace athletic competition and sponsor teams. Since the beginning of interscholastic sports, there have been discussions over the role, value, and importance of the academic qualifications of those who play. Educators, parents, and communities have invested much in the academic and athletic success of the students; therefore, this topic typically generates heated debate among a wide variety of stakeholders.

This dissertation is a mixed-methods research study of high school academic eligibility policies. While the study evaluates quantitative data, it relies heavily upon interview data from athletic directors in two public school systems located in the piedmont region of North Carolina. The systems are relatively similar in size, socioeconomics, and demographics. However, each system enforces a different policy regarding the academic eligibility standards necessary for students to be qualified to participate in interscholastic sports. This first chapter presents the background of the study, including a historical look at interscholastic sports. It also states the problem addressed in the study, describes its significance, and presents a

summary of the research methods used. The chapter concludes by defining the key terms used in the research.

Background of the Study

The role of sports in American society has been elevated to extraordinary levels over the last century in general, and over the last several decades in particular. What was shared community affection just a few decades ago is now a national addiction. It is an obsession without boundaries, crossing all socioeconomic levels, educational attainment, and ethnic divides. This background study examines the elevation of sports in the culture and the influences that brought athletics to the high school setting. It also details the establishment and implementation of the academic eligibility policies that have influenced interscholastic sports for nearly three decades.

Comparison with the Past

The expansion of sports to its current overarching status originated with the societal conditions present at the turn of the twentieth century and was a by-product of changes influenced by the urbanization and industrialization of America. During the twenty years that followed the Civil War, leisure time for adults and young people was generally very limited, and structured involvement in sporting programs by adolescents was practically unknown. Such is not the case today. By the time some youth currently reach adolescence, they have competed for several years in organized sports programs through leagues sponsored by communities, churches, and local recreation centers. Once the dedicated athletes reach high school, most will have spent nearly a decade honing their skills and knowledge of the game.

Youth sports programs have produced a fertile field of candidates for collegiate and professional sports teams. While colleges have traditionally recruited from high school, professional franchises are more frequently probing these teams to find a protégé in the mold of Kevin Garnett, Kobe Bryant, or LeBron James. This comes as more colleges seek to field high profile teams for the broadened media exposure and increased television revenues associated with winning programs. As a result, modern interscholastic sports have become the corridor for prominent athletes seeking to step into the limelight of a prestigious college team or the prosperity of a professional contract. Thus, today's high school athletic departments, players, and coaches are subject to stresses not at all intended for that level of play.

The Formation of Interscholastic Sports

Academics and athletics have a relatively short coexistence in the education system. Interscholastic athletics was not an element within the domain of schools for most of the first two hundred and fifty years of American education. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, sports were simply a recreational activity (Burnett, 2000).

Three primary factors contributed to the formation and expansion of interscholastic sports in the early part of the twentieth century. The first influence reflected the social atmosphere of the time. Youth leaders and educators expressed a growing concern for the need to advance civic values in youth, and thereby prevent crime and delinquency, especially among a growing immigrant population. These concerns caused public and educational leaders to push schools into sponsoring teams rather than leaving youth sports to privately funded groups and leagues. They believed schools to be the ideal place for students to learn the American virtues of

hard work, fair play, and competition. American business leaders were quick to align their support for this concept. Men such as Andrew Carnegie and J.D. Rockefeller saw sports as a means to prepare future workers to be loyal, dependable, team oriented, and obedient (Gerdy, 2006; Svare, 2004). Thus, athletics became a natural extension for the teaching of those ideals. It was at this time that civic pressures forced educational leaders to place sports under the direct supervision of high school principals.

A second dynamic that pushed sports into the school environment originated from educational professionals, especially from John Dewey and his followers. The notion of educating the “whole child” gave proponents a reason to encourage athletic competition as a diversion from the tediousness and toil of regular schoolwork. This theory gained life as educators began speculating that sports and play were vital elements of the process of education, thus making it part of the regular school program. One educator of the time reflected a common attitude toward sports when he said they “do more good than harm; for they promote vigorous physical development, and provide invaluable safeguards against effeminacy and vice (Burnett (2000, p.3).”

The third influence upon the rapid growth of interscholastic sports was its impact on school loyalty and community participation. It quickly became obvious that athletics had a unifying effect on the student body as well as within the community, particularly in small districts where high school sports provided the primary source of entertainment (Jable, 1992). The convergence of these three factors

laid the groundwork and fed the initial momentum for the interscholastic competition that grew to become high stakes interscholastic sports.

Since that time, wide varieties of youth sports organizations have gradually developed. School-based athletic programs at the interscholastic and intercollegiate levels have also expanded; due in part to the increased popularity of sports and the provisions of Title IX of the 1972 Educational Amendment Act, which provided more opportunities for female student-athletes. Youth leagues and school-based teams can now keep athletes involved throughout the entire calendar year. It is becoming more common for athletes to play on a school-sponsored team during the week, and on a non-school sponsored team during the weekend (an activity that many state high school associations are starting to resist). Along with regular season competition, each of these organizations supports a wide-range of district, state, and national competitions (Svare, 2004).

Schools Take Control of Sports

Interscholastic competition in America first began in cities. High school football teams were competing in Detroit, Michigan, as early as the 1880s. Other sports soon followed. However, it would be another two decades before an adult-supervised youth sports league would come into existence; it would happen in New York City, where in 1903, Dr. Luther Gulick, organized the Public School Athletic League upon his belief in the role of sports for the “toughening of the individual for the achievements of life” (Spears & Swanson, 1988, p.198). The league championed as its watchwords *duty, thoroughness, patriotism, honor, and obedience*. It initially operated independently of the school system, and allowed participation only for those

young men who received satisfactory recommendations from their teachers regarding behavior and academic achievement. By 1910, the league had at least seventeen imitators in other large cities.

New York City educators noticed the positive impact of the league upon students. One teacher wrote in a letter to the league, “All of the little imps in my class have become saints. Not because they want to be saints, but because they want to play in your games” (Rader, 1999, p.108). However, not all assessments of the influence of the league were quite so pious. As the popularity of high school sports developed, educators began to take note of its impact on the academic side of school. Their concerns centered on both the athletes who gave little attention to their studies, and the unsportsmanlike conduct that reflected poorly on the schools. Gradually, educators began to extend their authority over sports as a means of safeguarding the moral image of their institutions and of preserving their standing in the community (Riess, 1991; Rader, 1999).

In 1920, the governing body that would eventually become the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) was organized. It became obvious that high school athletics was now firmly under the control of school authorities (Sage, 1990). Gradually, individual state associations organized to oversee the competitions that were becoming so popular. This advancement added a new degree of accountability and stability to the rapidly expanding concept of high school sports.

By 1924, North Carolina joined the movement with the formation of its own high school athletic association, which supervised leagues and championship play

across the state. It also promoted the virtues of sports in the academic environment. A pamphlet written in 1926 by two of the state's distinguished professors of physical education extolled sports for teaching good citizenship, sound character, and right habits of living (Grundy, 2001). As schools started to manage athletic programs, they also began to promote ideals for school sports, including loyalty, morality, and social conscience.

The Social Influence of High School Sports

As interscholastic sports programs expanded into new communities, so did the debate over its influence on the social and academic life of students. Thus, interscholastic sports became a topic of recurring debate and inquiry over the next several decades. *Social Aspects of Sports* referenced several research studies over the course of more than half a century that lends insight to the impact of sports within the high school setting. For example, Waller's research in 1932 not only spoke of high school sports as a flourishing cultural pattern, but also considered its effects desirable as a unifying and morale-building activity for students. In 1949, Hollingshead recognized high school sports as a catalyst that solidified the identity for the school and the community. Gordon in 1957, and Turner in 1964, both supported the notion that high school sports were an important element for teens to build self-esteem within the adolescent subculture. In 1961, Coleman and in 1976 Eitzen both found that sports participation played an important role for social recognition among male adolescents. A similar study in 1979 by Feltz acknowledged sports to be a significant identifier of social standing among females. MacKillop and Snyder concluded in 1987 that participation in interscholastic sports continued to be a significant part of

high school social structure by elevating the status of athletes among their peers (Snyder and Spreitzer, 1989).

The social and cultural influences of interscholastic sports have been evident for decades, however, a direct causal relationship between athletic participation and academic success has been more difficult to substantiate. The research regarding sports participation in high school as a positive or negative influence on academic performance is varied. The next chapter discusses more on this topic; however, it is important to note that there are at least three generally accepted perceptions regarding the positive association between athletics and academic success. While none has substantial research backing, they do indicate the idea that students who play sports are already different from their peers before they join the team. First, some argue that there exists a strong relationship between mental and physical ability. Next is the notion that high school coaches select better students for the teams. Finally, the tendency is for better students to pursue extracurricular activities, including sports. Conversely, a dominant negative association between athletics and academics also exists, as expressed in the cliché “dumb jock,” which implies athletes typically have below average intellectual and academic skills (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1989; McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989).

The Expansion of Sports

The importance of sports as a cultural phenomenon over the last fifty years is the result of four concurrent developments that took place during America's prosperous years following World War II. First, the amount of leisure time for adults increased dramatically, allowing much greater involvement in the organization and

supervision of sports programs for their children. This newfound leisure time also increased the attendance at amateur and professional sporting events. Second, colleges and universities began granting athletic scholarships to talented high school athletes. This caused many young players, often motivated by their parents, to specialize in a single sport beginning at an early age. Third, driven by corporate dollars, television exposure, and product endorsements, the social status and salaries of professional athletes grew enormously. This became an appealing incentive for young athletes dedicated to seeking the fame and fortune of a career in sports. Lastly, and possibly most influential, was the expansion of sports media. Sports coverage in the broadcast media was once evident only in local news, a televised “game of the week,” the Olympics, or maybe a professional playoff, such as the World Series. Similarly, there were only a few magazines dedicated to sports coverage. Eventually, both of these media outlets expanded into multiple publications and a wide range of networks covering sports via radio and cable television, frequently in a twenty-four hour per day format. These factors produced an environment that made sports a focal point in the lives of many young people and their families (Svare, 2004).

While sports in America experienced the rapid growth of existing games, such as football, basketball, and baseball, it also underwent an expanded lateral growth. Young people became active in new types of sporting competitions. Soccer, lacrosse, softball, swimming, and hockey were just a few of the options that many communities and schools began to offer to young people that were not available to their parents’ generation. Additionally, more choices became available for younger

and younger athletes. Community-based sports leagues frequently began to offer programs for children as young as four, and even three in some sports.

The continued growth of high school sports over the last twenty-to-thirty years is equally extraordinary. The National Federation of State High School Associations reported in 2003 that nearly 1.3 million more students participated in the 2000-2001 school year than did just twenty years earlier. This growth was in large part attributed to the expansion of more opportunities for females, which increased at a rate twice that of boys. Overall, the largest gains were in girls' sports, especially in ice hockey, soccer, golf, cross-country, and softball. The only boys' sport that reflected a prominent increase during this time was soccer.

The Advancement of Eligibility Standards

Based upon the lack of standards for athletic performance, the National Federation of State High School Associations developed a set of minimum eligibility standards for athletic participation in 1979. The Federation's policies included requirements for academics, but also addressed multiple issues relevant to participation in high school sports. The list included age, enrollment, attendance, maximum participation, amateur awards, transfers, residency, medical examinations, non-school participation, recruitment, parental permissions, and players using aliases (Morton, 1993).

However, while the NFHS was establishing its academic guidelines, many schools districts during the 1970s and 1980s were eliminating minimum eligibility requirements. This survived upon the belief that such policies removed the incentive for disadvantages students to come to school. Many educators at the time also

considered athletics a right, not a privilege. The union of these two ideas meant that by 1983 less than one-percent of American high schools held student-athletes to a minimum academic performance requirement. This trend reversed dramatically within a few years as educators realized that students were concentrating more on sports and less on academics. By 1987, the trend among states was again moving toward required academic eligibility standards. In fact, by that time only five states (Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, and Vermont) had not enacted some type of academic performance standard for athletic participation. Once again, educators began to require more from the students who chose to pursue the role of athlete (Figler & Whitaker, 1991).

The academic eligibility standards required athletes to pass a minimum of four, full credit subjects per grading period, providing they would count towards graduation. Failure to meet this standard rendered an athlete ineligible for athletic participation during the subsequent grading period. The purpose of such rules forced an emphasis on the academic performance of student-athletes. In establishing these regulations, the NFHS expressed its position that involvement in a school's athletic program was a privilege for students who met the minimum eligibility standards.

Following the lead of the Federation, all states, and the District of Columbia, eventually implemented their own criteria for athletic participation. All states were encouraged to adopt a policy with minimum standards no less than those proposed by the Federation. Just over a decade after the standards were in place, a survey of the states revealed that nine had standards less restrictive, fifteen were the same, and twenty-seven were more restrictive (Morton, 1993).

The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) issued a report in 2004 that acknowledged the considerable variance in the ways states implement their individual standards. The report found that the majority of states (thirty-four) set standards by the action of the governing board of the state association through the action of its membership. Other states involved their respective departments of education in setting standards. Some relegate the matter to the state legislature, while a few allowed local schools and systems to set their own standards.

It is not difficult to see the lack of consistency among the states in their establishment and implementation of eligibility standards. To obscure matters even more, many states allow local school boards to raise the standard by adding additional elements to the state guidelines for academic eligibility. The greatest varieties of policies are at private schools, where there is more flexibility than in the public school systems. These schools may have policies more relaxed or more rigid than those established in the public school systems.

The Priority of Academic Eligibility Policies

The motive for the establishment of academic standards for athletic eligibility seems straightforward. Indeed, there is typically more sentiment for such policies than there is against them. Burnett (2000) references a national Gallop Poll that reported ninety percent of adults favor an academic standard for athletic participation. Such policies receive support because of the underlying goals they seek to accomplish. Adults view athletic participation as a privilege, and hope to link it to academics in order to accomplish three goals: (a) motivate students to work harder in the classroom; (b) emphasize the priority of time and energy towards achieving

educational excellence; and (c) insure that athletes demonstrate acceptable skills for future academic and vocational endeavors.

Educational leaders typically acknowledge the benefits of academic eligibility policies, even for the most harshly criticized “no pass, no play” rules that some states and school systems have implemented. These policies create the most demanding of all academic eligibility requirements. First instituted in Texas in 1984, these rules allow athletic participation only for students who pass all course work. Often criticized for being too demanding, these policies remain in place despite public opposition and courtroom challenges. Thus demonstrating the firm commitment of educators to maintain an eligibility standard that sends the undeniable message that participation in athletics comes only after academic accomplishment. Robert Kanaby, the executive director of the National Federation of State High School Associations, acknowledges that while athletics offers its own supplementary educational benefit, academics should come first (Beem, 2006). This thinking typically reflects the generally accepted reasoning behind the existing academic policies in existence throughout America’s educational landscape.

Research Questions

This study seeks to examine the opinions and perspectives of individuals closely associated with the academic eligibility policies, namely local high school athletic directors in two North Carolina public school systems. An analysis of the data generated from these interviews yields insight into the impact of enforcing different levels of academic eligibility upon high school student-athletes.

The following research questions and related null hypothesis guided this investigation:

1. Will athletic directors from schools in rural settings view academic eligibility policies differently than athletic directors from schools in urban settings?
 - 1a. Corresponding Null (H_0): There will be no difference in the views of athletic directors from rural or urban schools regarding academic eligibility policies.
2. Do minority athletic directors (female or African-American) view academic eligibility policies differently than majority athletic directors (Caucasian males)?
 - 2a. Corresponding Null (H_0): There will be no difference in the views of minority and majority athletic directors regarding academic eligibility policies.
3. Will athletic directors with more than ten years of experience have different opinions concerning academic eligibility policies than athletic directors with less than ten years of experience?
 - 3a. Corresponding Null (H_0): There will be no difference in the opinions of athletic directors concerning academic eligibility policies regardless of their years of experience.
4. Will athletic directors in a district with academic eligibility standards that exceed state requirements have differing views from athletic directors in a district that follows the state requirements?
 - 4a. Corresponding Null (H_0): There will be no difference in the views of athletic directors from two systems with different academic eligibility requirements.

5. Do academic measures indicate student-athletes perform differently in diverse geographic or demographic settings?

5a. Corresponding Null (H_0): There will be no difference in the academic measures of students in diverse geographic or demographic settings.

Professional Significance

The NASBE report of 2004 published the research and recommendations of a select committee on interscholastic sports. The report acknowledged an urgent need to address academic eligibility criteria for student-athletes because of the inconsistency and variety of standards that are currently in place. To quote the report, “a virtual kaleidoscope of eligibility standards exists (p.15).” Thus, research on the topic of academic eligibility standards is important because of its value to the educational professionals, and in some cases governmental leaders, who establish and implement the policies. There is ample research on the impact of academics in the high school environment; however, research on the specific topic of eligibility standards is inadequate given the current pressures placed on schools. “When research is either absent or limited,” the NASBE report concludes, “personal experience or past policies become the basis for decision-making, a practice that is no longer sufficient” (p.32).

The National Federation of State High School Associations (2003) reported that ninety-eight percent of high schools sponsored interscholastic sports, and that the total number of participants as compared to the total enrollment of high schools was 55.4%. The Federation reported that in 2002-2003 there were 6.8 million students involved in high school sports, a number that in 2004-2005 rose to over seven

million. Numbers like these, coupled with the increased demand for higher academic success imposed by legislation, such as No Child Left Behind, and the millions of dollars in potential athletic scholarships, reinforces the need for eligibility standards that are research based. For students and schools the stakes have never been higher. Therefore, this topic of research has intrinsic importance because it affects thousands of schools, a multitude of teams, and millions of student-athletes. Educators, as they assume the crucial role of insuring that sports does not compromise a rigorous academic environment, will perceive such information as valuable in their pursuit to implement policies that withstand opposition and antagonism.

Overview of Methodology

A complete discussion of the methodology is found in chapter three.

However, a brief overview of the research perspective, the research type, and the research methods is presently useful. This inquiry used a mixed-methods strategy known as exploratory design to analyze the two types of data gathered from selected high schools in two public school districts with similar characteristics. One system has fourteen high schools encompassing a student population of approximately twenty thousand; the other system has eleven high schools with a total student population of nearly thirteen thousand.

The examination of academic eligibility policies relies in large part upon individual interviews with a sampling of public high school athletic directors. These interviews provided an opportunity to investigate their experiences with the existing policies, allowing an in-depth exploration of the educational leaders close to the important issues. This dialogue allowed athletic directors to respond to a series of

sixteen-questions related to the implementation, enforcement, and consequences of the policies on their campuses. They were also asked to share their thoughts on the impact of the policies as related to minority students and learning disabled students. Along with this, they expressed their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the policies and their recommendations for change. Analysis of the quantitative data addressed a variety of overall measures of academic success, including grade point average, average days missed, dropout rates, discipline referrals, and graduation rates. This added detail to help explain the overall situation as described by the qualitative data.

Definition of Key Terms

Academic eligibility standards - The set of educational requirements (e.g. grade point average, attendance, minimum number of courses passed, etc.) a student must meet in order to be eligible to participate in high school sports.

Non-academic eligibility standards – The set of criteria not related to academic performance (e.g. enrollment, age, residence, amateur status, etc.) a student must meet in order to be eligible to participate in high school sports.

Athletic eligibility - When a student meets the necessary requirements, that student may play and practice a sport without restrictions during the season.

Attendance – The number of days (sometimes expressed as a percentage) a student is present or absent at school during a semester.

Minimum load – the least amount of courses a high school student must take during a semester in order to play sports the subsequent semester.

Ineligible –Students are ineligible to participate in sports when they fail to meet the academic or non-academic requirements adopted by the school system.

Conclusion

The issues and influences of sports in American high schools have been topics of debate and research for more than a century. However, the notion of a required academic eligibility standard has been in existence for just about a quarter of that time. Critics and proponents of high school sports can both point to studies that reinforce their respective positions, however, there is less supporting research concerning the effectiveness of academic eligibility policies. While the majority of educators and parents overwhelmingly support academic standards, the current environment reveals an array of practices and policies. The next chapter examines the existing literature that details the relevant theories, laws, guidelines, and issues that are molding the present and future of high school athletic eligibility policies.

CHAPTER TWO: Review of the Literature

A substantial amount of literature addressed the related topics of academic eligibility and interscholastic sports. A comprehensive investigation of the literature revealed that various types of on-line and in-print publications, including educational journals, textbooks, and other sports related volumes examine these issues. This chapter explains the search process in reviewing that literature and then examines both the theoretical and empirical studies relevant to high school sports and academic eligibility policies. These topics have many associated facets, including the theoretical, the legal, and the practical. Each influences the resultant practices and policies that individual states and districts choose to implement. What becomes evident is the determination of educators to maintain academic eligibility policies, and the lack of consistency among the policies that are in place.

The Search Process

Both electronic and college library resources provided avenues for a systematic search of material for this review. Electronic inquiries began with the Educational Research Information Corporation (www.eric.ed.gov), H. W. Wilson Research (www.hwwilson.com), and EBSCOhost, provided via the Liberty University network. These sites produced links to research articles using terms related to high school athletics and academic eligibility policies. The second source was college libraries, where books on the topics of education, sports, sports history, and sociology of sports were searched. The libraries visited were on the campuses of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, along with five North Carolina colleges, including Piedmont Baptist College, Wake Forest University, High Point University,

Guilford College, and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Each of these institutions grants undergraduate degrees in education and physical education, which substantiates the relevance of the resources.

Theoretical Literature Regarding Eligibility Policies

There are several theories associated with high school academic eligibility policies and their usefulness. Although it is a complex issue to untangle, three topics seem to dominate the discourse of ideas. First, there are theories that explain the value of academic eligibility policies in the high school setting; next are the suppositions about the students and their role as athletes, and last are the speculations about student-athletes who exceed the minimum academic standard. The following sections discuss each of these three topics and their associated theories.

Student Athletes and Eligibility Policies

The majority of educators, parents, and community leaders would generally agree that in theory, participation in interscholastic sports should be available to those students who meet an acceptable level of academic accomplishment. However, there are those who disagree, choosing rather to take the position that involvement in high school sports offers a multitude of benefits that should be accessible to all students, regardless of the level of their educational achievement. The ensuing debate over how to resolve this dispute has a polarizing influence on students, parents, and educators. Both of these positions present compelling points of view for consideration.

Theories that Support Academic Eligibility Policies

Proponents have long championed the virtues of academic eligibility guidelines as motivation for students to achieve educationally. Traditionally, several reasons support these theories. First among them is the threat of removal from the team. This premise suggests that participation is so valuable to students that they are willing to put forth the academic effort necessary to achieve some level of success in order to remain eligible to play. A second reason often cited is that academic eligibility rules demonstrate to all students that academics are the top priority in school. Supporters also make the case that such rules are needed as a hedge against athletic participation taking so much time as to compromise students' academic performance. To a lesser degree, advocates also promote academic eligibility rules because they promote the development of vocational skills (e.g. the value of work, cooperation, and respect for authority), which are considered necessary elements for future employment opportunities. Eligibility policies also elevate students in the eyes of the community as acceptable representatives of the school (Morton, 1993).

The most rigorous of all academic eligibility policies are those labeled "no pass / no play." In this system, players are ineligible if they fail any subject, regardless of their achievement in other coursework. Proponents of these more severe guidelines contend that such demanding policies are necessary because students are failing classes and academically achieving less than ever before. Therefore, according to Burnett (2000), such policies establish the incentive necessary for students to improve all of their grades to at least a passing level. These advocates typically take a strong position, stating athletic involvement is a privilege

for students, not a right. They believe a stringent eligibility policy will force students to adjust their priorities, thus insuring academics will come before athletic pursuits.

Theories that Oppose Eligibility Policies

Equally as passionate, opponents of academic eligibility policies state that such rules unfairly penalize students with poor academic skills, who avoid the eligibility policy by choosing not to be involved in sports. Therefore, they are deprived of participation in something they do well in and enjoy. As a result, students miss the opportunity to develop through the personal and social experiences sports offers. An additional argument is that such rules place pressure upon classroom teachers, who may unwittingly exercise an academic double standard for the athlete and the non-athlete. Opponents also argue that such policies, as they preclude students from competing interscholastically, prevent talented athletes from pursuing opportunities for a post-secondary education (Morton, 1993). A major concern is that for some students the academic eligibility policy keeps them off the team, which is the primary reason they remain in school. This argument is supported by a survey of Maine and Massachusetts student-athletes which revealed that 40.5% considered participation in sports the main reason they go to school (University of Maine Sport and Coaching Initiative, 2005. p. 26). There is also a fear that such policies are discouraging to students, and thus increase the probability of dropouts, or that students will take easier courses in order to sustain their eligibility. One poll in Texas found that over fifty-percent of secondary school principals perceived the no-pass/ no-play policy had been influential in directing students away from more demanding classes. A more contemptible action is transferring athletes into special

education programs to eliminate them from the eligibility rules. There are some concerns that these policies decrease team depth and quality, thus potentially denying competent athletes the likelihood of college scholarships (Morton, 1993; Reeves, 1998).

One criticism often cast at academic eligibility policies is that they are unfair and ineffective for minority and low socio-economic status (SES) students. An unintended consequence of eligibility rules makes it appear that athletic participation is not only a privilege, but is for the privileged. A United States Department of Education study concluded that African-American and Hispanic male athletes suffer the most from an eligibility requirement of a 2.0 grade point average. In addition, these policies more frequently affect students of low SES and/or low cognitive ability, even though positive correlations exist between their athletic involvement and academic attainment. This makes it seem that the students who could benefit most from athletic participation are often the very ones eliminated from involvement. (Morgan, 1993)

Not surprising, some athletic directors, according to Bukowski (2001), defend low academic requirements in order to maintain a program that is “student-friendly,” thus insuring all students the opportunity to participate. However, the same study concluded that athletic programs with low academic requirements only hurt themselves by detaching academic requirements from athletic participation.

The no pass / no play opponents emphasize the overall positive benefits of athletic participation for students, which is denied students declared academically ineligible. They rely in part upon the statistical evidence that supports the theory that

participants in sports earn better grades and have higher attendance rates than their non-athletic peers. This, they say, reinforces the overall academic mission of the school to provide an education established upon basic skills and values, including self-esteem and self-respect. Opponents also note the inequity of a system which allows a student with all Ds to play, but denies participation to the student who has all As and one F. For the opponents of academic eligibility rules, athletic participation is a valid learning experience that should be available to all students, especially when sports is the primary reason to stay in school (Burnett, 2000).

The challenges imposed by the academic eligibility policies take on a legitimate significance when seen in the life of a student impacted by its requirements. Burnett (2000) writes the story of an urban minority student who plays basketball for his high school team. His family depends upon the government to assist in providing food and housing. His home is absent a father. Most of the other boys in his neighborhood are high school dropouts who are habitually involved in drugs and alcohol. He is a capable student, but most of the time is unmotivated and disinterested in academic pursuits. He has aspirations of breaking away from the ill-fated existence of his acquaintances. However, grades by themselves will not be enough to allow him to pursue a post-secondary education. He attends school exclusively because of basketball, where he excels. He had previously led the varsity team into the state playoffs. His place on the team provides a sense of purpose and identity; it has been his only source of self-respect and confidence. However, before tryouts begin this year, he is told he will not be eligible to play because he has failed to meet the academic eligibility standard. Consequently, he does not return to school.

No doubt, such incidents occur annually with a multitude of different names and locations. They demonstrate the long-term impact these policies have upon students, and the type of pressures school systems face. Educational leaders across the country find themselves trying to balance the tensions of academic expectations, such as those associated with No Child Left Behind, against the strong and frequently well-established values that schools and communities have regarding high school athletic programs (Riede, 2006). One approach to this problem is to distinguish between different types of student-athletes, an idea that attempts to understand why student-athletes either succeed or struggle with academic eligibility policies.

Eligibility and the Ideal Student-Athlete

Snyder and Spreitzer (1989) frame the interaction of the academic and athletic roles in a matrix that reflects the commitment level of students toward each role (Table 1). This theory offers the opportunity to examine four ideal types of student athletes and the impact of academic eligibility rules upon each group.

Table 1

Four Types of Students

	High Athletic Commitment	Low Athletic Commitment
High Academic Commitment	Type I Scholar-Athlete	Type II Pure Scholar
Low Academic Commitment	Type III Pure Athlete	Type IV Non-scholar-non-athlete

Type I assumes that students have the cognitive capacity, physical ability, and related skill to be successful in both roles. Students of this type strive to excel in each role, and frequently find success in both. The intrinsic and extrinsic rewards result in a net positive effect, so that commitment in one role does not reduce the likelihood of success in the other. For these students, meeting the academic eligibility standard is not difficult. Their impetus to excel academically will typically produce grades well beyond the minimum standard, and may qualify them for academic honors.

Academic success for the scholar-athlete supports the theory that superior physical condition benefits mental performance. It also suggests that competent students choose to participate in extracurricular activities, such as athletics, and that athletes make effective use of limited time and energies. These students typically have the ability, academic proficiency and internal motivation to pursue an athletic scholarship in college.

Type II students are those highly committed to academics, but not commitment to athletics. Their limited participation in sports is the result of several possibilities. For example, these students' athletic skills may be below average, they may have little interest in sports, or they may be involved in other extracurricular activities. It may also be that they find non-athletic achievements to be more appealing, satisfying, and rewarding. Therefore, if sports involvement does occur, it is more likely the result of extrinsic influences, and participation may be only for one or two seasons. Like the scholar-athlete, meeting the eligibility standard necessary for sports participation is not difficult. These students' academic attainment goals focus on education as a means to pursue non-athletic related goals. Thus, athletics

typically has little or no bearing on the pursuit of higher grades and opportunities for post-secondary education.

The pure athletes, identified as Type III students, are those who willingly dedicate their time and energies first to sports, where they find their greatest rewards. As a result, academics are more likely to assume lesser importance. Unlike the scholar-athletes, the commitment invested in sports diminishes their ability to be successful in academics. Therefore, they schedule less demanding academic loads, require tutoring, or may resort to cheating as a strategy for meeting the eligibility standard. Members of this group benefit from the academic assistance and encouragement they receive from peers and adults. However, the complaint is that they receive specialized extra credit work and leniency in grading. These student-athletes struggle most with academic eligibility policies.

In theory, the exposure for these students to the virtues of hard work, persistence, discipline, and achievement transfers from the athletic field to the classroom; and the positive sense of self-esteem created from the prestige of sports will translate into academic achievement. These students are likely to pursue post secondary education primarily to continue their passion for athletics. However, once in college they usually must receive the same type of academic support if they are going to succeed. Should academic ineligibility or an injury prevent them from being able to participate in college, they will most likely drop out.

Type II and Type III students are committed to only one of the two roles. Thus, any involvement in a second role typically produces minimal reward and token satisfaction. Both types exemplify the theory that there is a strain between academics

and athletics. This strain will be evident in the academic struggles faced by Type III students, and their likelihood of falling below the academic eligibility standard. Type IV students will typically have a negligible role in high school sports programs. Their lack of athletic interest and academic motivation prevent them from pursuing any involvement with sports; therefore, academic eligibility standards for this group are a non-factor.

This model is collaborated in research on nine-hundred thirty six male high school seniors from various public and private schools in New York State. That study used similar distinctions to classify student roles. To summarize the results, seventeen percent of the students were Type I, scholar-athletes; seven percent were Type II, pure scholars; and forty-three percent were Type III, pure athletes (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1978).

In theory, the Type I scholar-athletes would be more the norm in high school sports programs, or at least the ideal toward which students are encouraged to become. However, American culture has created an antithetical stereotype to the scholar-athlete, that of the “dumb jock.” It has thus become more acceptable for students to excel in sports and struggle in academics (Type III students). Instead of creating a link between the successes of the two roles, a polarity exists between athleticism and intellect. This reality is well analyzed by Gurdy (2000, p. 142), who states, “We have taken two virtues, physical and mental health, and made them culturally incompatible, making it almost unnatural for people to aspire toward both ideals.” Consequently, many communities, schools, and student-athletes make a very clear and significant choice regarding priorities. Unfortunately, it is a choice that

opposes the very mission of education, athletics comes before academics, or even worse, athletics comes at the exclusion of academics.

The relationship between academics and athletics does not have to be antagonistic. One attempt to envision the relationship in more harmonious terms is a model put forth by Snyder & Spreitzer in 1989. In this model, athletic participation initiates a set of intervening variables, which in turn leads to positive contributors to academic achievement (Table 2). This model illustrates the personal, social, and academic benefits of playing sports and the resultant academic achievement that may follow.

Table 2

Causal Model of Variables Between Athletics and Academic Success

	Intervening Variable	That Leads To:	Results In:
	Athletic success	A desire to continue to participate in sports and pursue athletic scholarships	
Athletic Participation Includes:	Prestige	Higher aspirations in non-athletic activities; positive self-esteem; lenient grading; academic assistance and	Academic Achievement

	encouragement
Exposure to hard work, persistence, and achievement	Higher aspirations in non-athletic activities
Experiences of success	Positive self-esteem
Physical fitness	Mental fitness
More efficient use of time and energy	Successful planning strategies
Academic eligibility requirements	Leverage for academic motivation

This model attempts to paint a portrait that intertwines the best of athletics and academics. However, in the pragmatic world of high school sports, there are skeptics who question the validity of such theories. In fact, their position reflects doubts about the ability of some athletes to perform academically without special circumstances. These theories attempt to look beyond the student to determine the factors that determines whether athletes score well in the classroom.

Performance beyond the Minimum Standards

More athletes exceed the minimum academic eligibility standard than do not. Their successes provide some theories about the reasons why athletes are able to perform beyond the minimum standards. As discussed above, the scholar-athletes vigorously pursue success in both roles, motivated by a combination of intrinsic drive

and extrinsic rewards. However, additional theories arise regarding the success of other types of student-athletes.

Research referenced by Figler & Whitaker (1991) specifically addresses the theory that athletes receive elevated grades for the work they accomplish in school.

There are four contributing factors to this theory:

1. Athletes receive special assistance from teachers to accomplish their work.
2. Eligibility requirements mandate only minimal academic performance, which is relatively easy to attain.
3. The pool of athletes is purged of those who are unmotivated to perform to academic standards.
4. There is special status and privilege afforded athletes in the classroom.

This theory states that were it not for one or more of these factors, the academic performance of students would be considerably lower. The extreme view of this theory suggests that athletes are the recipients of inflated grades through such unprincipled practices by teachers as assigning higher scores or altering grades prior to the issuance of report cards.

According to Burnett (2000), athletes may do well in class because sports provide a channel for reinforcing the lessons of the classroom, and are an essential part of a well-rounded education. This increases the students' sense of engagement or attachment to the school, thus motivating them to higher levels of achievement. In a somewhat more encompassing theory, Coakley (2001) suggests that athletes are more likely to come from economically privileged families, have above-average cognitive skills, higher self esteem, and a history of successful academic performance. Thus,

this theory concludes that students who try out for high school teams, make teams, and stay on teams are successful because they are different in specific ways from their non-athletic peers.

These theories seek to respond to the question that high school coaches and athletic administrators face on a regular basis, specifically, “Why do some student-athletes consistently meet or exceed academic eligibility requirements, while others do not?” An answer is difficult to ascertain using theory alone; therefore, it is important to examine the observations and conclusions presented through the empirical literature.

Empirical Literature Regarding Athletics and Eligibility Policies

A variety of essential factors influences the academic success of any student. Athletics is one element that draws particular attention from educators, parents, and researchers, who seek to substantiate a correlation between athletic participation and academics. While the results are typically not concrete, insights from the empirical literature help to lend understanding to the significance of sports in high school, along with some perception regarding its impact as either contributing to or distracting from the academic mission of the school.

Sports in an Academic Environment

In order to understand the importance of academic eligibility policies in high school, it is necessary to grasp the significance that sports plays in that setting. Since the beginning of interscholastic athletics over a century ago, sports has become a progressively more important part of the high school experience. Leonard (1998) cites the story of one principal who remarked that he would receive more protests

from discontinuing the sports program than he would from eliminating the English Department. While such a personal evaluation may not be true, it acknowledges the important status of high school sports as a community ritual. What has not changed over the decades has been the debate regarding the influences and consequences that interscholastic sports programs bring to bear upon the academic mission of schools. To some, high school sports are an essential element of a well-rounded education. Yet others criticize the same sports programs as misdirected and disrupting to the real purpose of secondary education. The following sections examine the pro and con arguments relative to athletics in high school. Examining the relationship that exists between academics and athletics is foundational to understanding the importance of academic eligibility.

Athletics as a Constructive Influence in High School

Educators and parents have a justifiably high interest in the relationship between academic achievement and extracurricular involvement. Young people who are not engaged in the positive use of leisure time are more subject to at-risk behavior. Lerner & Galambos (1998) identify these risk behaviors as drug and alcohol abuse, increased sexual activity, school dropout, and violence. As a result, a growing number of young people are becoming involved in antisocial behavior, thus threatening the schooling process for all students (Gilman, Meyers, & Perez, 2004).

On the other hand, student extracurricular involvement is associated with school engagement and accomplishment. Involved students are less likely to drop out and more likely to have higher academic success (Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez, & Brown, 2004). Benefits occur both in the short-term and the long-term, and across

various socio-economic strata. Research indicates positive consequences of participation in organized activities such as sports, including higher rates of college attendance (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Guest & Schneider's (2003) longitudinal studies also document how participation influences adult outcomes, such as occupational status, income, educational attainment, and psychosocial development.

Both quantitative and qualitative research confirms that there is a positive association between extracurricular participation and academic achievement (Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003), and that as a group, high school athletes generally do better in measures of academic success than their non-athletic peers (Coakley, 2001). In most high schools, sports are one of the basic extracurricular options available to teens and are generally the largest nonacademic program available for student involvement (Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003).

Statistical evidence demonstrates that participants in high school sports earn better grades than non-participants and record better attendance in school (Burnett, 2000). In addition, involvement in sports is associated with psychosocial development and social and academic competence (Fletcher, Nickerson, & Wright, 2003). Participation in sports has favorable effects on several important facets of school life beyond attendance, including success in the academic track, taking more demanding coursework, and time spent doing homework. In fact, Marsh & Kleitman (2003) report that student athletic participation has many positive effects, which are very robust, with no apparent negative consequences.

According to Holloway (1999), studies on the academic improvement of students who participate in team sports demonstrate that participants have higher

grade point averages during the season of competition than out of season. Such studies support the belief that involvement in athletics for high school students does not endanger, and may enhance, academic performance, resulting in better grade point averages and college attendance. Zaugg (1998) concluded that high school athletes are meeting or exceeding the academic and behavioral performance levels of their non-athletic counterparts. In addition, Galley (2000) found a positive correlation between sports participation and being on a career path following graduation.

The North Carolina High School Athletic Association (NCHSAA) promotes two studies that echo the achievements of athletes over non-athletes in North Carolina high schools. The Whitley report, done during the 1994-95 academic year, examined 126,700 students at 133 schools. It found that athletes performed significantly better than their non-athletic peers in the areas of grade point average, attendance rate, discipline referrals, dropout rate, and graduation rate. A more recent study by Overton of the 1999-2000 academic year similarly compared over 125,000 high school students at 131 schools in seven distinct measures, including grade point average, attendance rate, two different end-of-course testing components, discipline referrals, dropout rate, and graduation rate. In all seven categories, athletes exhibited more positive results than non-athletes.

Athletics as a Destructive Influence in High School

Critics of high school sports claim it interferes with the educational mission of school. They point to the headline cases of excess and abuse as legitimate reasons to

scale-back or discontinue such programs. Coakley (2001) lists the traditional arguments opponents present against interscholastic sports programs:

1. They distract attention from academic endeavors.
2. They perpetuate unnecessary power and performance in a postindustrial society.
3. They turn most students into spectators of sports rather than participants in physical education.
4. They result in serious injuries to the student-athletes.
5. They create a superficial atmosphere that has nothing to do with educational goals.
6. They influence budget decisions and often deprive educational programs of human and financial resources.
7. They create undue pressures on student-athletes.
8. They create a status system in which athletes are given excessive privilege.
9. They create an atmosphere in which athletes assert social dominance over non-athletes.

These arguments have typically not found a sympathetic audience among the vast majority of educational leaders and community supporters; therefore, athletics not only continue to exist at most high schools, but also continues to expand.

Generally, much of the research on the topic echoes that of Broh (2002), who found that that participation in some extracurricular activities improves achievement, while participation in others diminishes achievement. The conclusion seems to be that participation in interscholastic sports particularly promotes social ties among

students, parents, and schools, while enhancing student development. While there are positive outcomes derived from athletic participation, it is not difficult to recognize the academic tensions that athletics produces. Consequently, the issue becomes how to manage the conflicts, particularly those imposed by academic expectations. Traditionally, the answer for most systems, including those in North Carolina, has been academic eligibility policies, which exist to insure an acceptable level of scholastic success.

Existing Eligibility Policies

The supporting evidence for positive outcomes that result from athletic participation is not without stress points. The academic priorities that an educational system establishes come under constant review and evaluation from many stakeholders. One of the many challenges faced by educators is how to maintain academic credibility within the athletic program. While there is general agreement among stakeholders regarding the need for academic eligibility policies in high school sports, there is much less agreement over exactly what the standards should look like. The line of eligibility each school system adopts for academic eligibility results from multiple factors. The eligibility standards of the North Carolina High School Athletic Association address over a dozen academic and non-academic requirements for student-athletes. The following section describes both the academic requirements set forth by the NCHSSA and the way in which the two local school systems in this study implement those policies. There is also discussion on the variations state systems use to establish academic eligibility, followed by a look at two recent cases of violations of eligibility rules. Finally, the section concludes with

a review of four models of policy reform that educators are promoting and implementing as alternatives to the traditional systems.

The athletic eligibility requirements established by the NCHSSA consist of fourteen different issues. Non-academic standards speak to such topics as residence, age, medical clearance, amateur status, and criminal history. Scholastic requirements address attendance, course load, and academic achievement. Local school systems may implement additional conditions beyond the minimal standards. The requirements that speak to scholastic issues are as follows:

1. Attendance: A player must have an attendance record of at least eighty-five percent of the previous semester (no more than thirteen days absent in a typical ninety-day semester). At the end of each semester, any player who fails to meet this standard is immediately ineligible.
2. Scholastic Requirement: A student must have passed a minimum load of courses during the preceding semester to be eligible at any time during the current semester. A minimum load means passing five courses in a traditional school schedule, and three courses in the “block” schedule format. Pupils enrolled in “exceptional students” classes shall be eligible for participation provided their program of study is in accordance with the State Department of Public Instruction and, in the opinion of the teacher and principal, make “satisfactory progress.”
3. All students must meet the promotion standards established by the local board of education.

The state standards allow the local school district to design and implement a summer school program to assist students with a deficient number of semester credits. As described in the policy, students who do not meet these academic standards at the beginning of the semester are not eligible to participate in athletics at any time during the semester. At the end of each semester, the principal has eight school days to check grades and inform any students declared ineligible to participate.

One school district in this study follows the state guidelines as written. The other system exercises the option to implement additional conditions, and, therefore, adds the following requirements.

1. The number of absences in the previous semester cannot exceed ten days.
2. Student-athletes must earn a minimum 2.0 Quality Point Average (QPA) in the previous nine-week grading period. Students who do not meet the 2.0 QPA standard have three options: weekly tutoring sessions, summer school, or requesting a hardship waiver.

Variations of Academic Eligibility Policies

Traditional academic eligibility policies depend upon quantitative measures of student success and accomplishment. Characteristically, these systems intertwine an academic measure, usually grade point average or academic average, along with an attendance requirement. Some systems count courses passed as a student progresses toward graduation as a measure of successful academic progress. Variations exist from state to state, and within each state.

Athletics and Achievement, a report issued in 2004 by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) identified three general

approaches schools use to determine player eligibility. One method requires athletes to maintain a set grade point average. Using this system, Florida and California require a 2.0 grade point average for their athletes, while Louisiana requires a grade point average of 1.5. A second technique requires students to pass a certain number of classes. Thus, Connecticut athletes must pass four classes per year, while Indiana students must pass seventy percent of a maximum load of courses. The third approach monitors students' progress toward obtaining a high school diploma. Using this system, Georgia students must pass five courses per year that count toward graduation, while those in Kentucky and Minnesota must make satisfactory academic progress and be on schedule to graduate.

The various policies currently in use demonstrate part of the difficulties educators are experiencing. It appears the one thing that is consistent among strategies is that there is no consistency. The autonomy of school systems to create their own policies, or to step up existing policies, produces an arrangement whereby an athlete can be academically eligible in one system, but transfer mid-year to a neighboring system and be ineligible. The system appears to lend itself to the likelihood of confusion. This, combined with the number of students involved in interscholastic sports and the pressure placed upon athletic departments to be successful, makes conditions ripe for breaches, if not out-and-out dishonesty, in the system.

Violations of Eligibility Policies

The article spoke plainly, calling it “the biggest high school sports scandal in the state’s history”; the scandal had “shaken players, fans, and coaches across the

district.” What could merit such strong criticism? Was it cheating, fixing games, gambling, drugs, or improper conduct by a coach? No, the outrage was over teams that competed with players that had violated the academic eligibility requirements during the 2002-2003 school year (Jonsson, 2003).

The investigation revealed that dozens of athletes in eleven of fourteen high schools in Guilford County, North Carolina, had participated in athletic competitions despite low grades and excessive absences. The worst case involved a school in which only the tennis and cross-country teams were uninvolved. In the end, teams had to forfeit entire seasons, and some had to nullify championships. All totaled, the district had to forfeit over one-hundred wins, and return twenty-six thousand dollars in playoff revenue, plus pay penalties in excess of fifteen thousand dollars. Athletic directors, coaches, and principals also paid fines, and two athletic directors lost their jobs. The incident prompted a statewide review by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association, in which forty-eight schools eventually reported the use of ineligible players in a variety of sports (Beem, 2006).

High schools in Maryland also dealt with a similar episode, though not as widespread. Gehring (2004) reported a broad range of violations at one Howard County school that forced five teams to forfeit their fall seasons, along with disciplinary actions for those involved. The event prompted the superintendent to recommend audits of all district high schools.

Some would discount these episodes as nothing more than infractions brought about as the result of poor record keeping or inadequate monitoring. Others would view them as a microcosm of the on-going tension that exists between athletics and

academics on the high school level. Yet others might label the real problem as being the academic eligibility standards, which, they would say, generate unrest when imposed into an athletic environment.

Whatever position one takes, it is obvious that in the world of competitive high school sports, stresses do exist. Educational leaders strive to maintain a delicate coexistence between competitive athletics and rigorous academics. School leaders are finding themselves caught in the middle of the controversy. Riede (2006) writes of one superintendent who discovered the intensity of the debate when he proposed raising the required grade average for athletes from a sixty-five to a seventy. This seemingly manageable change resulted in a very public disagreement in which his proposal for higher standards was defeated by the school board. As in the case of this superintendent, the debate often places educators, who want to achieve aggressive educational goals, against parents, who support well-entrenched and community supported high school sports programs. In some cases, the existing policies seem outdated. New influences on academic achievement, plus the continued growth of athletics, have led to many attempts to reform existing policies. The next section examines some of the new ideas that are currently in some high schools.

Attempts to Reform Eligibility Policies

The thought of reforming the academic eligibility policies for many educators simply implies raising or lowering the number of courses passed, increasing or decreasing the grade point average requirement, or changing the number of days student-athletes must attend per grading period. For example, the Florida legislature, in 2005, mandated a revised eligibility policy that raised the cumulative grade point

average from 1.6, with grades checked every six weeks, to a 2.0 GPA, with grades checked once per semester (Reeves, 1998). However, many school systems have decided that traditional academic eligibility policies, designed to hold student-athletes accountable for their academic progress, are not effective. Therefore, rather than continuing to struggle with the demands of an unproductive system, some districts are creating new policies and establishing innovative strategies of reform. These reforms accommodate a variety of strategies aimed at keeping student-athletes motivated to stay in school and progress towards graduation. Attempts to reform the system encompass a variety of strategies, including closer monitoring techniques, individualized academic goals, and more involvement of teachers; in some cases students and educators work together to establish goals and achievement levels. This section describes some of the programs that educators are piloting to create a more effective balance between academics and athletics.

Cato-Meridian Central High School in New York State, as reported by Sweet (2005), and by Kozik, Cowles, and Sweet (2004), is one example of how new ideas produce positive results. The school's policy once required student-athletes to pass all but two classes in order to play. The standard was set low in order to allow more students to remain on a team. However, academic progress remained dismal; at one point, over two-hundred athletes had failed at least one course during a nine-week grading period. A committee of stakeholders, including teachers, coaches, parents, and administrators, collaborated to compose some innovative strategies for students involved in such extracurricular activities as sports. In the new system, students were responsible for developing contracts with their teachers for each subject they were

failing. Grade evaluations occurred every five weeks, followed by a four-day period during which failing students met with their teachers to discuss how to raise grades.

The system created new tools for academic monitoring. Lines of communication between teachers and coaches formed, and grade reporting occurred weekly for some students. One of the unique parts of the policy was a “bump and run” strategy, where counselors and administrators sought to have quick conversations with the most at-risk students at lunch or in the hallway. This provided a quick opportunity for a status report, a problem-solving session, and words of encouragement. This timely, usually four minute process, guaranteed students that adults paid attention to their academic needs.

The results of the program appeared successful. By the end of the year, the number of students failing at least one course decreased by fifty percent, there was a drastic reduction in the overall failure rates, and, a pleasant unintended consequence, student fights decreased by sixty-percent. The policy also increased the communication between students and teachers. The support level for students became more thorough and complete.

Four factors were important to the program’s success:

1. The involvement of the faculty members in creating and maintaining the policy.
2. A streamlined process of grade reporting and contract creation between students and teachers.
3. A strong, student-centered and academically minded coaching staff.
4. The active use of timely data.

Kirk & Kirk (1993) describe another approach being used at Whitehaven High School, in Memphis, Tennessee. Rather than attacking the existing eligibility policies, these strategies specifically target the academic needs of athletes, seeking to insure their academic success. The core of the model, known as *Athletes and Academics*, involves everyone associated with the individual athlete, both at school and at home. Thus, counselors, coaches, faculty, parents, and athletes are all integral participants in the system. Two principles sustain this method: intervention and co-curricular skills development. Intervention is the means of preventing and addressing academic problems, and occurs by way of meetings throughout the calendar year. Participants at these meetings discuss topics relevant to a student's grade monitoring, academic planning, counseling, and goal-setting. Another distinguishing feature of this system is the specialized co-curricular skills that address the needs of student-athletes. The co-curricular component for which each athlete receives instruction includes:

1. Developing time-management skills.
2. Building specialized academic strategies.
3. Setting goals.
4. Learning decision-making and problem-solving processes.
5. Developing interpersonal communication skills.
6. Improving parent involvement.

Behind this model lies the philosophy that strengthening the skills and efforts of athletes will prepare them for both physical competition and academic challenges.

A third strategy attempts to mesh the requirements of the academic eligibility policy into a more all-inclusive approach of reform. Stein, Richin, Banyon, Banyon, & Stein (2000) discuss this comprehensive approach. Their model, which includes such noble issues as student character and conduct, also addresses instructional strategies that help students develop the skills they need to learn, and the practice of meeting the standards for learning. To accomplish these reforms a school should create a task force on athletics, using a variety of adult stakeholders to contribute to a refurbished set of guidelines that steer the on-campus interaction between athletics and academics. This type of comprehensive approach supports the idea that academic achievement, while a major component of reform, is only one of many changes needed in today's competitive interscholastic sports.

The most wide-ranging of all attempts at reform belongs to the state of Maine, where a select panel of leaders in education, athletics, medicine, and public policy released *Sports Done Right* (University of Maine Sport and Coaching Initiative, 2005), a comprehensive report on the condition of high school athletics in that state. The report is part evaluation and part recommendation, addressing several key areas, including the following: philosophy, values and sportsmanship, parents and community, and sports and learning. The report, sponsored by the University of Maine, with grant support from the United States Department of Education, frames its proposals within concepts called core principles and core practices. The sports and learning section begins, "The intrinsic qualities of sports create a strong learning dynamic that complements the academic program" (p. 6). Having affirmed this perspective on sports, the report goes on to recommend practices for schools and

communities to observe to insure the academic success of student-athletes. Although the report does not specifically recommend a universal academic eligibility policy, it does call on local educational leaders to establish a balance between academic learning and athletic learning. *Sports Done Right* is neither law nor state-mandated guideline. It is rather a model designed to impress upon schools and communities (beginning in the state of Maine) the need to reform existing policies and procedures because it is the right thing to do for the young people (Cobb & Albanese, 2005).

Whether the approach is “bump and run,” preemptive intervention, or comprehensive reform, new eligibility policies provide evidence that innovative approaches can be both effectual and viable, thus creating a fresh atmosphere of success on at least some high school campuses. The common component appears to be the expected involvement of significant adults in the lives of athletes. These relationships prove to be the catalyst for open communication and constant monitoring of academic progress, a formula that appears to yield success for all parties involved.

The idea of reforming traditional style eligibility policies remains novel to most school systems. To the educators and parents involved, the discussion remains purely quantitative, typically based on some mixture of requirements associated with measures such as grade point average, quality point average, number of days at school, or number of courses passed. In such systems, academic eligibility policies are classically rigid. In these situations, parents find that their recourse for exceptions has been primarily through the legal system. The next section discusses some of the issues that the courts have ruled on regarding eligibility policies.

Legal Challenges

The debates associated with academic eligibility policies raise several legal questions. To some, participation in public school interscholastic sports is a right for all interested students. Therefore, policies that potentially eliminate students from athletics are illegal. Others perceive sports as a privilege directly linked to the achievement of an academic standard; therefore, such policies are not only legal, but necessary to insure academic achievement. Issues also arise regarding the application of academic eligibility for students with learning disabilities. Should they, or should they not, be subject to the same academic eligibility policies to which other student-athletes are accountable? The following sections address these issues and the professional practices recommended to educators as they design and implement such policies.

Right v. Privilege

Some believe that participation in high school sports is not only an important extracurricular activity, but also a constitutionally guaranteed right. However, the courts have typically not taken such a stance. Several state supreme courts, including West Virginia, Montana, and Louisiana, ruled that academic eligibility policies are not a violation of constitutional rights. It was the ruling of the courts that these policies could exist because of a legitimate state interest in providing a quality public education (Morton, 1993). The Texas Supreme Court reaffirmed by a unanimous decision that students' interests in extracurricular participation is not a constitutionally protected right, even if there are potential implications as to a

student's future professional athletic opportunities ("Playing Sports," 2005).

However, these decisions have not stemmed the tide of legal challenges.

Some have challenged the policies based on a constitutional right of students to participate. These challenges to eligibility rest on the assertion of a violation guaranteed under the due process of the Fifth Amendment and the equal protection of the Fourteenth Amendment. However, the courts have overwhelmingly not agreed with the plaintiffs in such cases, and thus have failed to recognize a constitutional right for students to be involved in extracurricular activities. Again, the courts based their decisions on the idea of a compelling state interest to provide education, and because policies are rational and relative to the academic performance of students (Burnett, 2000).

Reeves (1998) reports that many school districts face continued legal and legislative challenges to defend the validity of eligibility policies. In these cases, the theory of academic eligibility is easy to support in the courtroom but sometimes difficult to defend in the court of public opinion, especially when a standout athlete departs the team because of low grades. In an environment of high-stakes interscholastic sports, some parents look for the loophole that might provide their student the opportunity to pursue an athletic career beyond high school, even if it means legal action against the school.

Students with Disabilities

Another important influence beyond case law is the challenge these policies present to students with learning disabilities. Schools are subject to an intricate matrix of three federal statutes specifically designed to offer protection against

discrimination regarding the rights of students with learning disabilities. Sullivan, Lantz, & Zirkel (2000) examine these issues and provide sound recommendations for educational leaders to consider.

Two civil rights laws, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) both provide protection from discrimination and allow accommodations to individuals with disabilities. Alongside these two statutes, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) authorizes and provides funding for certain special education needs of students. All courts have ruled athletic associations fall within the provisions of either Section 504 or ADA. Thus, high schools, as members of state athletic associations, carry out the responsibility of enforcing athletic eligibility rules. Although presumed not intentional, the state regulations sometimes result in the exclusion of students with disabilities from athletic participation.

Using the provisions authorized in Section 504 or ADA, students seeking to obtain exclusion from academic eligibility requirements find their cases rest on two essential elements. First, they must prove a disability as defined by the act. Second, they must be otherwise qualified to participate (i.e. meet the other requirements, such as age, residence, amateur status, etc.), and they must prove that a waiver of the academic eligibility policy is a reasonable accommodation. Third, they must make the case that discrimination had occurred solely because of their learning disability. Finally, they must demonstrate that the school receives federal financial assistance. (e.g. *Johnson v. Florida High School Activities Association, Inc.*, 1995; *Sandison v. Michigan High School Athletic Association, Inc.*, 1994).

Athletic associations have been able to defend the academic eligibility rules because they are “neutral,” meaning they are not discriminatory since they apply equally to students with and without learning disabilities. However, a federal district court ruled in *T.H. v. Montana High School Association* (1996) that when a student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) includes participation in interscholastic sports, protection is granted under IDEA for the student to pursue a due process hearing. In that case, the court strongly encouraged schools to exercise prudence when including as a component of an IEP any activity for which a student is ineligible because of an association rule. “By doing so,” the court said, “the school is potentially making a promise it simply cannot keep, and is setting students...up for disappointment and failure when and if valid restriction on eligibility are ultimately enforced” (p. 125).

Any school system would be failing in its duties if it attempted to establish interscholastic eligibility policies without considering the legal aspects of such rules. Educational stakeholders should be vigilant to protect themselves from legal charges and better serve the needs of students. Therefore, they should implement rational practices and professional guidelines with the following recommendations in mind.

1. Work cooperatively with athletic associations to develop sound waiver policies that promote the best interest of students with learning disabilities.
2. Develop policies and procedures that facilitate and streamline individualized decision making for the exceptions, preferably by establishing a committee of stakeholders to evaluate exclusions to the rules.

3. Keep the channels of communication and dispute resolution open with the parents by establishing sound grievance procedures.
4. Include provisions for participation in athletics in IEPs or Section 504 plans only when necessary.
5. When no other reasonable accommodations are available, schools should develop alternative ways for students to participate in an athletic program.

The solution for some states and school systems has been to release students with a diagnosed learning disability from the academic eligibility policy. Such is the case in Texas, where the legislature enacted an amendment to exempt all learning disabled students from the no-pass/no-play policy, requiring instead that eligibility be based on the student's attainment of his/her individual education plan (Morton, 1993).

That schools should prioritize education is sound thinking to those in legislatures, courts, classrooms, and gymnasiums. Legal judgments and legislative decisions reverberate what is intuitive to many educators and parents, namely that athletic participation is a privilege for the student and should be linked to academic achievement. However, other issues cast shadows over both the high school classrooms and athletic fields. These are the pragmatic issues faced by schools on a regular basis.

Pragmatic Issues

Social, educational, legislative, and legal issues are not the only issues to consider regarding high school academic eligibility policies. The final section of this

chapter briefly addresses two additional issues that weigh into the discussion, namely the influence of college athletics on high school programs and the responsibilities of policy makers.

The Influence of College

As reported by the NASBE (2004) in *Athletics and Achievement*, the percentage of high school students who pursue an athletic career beyond high school is very small (as low as 3% in major sports). However, this number represents thousands of students and millions of scholarship dollars. For the athletes who desire to pursue athletics at a Division I or Division II member school of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) there is another academic eligibility to encounter, the one enforced by the Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse of the NCAA. This program seeks to insure high school athletes have earned the necessary academic credentials to attend college. While this is a noble goal, critics of the program question whether an athletic organization, whose primary role is to regulate college and university sports, is the proper group to prescribe high school academic standards. Nonetheless, students are presently required to complete fourteen approved courses through their high school years, a number that increases to sixteen in 2008. Without meeting this requirement, the superior athletic skills, good grades, and exemplary test scores of the Type I scholar-athletes are no longer enough to warrant a place in NCAA sports. This additional requirement casts a long shadow of influence over high school programs that exist in an already pressurized system.

The discussion over the effectiveness of the Clearinghouse remains an additional topic of debate. Some see its work as inept and unnecessary, such as

Nathan (1998), while others, such as Barnes (2005), agree with those who perceive the eligibility requirements for college freshmen fair. For the near future, this influence will remain an important factor in high school sports.

The Responsibilities of Policy Makers

A visit to almost any local high school will likely uncover a traditional set of quantitative measures in place for academic eligibility, such as GPA, QPA, and days in attendance. The challenge before policy makers, whether educational or legislative, state or local, is to construct academic eligibility requirements that meet scholastic expectations and satisfy the needs of a diverse population of stakeholders, chiefly the needs of the students. This demands the collaborative efforts of policy makers engaged in effective decision-making, with an eye toward research, an ear for expert advice, and an attitude to consider non-traditional strategies. Some plans, such as the reforms discussed previously, demonstrate there is room for new approaches by policy makers who are willing to consider fresh ideas for the situation. The conclusion reached by the NASBE (2004) report, *Athletics and Achievement*, is the need for balance. Balance between an educational environment that stresses academic achievement and the athletic program, which benefits students, schools, and communities. This charge applies primarily to the policy makers, but other educational leaders, including school administrators and athletic directors, must also use their proximity to the situation as a voice of reason and recommendation.

The University of Maine's Sport and Coaching Initiative, *Sports Done Right* (2005), likely provides the most up-to-date approach to the issue. Built upon research and expert judgment, this broad strategy of reform speaks to the place of

interscholastic athletics as an experience that develops the learning potential and personal growth of each student-athlete. Quality sports programs, the report concludes, are those that emphasize the importance of “student” in the student-athlete. To that end, athletics becomes a tool to inspire and motivate students to strive for greater academic success.

Conclusion

The importance of sports in American high schools appears undeniable. It dominates the lives of many students and their families. Academic eligibility policies, discussed both theoretically and empirically in this chapter, have their supporters and their opponents. They exist because of a deep-rooted ideal that supposes athletic participation comes only after academic achievement. These ideas, even the most stringent of them, have withstood legal challenges and stakeholder objections. Therefore, it appears logical to assume that academic eligibility policies will be a mainstay of athletic participation for years ahead. What remains to develop is how policy makers address new stresses on the system, especially in an age of increased academic expectations, community interest, and college regulations. New strategies are typically yielding successful results; however, the momentum to move toward these non-traditional systems of academic accountability currently appears to be nominal. Consequently, this research project moves forward to compare two systems that employ traditional policies.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

This chapter describes several elements important to the execution of the research done in this study. First, there is an overview of the general perspective and context of the study, followed by a description of the participants, instruments, and procedures employed in the research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of validity, reliability, and data analysis as it relates to this study.

The General Research Perspective

Traditionally, the techniques used to reveal an understanding of tendencies and relationships in research have been either quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative studies yield conclusions based upon statistical analysis, such as frequency and magnitude of relationships. Alternatively, qualitative methods provide insight centered on quotes and experiences from those persons closely associated with the issue. A third approach, known as mixed-methods research, seeks to accomplish productive investigations by blending elements of these two techniques. Creswell (2005) views this approach as an ideal strategy that makes the data from one source complement the data from the other, enabling an improved investigation of the issue from more than one perspective. Using this strategy, the researcher seeks to determine if the two sets of data yield similar or dissimilar results. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004) also laud the mixed-methods approach, arguing that it builds on the strength of both outcomes, and thus provides a greater understanding of the results. They associate mixed-methods design with richer, more valid, and more reliable conclusions than evaluations based on one method alone. A further advantage

is that a mixed-method approach is likely to increase the acceptance of findings by the diverse groups that have a stake in the evaluation.

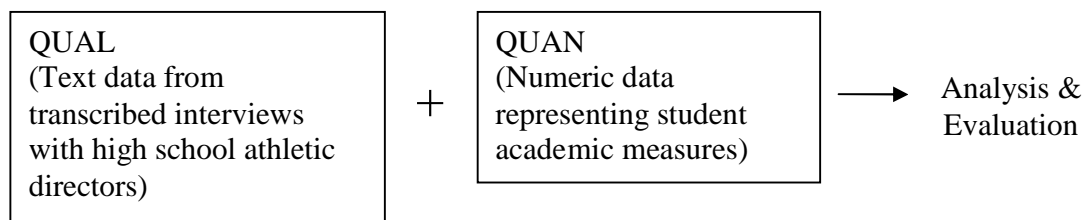
The impact of academic eligibility policies on high school student-athletes is an intricate issue. In an attempt to analyze that complexity, this study embodies a mixed-methods approach that analyzes both quantitative and qualitative data. As described by Creswell (2005), three options of mixed-methods research are typically available for use in such an investigation. First, there is the exploratory method, where the qualitative data is secured first and given priority over the quantitative data (notated QUAL → quan; the capitalization indicates priority; the arrow indicates qualitative data is gathered first, and then quantitative data). A second option is the explanatory method, where quantitative data collection occurs first, and takes priority over the qualitative data (notated QUAN → qual). Finally, there is the triangulation method, where two types of data collection occur concurrently and rate equal priority (notated QUAN + QUAL). This approach seeks a union of the results from different perspectives studying the same phenomenon. The mixed-method approach is a valuable tool to determine if two evaluations support similar conclusions.

Because this research seeks an in-depth evaluation of the influence of the requirements and since it leans primarily on the interview data, this study utilizes an exploratory method to yield insight into the issues related to academic eligibility policies. This type of research makes the design, implementation, and reporting of the data straightforward (Figure 1 displays this process as it applies to this study). It also offers an appealing element to those seeking a quantitatively-based component in an otherwise qualitatively-driven study. The evaluation of the qualitative and

quantitative data together will help to formulate a more refined understanding of the athletic directors' perspectives and those statistical results that evaluate student academic measures (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

Figure 1

The Exploratory Design Used in this Research



The Research Context

This study evaluated data from two public school systems in North Carolina. There are several similarities between the two systems, including relative size, economic influences, demographics, and socio-economic status levels. In each system, high school includes grades nine through twelve. Both offer a comprehensive curriculum driven by the state's standard course of study, including regular, honors, and Advanced Placement levels, with an available International Baccalaureate program. School system A includes fourteen high schools that sponsor interscholastic teams. Together, these schools tally a student population of just over twenty-thousand. Overall, the system's student population is white (45%), African-American (41%), Hispanic (6%), Asian (4%), an multiracial (3%), and a small portion (less than 1%) that is American Indian. In 2006, over four thousand students graduated with high school diplomas.

School system B is somewhat smaller. It has a total student population in excess of thirteen thousand. The district's student population is white (46%), African-American (34%), Hispanic (14%), multiracial (3%), Asian (2%), and a small amount (less than 1%) that is American Indian. In 2006, nearly two-thousand, six hundred students graduated from its eleven high schools.

The Research Participants

As is typical with exploratory research, the quantitative data used in this study receives less priority than the descriptive data. However, this does not minimize the importance of the quantitative data, only the weight it brings to bear upon the final analysis. In this study, the quantitative data originated from one system's district athletic director. This historical data summarized the following five academic measures of high school athletes:

1. The number of students that participated in interscholastic sports
2. The average GPA
3. The average days missed per year
4. The withdrawal rate per year
5. The graduation rate per year

The priority of analysis rests most upon the descriptive data generated from the ten high school athletic directors (five in each district), who participated in individual interviews. This dialogue targeted their perspectives and experiences with academic eligibility policies as implemented by each local education agency. The evaluations were based on several distinctive characteristics, including which system

the school belonged to, the rural or urban setting of the school, along with the demographics and experience of the athletic director.

As Table 1 summarizes, the schools in the study represent various demographics, both in their student populations and in the athletic directors themselves. It is notable that the urban schools are predominantly African-American, while students in the rural schools are primarily Caucasian. Three of the schools have a Hispanic population over ten percent. The “% Other” category identifies the combined percentages of American Indian, Asian, and mixed-race minorities.

Table 1

Summary of the Schools and Athletic Directors in this study, 2006-2007

School	Total Students	% Cau.	% A-A	% Hisp.	% Other	School Type	AD Years.	AD Gender	AD Race
1	764	16.9	4.1	16.9	1.9	Urban	16	Male	Cau
2	967	18.2	70.1	2.8	8.9	Urban	4	Male	Cau
3	1,021	47.9	36.8	5.5	9.8	Rural	3	Female	Cau
4	1,265	47.7	42.7	5.2	4.4	Rural	18	Male	Cau
5	1,569	21.0	60.4	13.8	4.8	Urban	1	Male	A-A
6	1,584	1.2	93.2	2.7	2.9	Urban	4	Male	A-A
7	1,591	52.7	31.6	11.3	4.4	Rural	18	Male	Cau
8	1,804	70.4	16.5	9.1	4.0	Rural	8	Male	Cau
9	1,820	41.7	44.5	4.2	9.6	Urban	20	Male	Cau
10	2,034	78.1	11.3	5.4	5.2	Rural	20	Male	Cau

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The descriptive data originated from individual interviews between the researcher and ten high school athletic directors. For this research, the interview was the preferred method of qualitative data collection because it allowed the athletic directors to discuss their experiences with the policies based on their first-hand knowledge of how the policies affect teams and players. They expressed how they regarded the situations the policies created from their own point of view and in their own words. This was preferable, for example, to a survey, which typically yields a poor rate of return, and would limit the personalization of the replies, making it more difficult to probe responses.

The interview consisted of sixteen open-ended questions. Questions helped the interviewees think about their perspectives and experiences with various athletes. This was evident as frequently the athletic directors paused to think for a moment before they responded. All interviewees answered the same basic questions in the same order. Questions dealt with such topics as fairness, stress, communication procedures, minority and learning disabled students, satisfaction, and recommendations for change.

Successful interviews are the result of an effective interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. Creswell (2005) points out one-on-one interviews are ideal when participants are “not hesitant to speak, are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably” (p. 215). An effective interviewer should be knowledgeable of the subject, structure of the interview, and clarity of language and subject matter. In this study, the researcher had previously been an athletic director for ten years. The

interview protocol and questions used in this research are included in the Appendix. (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

The quantitative data originated from the district office. Since this data was historical in nature, there was no collection instrument.

Procedures Used In Carrying Out the Design

The process of carrying out the research design involved a straightforward course of action. A phone call to each district's athletic director began the process of data collection. During the phone call, there was a brief introduction and explanation of the intent of the research and the desired data. A meeting with each district athletic director to discuss further details regarding data collection followed this phone conversation. At this meeting, each district athletic director provided available quantitative data, and suggested five high school athletic directors to interview for the qualitative data. In an attempt to engage a broad perspective of interview participants, the recommendations included schools in different geographical locations, with different sizes, and with minority (female or African-American) athletic directors.

Based upon the recommendations of the district athletic directors, contact was made with the selected high school athletic directors via phone. These phone calls accomplished two important goals, first for introduction and explanation, then for scheduling of an individual interview. The interviews were always held in each athletic director's office, and typically took less than one hour to complete. To insure the accuracy of responses, and with the permission of each participant, a digital

recorder taped each conversation. This also kept the interview moving at a comfortable pace.

Validity

An essential component of good research is a report on the validity of the data and results. Validity is an issue common to both quantitative and qualitative research. Valid research minimizes bias in the data and the results. From a quantitative perspective, validity is evident through careful collection and proper statistical treatment of the data. One threat to qualitative validity can be bias, either from the interviewer or from the interviewee. By collecting data directly from athletic directors in an authentic setting, the research data can be considered authentic, situation-specific, honest, and creditable. Qualitative data is meaningful because it reflects ideas in terms unique to the respondents (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

Within a mixed-methods context, Creswell & Clark (2007) define validity as “the ability of the researcher to draw meaningful and accurate conclusions from all of the data in the study” (p. 146). While it is idealistic to contend for absolute validity, it is possible for research to minimize the influence of threats upon the research with planning and procedures that reflect sound collection techniques and data analysis. This makes it possible to generalize the results from this study to a wider population of situations. This study attempts to maximize concurrent validity through the analysis of the historical data and the interview responses of the various high school athletic directors.

Reliability

A companion issue to validity is reliability. The reliability of this study rests upon the consistency, precision, and accuracy of the research. In essence, reliability seeks a fit between what the data suggests and what actually happens. In this study, reliability is understood in light of the recommendation of Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000); namely, that reliability rests upon a highly structured interview of several individuals, conducted by the same interviewer using the same format and sequence of questions for each one of several interviewees.

Data Analysis

Results that are more detailed are presented in the next chapter; however, an overview of the methodology employed in the analysis of data is presently useful. In this study, the data generated from the interview process primarily received qualitative analysis and the historical data received quantitative analysis.

Analyzing these two types of data involved several elements. For the qualitative data, the first step was to listen to the recorded interviews and transcribe the responses; this gave an overall flavor of the athletic directors' perspectives. Then, to make sense of the text data, a coding procedure described by Creswell (2005) was used to process the data into segments. Segments were then coded and reduced into several common themes. This process distinguished meaningful text from unimportant information and differentiated between similar and dissimilar responses.

In order to analyze interview responses quantitatively, some responses received numeric counts. As referenced by Creswell & Clark (2007), several approaches are useful in quantifying qualitative data, including (a) the frequency of

themes; (b) the percentage of themes; (c) the percentage of respondents endorsing multiple themes; and (d) the proximity of one theme to another. These were useful strategies to draw conclusions from the data.

Using SPSS, version eleven (2001), a quantitative analysis of historical data generated descriptive and correlational statistics, including measures of central tendency, variability, and relationship. Since the analysis frequently involved the comparison of two samples (e.g. urban as compared to rural schools or minority as compared to majority athletic directors), the Pearson's product moment coefficient of correlation (r) was selected to determine the degree of relationship between selected variables. Additionally, the quantitative data was subject to the independent t-test and One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). When deemed useful, tables, graphs, and matrices assist in the data analysis and explanations.

Summary

This chapter described the methods used in obtaining data and researching this study. As a mixed-methods study, this research was done using exploratory design, which primarily weighed the qualitative over the quantitative data. The goal was to obtain a complete picture of the impact of academic eligibility policies upon high school student-athletes. The next chapter presents the results obtained from using these methods.

CHAPTER FOUR: Results

As explained in the first chapter, this research investigated the impact of academic eligibility policies upon the achievement of high school student-athletes. To accomplish this goal, two types of data were collected and analyzed. The majority of the data originated from interviews with high school athletic directors. Quantitative data consisted of academic achievement measures, which one district provided for each of its high schools. Using methods recommended by Miles & Huberman (1994) and Muijs (2004), this chapter describes the results of the data analysis. The qualitative analysis of the interview data is presented first, and addresses the similar and dissimilar responses regarding the first four research questions. This is followed by an analysis of the quantitative data, which addresses the fifth research question.

While analysis of the descriptive data examined the experiences and perspectives of the athletic directors, the historical data gave insight to measures of student success. Together, these two perspectives provide a more comprehensive picture of the impact of academic eligibility policies.

The analysis of the interview data focused on the following distinctions:

- Rural and urban schools (research question 1)
- Minority (female or African-American) athletic directors and majority (Caucasian male) athletic directors (research question 2)

- Athletic directors with more than ten years of experience and those with less than ten years of experience (research question 3)
- Athletic directors in two districts with different academic eligibility standards (research question 4)

The Descriptive Data: Similar Responses

The responses from the athletic directors indicated there was general agreement on some issues and disagreement on others. This section of the analysis examines the responses that were generally the same in nine of the sixteen interview questions.

- All had the same opinion that athletes are under greater stress than non-athletes (question 2) to meet the academic policies necessary to maintain eligibility, even if their peers were held to an academic standard in some other extracurricular activity. Several athletic directors reasoned this because of the time demands placed upon students to practice and play sports. However, higher standards for team members were justified by statements like, “Athletes are in the spotlight, they should be held to a higher standard,” or “Students must know that academics come before athletics.”
- They expressed uniform satisfaction (question 4) with the multiple ways their respective schools communicate the policies (question 3) to the students and their parents, including pre-season meetings, eligibility forms, handbooks, newsletters, and websites.

- Concerning students with learning disabilities (question 6), they typically stated that while the eligibility rules do not specifically make allowances for these students, there is flexibility exercised in the classroom via the Individual Education Program (IEP) and related supervision provided by the guidance office.
- Regarding some of the specifics of the eligibility rules, they concurred that the policies have little to no negative effect on the number of students trying out for teams (question 9). One athletic director said, “The students who want to be on a team know the requirements before the season begins.” One AD expressed the idea that students who do not meet the standard sometimes play on organized community youth teams, such as those provided through the Amateur Athletics Union (AAU).
- There was also consensus that when athletes are declared academically ineligible the coaches typically took an interest in finding some academic assistance, including directing the students to before or after school tutoring when available (question 10). Several of the athletic directors also commented that they individually discuss academic situations with students when they become ineligible.
- Hardship waivers, whether for the district or the state, were viewed as a positive tool to assist students in atypical situations (question 11). Overwhelmingly, athletic directors stated they would submit a small number of waiver requests in the course of a year, typically ranging from three to ten.

- On the topic of verifying the eligibility of players on opposing teams (question 12), the athletic directors typically echoed the thought that if there were questions concerning the eligibility of an opposing player, the first call would be made to the athletic director of the opposing school. Although, two said they would first inform the district athletic director.
- When asked to describe their role in enforcing the academic eligibility policies on their respective campuses (question 13), the athletic directors expressed several common opinions. In various ways, the athletic directors acknowledged their task of making certain the coaching staff was properly informed of the policies, and that players' eligibility was accurately verified. Some expressed their perception in broader terms. One confidently stated, "I am the enforcer!" while another said, "I am the police chief." Although others did not use such vivid metaphors, all athletic directors confidently conveyed the idea that the communication, implementation, and supervision of the policy received the utmost priority in their offices. One veteran athletic director observed, "I am more involved now than I ever have been."

The Descriptive Data: Dissimilar Responses

While there were many common threads throughout the interview responses, an examination of the replies also revealed some differences. Tables 2 through 5 highlight those differences. Four pairs of contrasting variables reflect the issues associated with the first four research questions. The tables include summary statements and quotes from the athletic directors pertaining to these five themes:

1. The fairness of the policies and the best interests of students (questions 1 & 8).
2. The impact of the rules upon minority students (question 5).
3. The rules as a predictor of graduation (question 7).
4. The athletic directors' satisfaction with the policies (question 14).
5. The athletic directors' recommendations concerning the policies (questions 15 & 16).

This section concludes with a table that summarizes the number of responses given for each theme within each of the first four research questions.

Research Question 1

Will athletic directors from rural schools (N=5) view academic eligibility policies differently than athletic directors from schools in urban settings (N=5)?

Table 3

Summary of Athletic Directors' Responses: Urban and Rural Schools

Issue	School	Summary of Responses
Best Interest of Students & Fairness	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four said yes, the policies are implemented with the best interest of students and are fair; two affirmed with “definitely”; one stated that students are not harmed by the policy.
	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One simply stated the policies are unfair. • Four said yes. One said “absolutely not,” stating they had more to do with politics than students. • Four said fair, and two emphasized it was because of

		<p>the block schedule. One said unfair because it prevented D students from participation.</p>
Adversely Affect Minority Students	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four said yes; two observed it was more noticeable at minority schools. • One said no, further commenting, “I feel strongly that the requirements are established for everyone, and can be met by everyone.”
	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All said no; one referenced the block schedule as “making it easier for everyone to play”; one commented that in his experience, minority students are affected more during the fall season.
Predictor of Graduation	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four said yes; Another commented that the standards are high enough for graduation, but not for success after graduation. • One said “No, not necessarily, especially if they devote too much time to sports.”
	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four said yes; One noted that athletes should graduate on-time because, “the academic standards for athletes are higher than the graduation standards.” • One said.”No, it’s not a guarantee.”
Satisfied with the Policies	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three said they were satisfied. • Two said they were dissatisfied. One stated, “I don’t know of any AD in the county, who, if they tell you the

		truth, likes it.”
	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three said they were satisfied. • Two said they were dissatisfied; one state, “if a student does enough to graduate, then they’re doing enough to play.”
Suggestions	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two said it should be raised; one said the standards are “too easily attained.” • Two said it should be lowered (to the state standard). • One commented that the policies should be left the same.
	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One wanted them “somehow raised.” • Two wanted them lowered (to the state standard) • Two said they should remain the same, but did address issues regarding the timing of when the grades are checked, especially for fall and winter sports.

Research Question 2

Do minority athletic directors (female or African-American; N=3) view academic eligibility policies differently than majority athletic directors (Caucasian males; N=7)?

Table 4

Summary of Responses: Minority and Majority Athletic Directors

Issue	Distinctive	Summary of Responses
-------	-------------	----------------------

<p>Best Interest of Students & Fairness</p>	<p>Minority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All said yes they are in the best interest; one commented that they “prepare them for challenges later in life.”
<p>Interest of Students & Fairness</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One noted that even though the policies are in the best interest of students, the rules are unfair.
<p>Fairness</p>	<p>Majority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six said yes; one commented, “It demands some academic achievement before athletic participation.” • One said, “Absolutely not.”
<p>Adversely Affect</p>	<p>Minority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One plainly said yes. • Two said no, one stated, “The standards are attainable by everyone and the distribution is fair.”
<p>Minority Students</p>	<p>Majority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five said no, although one commented maybe during the fall season it does, another said it is more noticeable at minority schools. • Two said yes; one correlated it to SES.
<p>Predictor of Graduation</p>	<p>Minority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two said yes; meeting the standards should keep them on track to graduate • One answered without certainty, saying “Not necessarily.”
	<p>Majority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six said yes, often referring to the higher GPA or the higher academic standards than graduation requires. • One said, “No, it’s not a guarantee.”

Satisfied with the Policies	Minority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two expressed satisfaction, one very strongly. • One was dissatisfied, stating, “I don’t like them.”
	Majority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four expressed satisfaction with the policies • Three expressed some degree of dissatisfaction, either in the standard or the timing of when grades are checked.
Suggestions	Minority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One recommended no changes. • One recommended only using the state standard. • One suggested the standard should be raised, including a GPA requirement and six-week grading periods.
	Majority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two recommended no changes. • Three suggested lowering the standards (to the state requirements). • Two desired increasing the requirements, including more frequent monitoring or a change in the timing of when grades are checked.

Research Question 3

Will athletic directors with more than ten years of experience (N=5) have different opinions concerning academic eligibility policies than athletic directors with less than ten years of experience (N=5)?

Table 5

Summary of Responses: Athletic Directors' Years of Experience

Issue	Distinctive	Summary of Responses
Best Interest of Students & Fairness	< 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All said yes; the following comments typically stated, “They must be students first.”
	> 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four said yes, but one said the state standard was too low. One said no.
Adversely Affect Minority Students	< 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three said no; one’s answer came only after a long thoughtful pause. Two said yes.
	> 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three said no; one commented, “I can’t say that it does.” Two said yes, one referred to the attendance policy affecting more Hispanic students.
Predictor of Graduation	< 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four said yes; one said, “athletes should graduate on time because of all the extra attention they receive.” One said, “No, not necessarily.”
	> 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four said yes; one bluntly commented, “if they meet the standard they should graduate on time.” One said no, even if they meet the standard “it’s not a guarantee.”
Satisfied with the	< 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four said yes; one said, “On a scale of one-to-ten, I’d give it a ten.”

Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One said, “No, I am dissatisfied with the existing rules.”
	<hr/> <p data-bbox="497 434 561 465">> 10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two said yes; one expressed his satisfaction with the comment, “I feel more comfortable with it now than I did when it first came out a few years ago.” • Three said no, two particularly referenced dissatisfaction with the GPA requirement.
	<hr/> <p data-bbox="497 801 561 833">< 10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two favored leaving the policies as is, stating, “They’re fair...I am generally content,” and “It works.” • Two wanted the standards raised. One said, “I wouldn’t be opposed to them being more rigid.” • One said the requirement should be lowered to the state standard.
Suggestions	<hr/> <p data-bbox="497 1303 561 1335">> 10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One said no changes. • Three would like to lower or eliminate the GPA requirement. • One suggested raising the requirements, including more monitoring and tutoring. <hr/>

Research Question 4

Will athletic directors in a district with academic eligibility standards that exceed state requirements have differing views from athletic directors in a district that follows the state requirements?

Table 6

Summary of Responses: Athletic Directors from Two Districts

Issue	Distinctive	Summary of Responses
Best Interest of Students & Fairness	A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All five said yes; one typical comment was, “They should be expected to meet an academic standard before participating.”
	B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four said yes, however one expressed a preference to the state rules, not the district’s higher standard. One said, “Absolutely not.”
Adversely Affect Minority Students	A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three said no; one minority school athletic director further commented, “We have higher expectations than the minimum requirements.” Two said yes, one speculated a correlation with socio-economic status.
	B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three said no, although there was hesitancy to strongly commit to their position. Two said yes, one admitted it is more noticeable at a minority school.
Predictor of	A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All said yes, although one was hesitant to make a

Graduation	strong connection; another one said, “If they adhere to the policies, they will be on track to graduate.”
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three said yes; one said, “If they can maintain the 2.0 GPA policy, they should be able to graduate.” • Two said no; one responded, “not necessarily.”
Satisfied	A
with the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All five said yes, typically commenting that they accomplish what they are intended to do.
Policies	B
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three expressed the idea of lowering the standards, particularly to the state level. • Two said the policies were fine.
	A
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three expressed contentment with where the standards currently exist. • Two expressed a desire to see the standard raised.
Suggestions	B
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even though two said the policies were fine, all five expressed their preference for the state standard of eligibility over the district’s elevated standard; one mentioned using more tutoring.

These replies lent themselves to a summary based upon the number of times the respondents indicated their position on the questions. These counts are in Table 7, which demonstrates points of similarity and divergence.

Table 7

Descriptive Data Summary of Athletic Directors Responses

High School Athletic Eligibility Policies 81

	Years							
	Geography		Demography		Experience		District	
	Urban (N=5)	Rural (N=5)	Minority (N=3)	Majority (N=7)	< 10 (N=5)	> 10 (N=5)	A (N=5)	B (N=5)
<hr/> Issue: Are the policies fair and in the best interest of students?								
YES	4	4	3	6	5	4	5	4
NO	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
<hr/> Issue: Do the policies adversely affect minority students?								
YES	4	0	1	2	2	2	2	2
NO	1	5	2	5	3	3	3	3
<hr/> Issue: Are the policies a good predictor of graduation?								
YES	4	4	2	6	4	4	5	3
NO	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	2
<hr/> Issue: Are you satisfied with the policies?								
YES	3	3	2	4	4	2	5	2
NO	2	2	1	3	1	3	0	3
<hr/> Issue: What changes would you recommend to the current policy?								
RAISE	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	0
LOWER	2	2	1	3	1	3	0	5
NONE	1	2	1	2	2	1	3	0

The Quantitative Data

The athletic director's office of System A provided the most recent quantitative data available regarding measures of student achievement for a complete school year. Each of the system's fourteen high schools categorizes measures of three groups of students (athletes, performing arts, and other) for the academic year.

The data for each group included:

1. Average GPA
2. Average number of absences
3. Number of dropouts
4. Percentage of discipline referrals
5. Graduation rate

Research Question 5

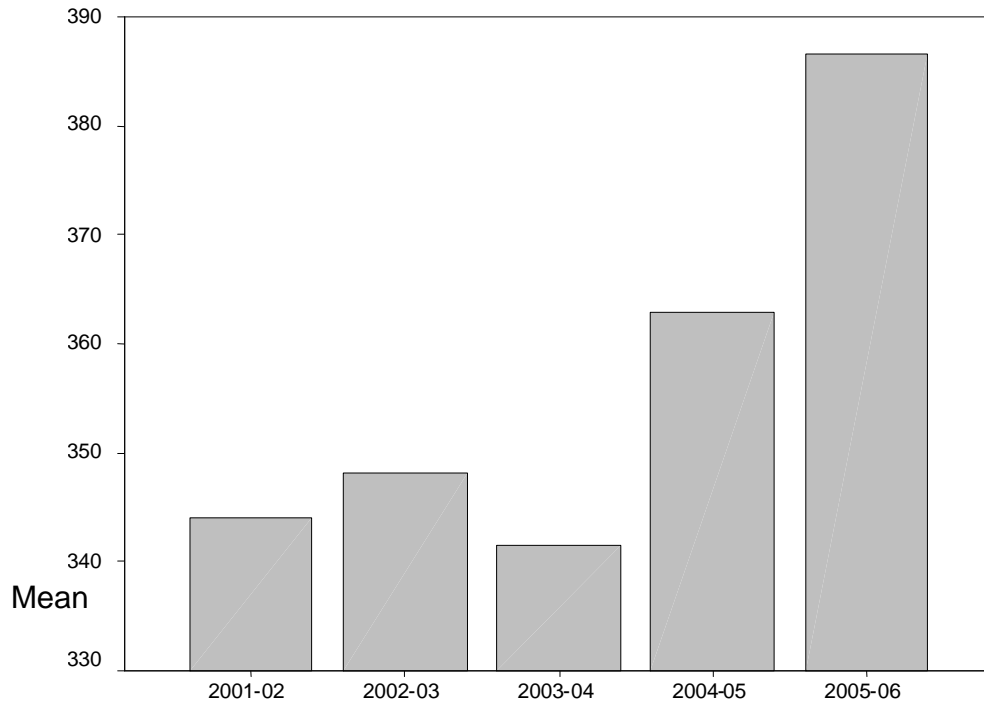
Do academic measures indicate student-athletes perform differently in diverse geographic or demographic settings?

Analysis of this data using SPSS provided three types of comparisons: (a) student-athletes to their non-athletic peers, (b) student-athletes at rural and urban schools, and (c) student-athletes at minority and majority schools.

Additional data provided a look at the number of students participating in interscholastic programs. Figure 1 displays the 12.5% growth experienced over five years in the mean number of athletes in each school's total number of participants.

Figure 2

Mean Number per School of Athletes in System A



Means Analysis

One piece of evidence demonstrating the impact of academic eligibility policies may be seen in the measures of performance of three groups of high school students. The mean scores and standard deviations for athletes, performing arts students, and other students, are displayed in Table 8. These figures indicate athletes outperformed their non-athletic peers in GPA and average number of days absent, which are two of the measures typically addressed in eligibility policies.

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics of Three Types of System A High School Students

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Athletes' GPA	14	2.503	3.364	3.04807	.237097
Performing Arts GPA	14	2.491	3.449	2.92271	.263780
Other GPA	14	1.569	2.622	2.07536	.312118
Athletes Absences	14	6.6	10.2	8.321	1.2411
Performing Arts Absences	14	6.5	14.3	10.379	2.3046
Other Absences	14	11.4	19.7	15.457	2.6135
Athletes' Drop Outs	14	0	6	2.36	1.946
Performing Arts Drop Outs	14	0	2	.36	.633
Other Drop Outs	14	44	114	69.57	23.608
Valid N (listwise)	14				

Other indicators of the influence of academic eligibility policies may be seen in the comparison of athletes' academic measures in urban and rural schools (Table 9) and in minority and majority schools (Table 10). While the means for these measures are not identical, they do signify comparable success rates and would seem to indicate that athletes are typically successful at maintaining the eligibility requirement, regardless of the location or type of school.

Table 9

Comparison of Athletes' Academic Measures: Urban and Rural Schools

Group Statistics					
	School Location	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Athletes' GPA	Urban	7	3.01371	.299751	.113295
	Rural	7	3.08243	.170864	.064581
Athletes Absences	Urban	7	8.871	1.3853	.5236
	Rural	7	7.771	.8440	.3190
Athletes' Drop Outs	Urban	7	3.00	2.082	.787
	Rural	7	1.71	1.704	.644
Athletes Disiplinary Referrals	Urban	7	17.443	6.9563	2.6292
	Rural	7	29.229	7.6863	2.9051
Athletes' Graduation Rate	Urban	7	98.900	1.4503	.5482
	Rural	7	99.400	.7767	.2936

Table 10

*Comparison of Athletes' Academic Measures: Minority and Majority Schools***Group Statistics**

	School Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Athletes' GPA	Minority	4	2.83000	.254299	.127150
	Majority	10	3.13530	.173360	.054821
Athletes Absences	Minority	4	9.075	1.3048	.6524
	Majority	10	8.020	1.1419	.3611
Athletes' Drop Outs	Minority	4	3.00	2.449	1.225
	Majority	10	2.10	1.792	.567
Athletes Disiplinary Referrals	Minority	4	21.825	5.3281	2.6641
	Majority	10	23.940	10.7136	3.3879
Athletes' Graduation Rate	Minority	4	98.625	1.7017	.8509
	Majority	10	99.360	.8746	.2766

Independent T-Test

The t-test for independent samples provided a more specific method of evaluating whether or not the means of the five measures between the two groups were statistically significant. An examination of urban and rural schools (Table 11) indicated there is evidence, at the 5% level, to suggest the only measure that was significantly different among these measures was the number of disciplinary referrals ($t = -3.008$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.05$)

Table 11

Independent T-Test Comparing Athletes in Urban and Rural Schools

		Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
Athletes' GPA	Equal variances assumed	1.099	.315	-5.27	12	.608	-.06871	.130409	-.352851	.215422	
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.27	9.527	.610	-.06871	.130409	-.361252	.223823	
Athletes Absences	Equal variances assumed	3.558	.084	1.794	12	.098	1.100	.6131	-.2359	2.4359	
	Equal variances not assumed			1.794	9.915	.103	1.100	.6131	-.2677	2.4677	
Athletes' Drop Outs	Equal variances assumed	.478	.503	1.264	12	.230	1.29	1.017	-.930	3.501	
	Equal variances not assumed			1.264	11.550	.231	1.29	1.017	-.939	3.511	
Athletes Disiplinary Referrals	Equal variances assumed	.017	.898	-3.008	12	.011	-11.786	3.9182	-20.3228	-3.2486	
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.008	11.882	.011	-11.786	3.9182	-20.3322	-3.2392	
Athletes' Graduation Rate	Equal variances assumed	7.273	.019	-.804	12	.437	-.500	.6218	-1.8548	.8548	
	Equal variances not assumed			-.804	9.180	.442	-.500	.6218	-1.9025	.9025	

A similar t-test examination of the five measures at minority and majority schools (Table 12) revealed evidence, at the 5% level, of a significant difference only in the measure of GPA ($t = -2.623$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 12

Independent T-Test Comparing Athletes in Minority and Majority Schools

		Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
Athletes' GPA	Equal variances assumed	1.151	.305	-2.623	12	.022	-.30530	.116394	-.558901	-.051699	
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.205	4.171	.089	-.30530	.138464	-.683602	.073002	
Athletes Absences	Equal variances assumed	.434	.522	1.505	12	.158	1.055	.7009	-.4721	2.5821	
	Equal variances not assumed			1.415	4.965	.217	1.055	.7457	-.8659	2.9759	
Athletes' Drop Outs	Equal variances assumed	1.013	.334	.770	12	.456	.90	1.170	-1.648	3.448	
	Equal variances not assumed			.667	4.355	.539	.90	1.349	-2.729	4.529	
Athletes Disiplinary Referrals	Equal variances assumed	2.379	.149	-.370	12	.718	-2.115	5.7109	-14.5579	10.3279	
	Equal variances not assumed			-.491	10.979	.633	-2.115	4.3099	-11.6033	7.3733	
Athletes' Graduation Rate	Equal variances assumed	5.985	.031	-1.091	12	.297	-.735	.6739	-2.2033	.7333	
	Equal variances not assumed			-.822	3.654	.462	-.735	.8947	-3.3147	1.8447	

Correlation Analyses

The results of analyses of correlation among the five academic measures are in Table 13. The table indicates that among the five academic measures, the strongest correlation was between graduation rates and the number of drop outs ($r = -.722$, $p < .01$), a relationship that is not surprising. The correlation between GPA and absences was the weakest of the relationships ($r = .053$, $p < .05$).

Table 13

Pearson's Correlation Between Academic Measures of Athletes

		Correlations				
		Athletes' GPA	Athletes Absences	Athletes' Drop Outs	Athletes Disiplinary Referrals	Athletes' Graduation Rate
Athletes' GPA	Pearson Correlation	1	.053	-.129	-.473	.257
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.858	.659	.088	.376
	N	14	14	14	14	14
Athletes Absences	Pearson Correlation	.053	1	.067	-.425	-.216
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.858	.	.821	.130	.458
	N	14	14	14	14	14
Athletes' Drop Outs	Pearson Correlation	-.129	.067	1	-.234	-.722**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.659	.821	.	.421	.004
	N	14	14	14	14	14
Athletes Disiplinary Referrals	Pearson Correlation	-.473	-.425	-.234	1	-.101
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.088	.130	.421	.	.730
	N	14	14	14	14	14
Athletes' Graduation Rate	Pearson Correlation	.257	-.216	-.722**	-.101	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.376	.458	.004	.730	.
	N	14	14	14	14	14

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Analysis of Variance

Tables 14 and 15 give the results of the One-Way ANOVA results based upon school location and type of school. The F-test is used to test the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the five measures. A significance of less than 0.05 will indicate there is evidence to reject the null hypothesis, and say that there is some difference between groups. Otherwise, the null hypothesis is accepted. These results

indicate there is a significant difference between urban and rural school in one of the five categories, athletes' disciplinary referrals. Similarly, the comparison of minority and majority schools gives evidence of just one category where there is a significant difference, athletes GPA. Therefore, the results indicate that when we combine results from the two tables, there is no significant difference in eight of the ten academic measures.

Table 14

One-Way ANOVA of Academic Measures: Athletes in Urban and Rural Schools

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Athletes' GPA	Between Groups	.017	1	.017	.278	.608
	Within Groups	.714	12	.060		
	Total	.731	13			
Athletes Absences	Between Groups	4.235	1	4.235	3.219	.098
	Within Groups	15.789	12	1.316		
	Total	20.024	13			
Athletes' Drop Outs	Between Groups	5.786	1	5.786	1.599	.230
	Within Groups	43.429	12	3.619		
	Total	49.214	13			
Athletes Disiplinary Referrals	Between Groups	486.161	1	486.161	9.047	.011
	Within Groups	644.811	12	53.734		
	Total	1130.972	13			
Athletes' Graduation Rate	Between Groups	.875	1	.875	.647	.437
	Within Groups	16.240	12	1.353		
	Total	17.115	13			

Table 15

One-Way ANOVA of Academic Measures: Athletes at Minority and Majority Schools

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Athletes' GPA	Between Groups	.266	1	.266	6.880	.022
	Within Groups	.464	12	.039		
	Total	.731	13			
Athletes Absences	Between Groups	3.180	1	3.180	2.266	.158
	Within Groups	16.843	12	1.404		
	Total	20.024	13			
Athletes' Drop Outs	Between Groups	2.314	1	2.314	.592	.456
	Within Groups	46.900	12	3.908		
	Total	49.214	13			
Athletes Disiplinary Referrals	Between Groups	12.781	1	12.781	.137	.718
	Within Groups	1118.192	12	93.183		
	Total	1130.972	13			
Athletes' Graduation Rate	Between Groups	1.543	1	1.543	1.189	.297
	Within Groups	15.571	12	1.298		
	Total	17.115	13			

Summary

The results presented in this chapter indicate that athletic directors share similar views on a number of topics related to the impact of academic eligibility policies. However, there were also noticeable differences, which provide insight to the challenges the policies create. It is noteworthy to see evidence that indicates athletes are typically meeting and exceeding the eligibility standard, in addition, they are frequently outperforming their non-athletic peers, and performing consistently among various types of schools. A more detailed discussion of the findings and the implications for educators and policy makers are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: Summary and Discussion

The concluding chapter of this study begins by looking back at the research problem. It then reviews the methodology, and summarizes the results associated with each of the five research questions. Finally, there is discussion concerning the implications of the findings, including recommendations for policy makers and suggestions for further research.

Statement of the Problem

As explained in chapter 1, this study examined high school academic eligibility policies for student-athletes. Of particular interest is the question, “Does a higher standard for academic achievement benefit or hinder the student-athlete?” This is a worthy topic because, while all states require public high school athletes to meet some standard of academic performance, there are inconsistencies regarding how the policies are implemented, along with questions about what type of impact the policies have on academic performance. With the increased stresses of legislation and the amplified calls from stakeholders for increased academic performance, this becomes an increasingly important topic, especially as participation and popularity in high school sports attains to unprecedented levels.

Review of the Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods strategy with an exploratory approach to examine the issues associated with academic eligibility policies. The research leaned heavily upon the qualitative data derived from individual interviews with ten high

school athletic directors. Each interviewee responded to sixteen questions regarding their perspectives and experiences with the academic eligibility policies. In addition, historical measures of academic success lent insight to how athletes perform academically when compared to their non-athletic peers and among different school settings. The athletic directors were from schools in two districts and at schools that were different geographically (rural or urban) and demographically (minority or majority). The athletic directors also exhibited various characteristics, including years of experience, gender, and ethnicity. These distinctives became the basis for analyzing the data and drawing conclusions.

Summary of Results

This study was framed in five research questions, four of which were investigated using qualitative data from the interviews. The last research question was examined using quantitative data provided by one district's central office. The interviews were a useful tool to gain insight into the experiences and perspectives of those educators closest to the policies. The questions sought to probe the athletic directors' viewpoints about the communication, implementation, and impact of the policies on their respective campuses. Together, the athletic directors brought a total of 112 years of experience to this discussion, plus additional years as coaches. The responses provided similar and dissimilar themes, which are discussed in the summaries that follow.

Research Question 1

Will athletic directors from schools in rural settings view academic eligibility policies differently than athletic directors from schools in urban settings?

There were many points of agreement among athletic directors at urban and rural schools. The perception of fairness, level of satisfaction, and mix of recommendations were similarly allocated among their responses. The most obvious difference occurred in how each group viewed the effect of the academic eligibility policies upon minority students. The athletic directors at rural schools unanimously expressed the opinion that the policies did not adversely affect minority students. In contrast, four of the five ADs from urban schools said the policies did adversely affect minority students. Those athletic directors validated this perspective by referring to the high percentage of minority students in their programs. Other than the issue of minority students, the responses were overwhelmingly similar.

Research Question 2

Do minority athletic directors (female or African-American) view academic eligibility policies differently than majority athletic directors (Caucasian males)?

This was the one question of the four with an unbalanced number of respondents (3 minority ADs and 7 majority ADs). These two groups expressed similar, almost parallel variations, even regarding the aforementioned issue of minority students, which most believed were not adversely affected by the eligibility policies. Although there were subtle differences, including slightly more dissatisfaction with policies among majority athletic directors, the responses provided evidence that demography was not a distinguishing factor regarding their views and experiences of how the academic eligibility policies are perceived and implemented.

Research Question 3

Will athletic directors with more than ten years of experience have different opinions concerning academic eligibility policies than athletic directors with less than ten years of experience?

Among the athletic directors, five averaged over eighteen years of experience; and two had twenty years of experience. The other five averaged four years of experience, with one in his first year. These two groups expressed many similar viewpoints regarding the policies, and in some cases, were identical. The one issue where their viewpoints noticeable differed was in their overall satisfaction with the policies. By a four-to-one count, the lesser experienced athletic directors expressed satisfaction with the policies. On the other hand, only two of the five ADs with more than ten years experience spoke of their satisfaction with the policies. This may be because the more experienced athletic directors, either in years past or in other locations, had worked under a different system of eligibility, as evidenced by one who said, "I liked it the way it used to be."

Research Question 4

Will athletic directors in a district with academic eligibility standards that exceed state requirements have differing views from athletic directors in a district that follows the state requirements?

The greatest distinction of responses was found in this question. Their replies were similar in many areas, and almost identical regarding the policies as being in the best interest of students and not adversely affecting minority students.

The athletic directors in System A unanimously agreed on the following positions:

1. The policies were a good predictor of graduation.
2. They were satisfied with the policies.
3. They would not recommend lowering the standard.

However, the athletic directors in System B did not express the same opinions. Just three viewed the policies as a good predictor of graduation, and only two expressed satisfied with the policies. All five expressed some desire to either relax or eliminate the 2.0 GPA that their district followed. One recommended decreasing the GPA to 1.5, allowing students to remain eligible at this level, but requiring tutoring until they obtained a 2.0 GPA. Another suggested linking eligibility to the standard necessary to be promoted and graduate stating, "If students are doing enough to be promoted and graduate, then they should be doing enough to play."

Although some recommendations were expressed stronger than others, the consensus among the group was that they would not be disappointed if their district adopted the state policy, and eliminated the additional requirements. One voiced concern that the policies resulted in teams from his school being selected from a smaller pool of athletes than teams at schools in other counties. As a result, teams from other counties have players who would not be eligible if they went to his school. He also wondered if the policy in his district drove athletes to attend schools in neighboring counties. Regardless of how it was stated, it was obvious that the athletic directors favored leveling the playing field to the state mandated standards.

Research Question 5

Do academic measures indicate student-athletes perform differently in diverse geographic or demographic settings?

The importance of this question rested in demonstrating the impact of the policies in different types of schools. The intent was to assess whether or not academic measures would demonstrate consistent performance regardless of what type of school athletes attended. One system in the study provided historical data of five measures of student success (GPA, absences, drop outs, discipline referrals, and graduation rates). This data was generated by the state's student information system and compared athletes to their non-athletic peers and to one another in the contrasting settings of urban/rural and minority/majority schools. In these measures, athletes typically outperformed non-athletes. Athletes also generally performed consistently in academic measures regardless of the type of school they attended. It could thus be implied that the policies provided a stabilizing effect on the academic performance of athletes, regardless of the type of school they attended.

Implications of the Findings

The generation and analysis of data allowed for (a) the exploration of the athletic directors' perspectives regarding the academic eligibility policies, (b) the identification of similarities and differences between various groups of athletic directors, and (c) the creation of meaningful inferences from the resulting data analysis. As a result, this study contributes to an understanding of the impact that academic eligibility policies have in high school settings. After evaluating the data, three important points seem to emerge.

1. The policies appear to be useful. None of the athletic directors recommended eliminating the policies. To the contrary, they typically applauded the policies as a useful motivator for keeping athletes attentive to academic priorities. The quantitative data added weight to the argument that the policies help to stabilize the academic performance of athletes.
2. Athletic directors appear to be strongly committed to administering the policies with honesty and reliability. Many of the athletic directors displayed a well-organized system of communication, follow-up, and record keeping. They also frequently spoke of their interaction with coaches, teachers, and administration as essential to the effective implementation of the policies. Some of their strongest comments reflected a desire to effectively implement and monitor the policies, a testimony to the professionalism and integrity of the athletic directors.
3. It is evident that there is still much debate over exactly where the line for academic eligibility should be established. The athletic directors in System A were more likely to talk about increasing the requirements and making the athletes do more. Conversely, the athletic directors in System B lamented the higher standards their district mandated, recommending instead that their athletes should be allowed to follow the state guidelines. The truth may lie somewhere between those two perspectives, but only more research will ultimately determine where that point may be.

Secondary education faces many cultural, legislative, and academic challenges. For example, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2007) reported that just sixty-eight percent of the ninth graders who began high school in 2002-2003 graduated four years later. While athletes demonstrate a higher rate of graduation, this statistic underlines the need to implement successful identification and intervention policies to insure timely advancement of students through high school. Although not all students are athletes, the policies can affect enough students to be a valid help in attempting to improve this number.

The data seems to indicate academic policies can positively influence the achievement of student-athletes. However, it is important to realize that by themselves the eligibility policies are not sufficient to bring about success. It also takes the direction of the athletic director, the drive of the coach, and the desire of the student to produce the intended results.

Relationship of the Current Study to Previous Research

While there is ample research that attempts to validate the link between athletic participation and academic achievement, there has been much less research on the impact of the academic eligibility policies at the interscholastic level. Each type of research is necessary if educators are going to confidently address both present and future challenges. In theory, states mandate academic eligibility policies to insure some level of academic success, in practice there are often unintended consequences that distract from the real purpose of the policies.

As documented in the review of literature, a strong symbiotic relationship between academics and athletics has existed in the American education system for

most of the last one-hundred years. While the relationship has not always been amorous, it has typically been at least cordial. As research has helped to better understand the relationship between academics and athletics, it must now be called upon to help understand the intricacies of the eligibility policies.

Implications for Policy Makers

Based on the research presented in this study, policy makers should remain firm in their commitment to enforce an academic eligibility standard for high school athletes. However, policy makers must remain attentive to the issue. While some athletic directors wanted the standards more rigid, others wanted them more relaxed. In both cases, their concerns are valid and their perspectives are valuable. Policy makers should be willing to investigate new strategies and options, some of which are being implemented in other parts of the county (e.g. the University of Maine Sport and Coaching Initiative, 2005, and Sweet, 2005).

With the availability of student data via computer networks, policy makers should also examine the capacity of student information systems, such as North Carolina's Window of Information on Student Education (NCWISE), to track trends in student-athletes' academic performance. Such information could prove valuable in providing support for existing policies or recognizing a need for change. To restate what the NASBE (2004) report concludes, "When research is either absent or limited, personal experience or past policies become the basis for decision-making, a practice that is no longer sufficient" (p.32).

Limitations

This study assesses opinions from high school athletic directors regarding policies in existence during the 2006-2007 academic year in two public school systems in the North Carolina. Therefore, the findings of this study, including the quantitative data analysis, should not be generalized to other high school systems or other school years.

Suggestions for Further Research

Academic eligibility policies present multiple facets for examination. While this study analyzed the viewpoints of the athletic directors, there are other viewpoints equally as valid. Additional research to understand student perspectives of academic eligibility policies would be valuable. An examination of their perceptions and experiences with the policies would help to isolate issues on the students most impacted by the policies. Such research could evaluate the effectiveness of the communication, the usefulness of tutoring programs, or the socio-cultural variants that influence how students view the policies. Similarly, the perspectives of school administrators, parents, even school board members, could offer important insights.

Further research, including more quantitative analysis, that compares the effectiveness of the policies in schools with block schedules and traditional schedules also seems appropriate. Additionally, case studies that focus on the experiences of student-athletes as they progress through high school would be productive.

Conclusion

Ultimately, if educators are going to create an environment that meets the legislative demands and stakeholder expectations for scholastic success, the issue of academic eligibility will need to receive continued attention. The priority of

academics cannot be sacrificed on the altar of athletics. At times, the relationship between academics and athletics may be stressful, but educators must be prepared for new challenges and new opportunities. As interscholastic athletics expand in popularity and as new generations of athletes envision the rewards of sports, quality eligibility standards must be in place. They must serve as guardrails of protection, not because they are easy or convenient, but because they are well thought-out and systematically researched. The “virtual kaleidoscope of eligibility standards” that the National Association of State Boards of Education (2004) described is not likely to disappear soon; therefore, it is essential that educators explore and research new strategies to insure academic attainment. To be willing to devote the resources of time and energy to this issue is to be willing to see greater success, both on the field of competition and in the classroom.

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APPENDIX

High School Athletic Directors' Perceptions and Experiences

Regarding Academic Eligibility Requirements for Student-Athletes

The following questions provide the interview protocol for individual meetings with selected high school athletic directors from two North Carolina public school systems. The questions examine personal perceptions and experiences with high school academic eligibility policies. Responses yield insight to the views of those closest to the issues associated with academic eligibility policies.

To the Participant:

What follows are questions that refer to your perceptions and experiences with the academic eligibility policies of school sponsored athletics. Although some questions lend themselves to a yes/no type of reply, please answer as completely as you deem necessary. For purposes of evaluation, your responses will be grouped with those of other high school athletic directors. Your identity is confidential; your name, the name of your school, and the name of your system will not appear in the final report or any summary derived from this research. With your approval, the conversation will be recorded. The purpose of this is to acquire all the details of your responses, while at the same time carry on an attentive conversation.

The interview begins with information regarding your work as an athletic director, followed by the interview questions.

Athletic Director Information:

1. Years as an Athletic Director: _____
2. Years at your present school: _____
3. Number of schools served in this position: _____

Questions:

1. Are the academic eligibility rules enforced with the best interests of students in mind?
2. If eligibility rules are enforced only upon student athletes (implying they are not enforced on other extracurricular activities), do they inherently create a more stressful academic experience for the student athlete?

If student involvement in extracurricular activities does require academic eligibility, do you think athletes are under more stress than their non-athletic peers?
3. How are the eligibility rules and the implementation of those rules communicated? What process is in place for that to happen at your school?
4. Has it been your experience that the school does a satisfactory job of communicating the eligibility rules to the athletes and their parents? Give your experiences with this communication.
5. In your experience, do academic eligibility requirements adversely affect a higher percentage of minority students?
6. Has it been your experience that some flexibility exists in the eligibility requirements for students with diagnosed learning disabilities?

7. Has it been your experience that a student's adherence to the eligibility rules is a good predictor of high school graduation?
8. Give your understanding of how the academic eligibility rules are fair or unfair to the students?
9. In your experience, do the requirements have a positive; negative; or neutral influence on the number of students trying out for teams?
10. What means are in place for academically ineligible students to return to eligible status?
11. What mechanisms are in place to evaluate requests from students for a hardship waiver of the rules?
12. What are your options for verifying the eligibility of athletes on opposing teams?
13. What is your role, as athletic director, in the enforcement of the academic eligibility policies on your campus?
14. How satisfied are you with the existing academic eligibility rules?
15. Do the eligibility requirements need to be raised, lowered, remain the same, or eliminated?
16. What changes would you recommend about the academic eligibility policy?