Effects of High School Athletic Participation on the Educational Aspirations of Male Student-Athletes: Does Race Matter?

Sarah Rogers  
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Duke University  
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Advisors: Dr. Clara Muschkin and Professor Kenneth Rogerson
Abstract

With 55.5% of the nation’s high school students participating in athletics, it is valuable for educators to understand how athletics affect students’ educational aspirations. Educational aspirations are the strong desires to further one’s education after high school, and are a strong predictor for educational attainment.

Three separate analyses contributed to the findings, specific to males. 1. Data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 revealed a statistically significant correlation between interscholastic athletic participation and students’ educational aspirations. 2. Interviews with six soccer and basketball coaches at middle-sized high schools in Durham, North Carolina provided a more in-depth look at the role of coaches and demonstrated that every coach implements measures to encourage his players’ educational success. 3. Questionnaires from 94 student-athletes indicated that, of those surveyed, 92% planned to obtain a college or postgraduate degree, showing very high educational aspirations. Also, 90% of the student-athletes considered or planned to play their sport in college, with higher percentages of blacks and Hispanics desiring this as compared to whites.

Race and social mobility also played important factors in the findings. Social mobility is when an individual moves from one socio-economic level to another, providing the individual with increased opportunities for further advancement in society. A larger percentage of white student-athletes prioritized their academics while a larger percentage of black and Hispanic student-athletes prioritized their athletics. Social mobility seemed to have a strong correlation with the minority students’ priorities and plans to play their sport in college.

Introduction

Throughout the United States, millions of high school students participate in sports. According to the 2011-2012 High School Athletics Participation Survey, conducted by the National Federation of State High School Associations, more students are playing sports than ever before, reaching almost 7.7 million. This is the 23rd year of consecutive growth, and this number accounts for 55.5% of all high school students (“High School Sports,” 2012). Sports have shown to have positive impact on health and adolescent development. Studies on adolescent participation in extracurricular activities also showed that participation in prosocial activities, team sports, performing arts, school-involvement activities, and academic clubs all predicted strong educational outcomes. Sports
participation in particular predicted an increasing school attachment throughout high school and an increased likelihood of being enrolled full-time in college by 21 (Eccles et al., 2003, p. 872).

In recent years, society has propagated the idea that attending college is a necessity. Many students desire to continue their education after high school, but not all actually pursue a higher degree. In 2011, the Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded that 68.3% of high school graduates were enrolled in college that fall (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The report did not provide the percentage of college enrollees who were former high school athletes, but this information could be valuable to understand how athletics impacts educational aspirations.

The relationship between athletic participation and college enrollment varies by gender. In 2011-2012 about 4.5 million high school males participated in school athletics ("High School Sports," 2012). As compared to the 3.2 million females who played sports, males’ participation rates were slightly higher. This contrasts their college enrollment rates. For recent high school graduates in 2010, only 63% of males, as compared with 74% of females, were enrolled in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Since males have higher rates of athletic participation and lower rates of college enrollment, studying male student-athletes educational aspirations can explain more about the relationship between these two statistics. How exactly do sports impact a male student’s desires to further his education?

Researchers from many social science fields have focused on males and studied the relationship between high school athletic participation and students’ educational achievement and aspirations, including desires to attend college. The majority of results
found that participation in athletics positively impacts education. However, some studies discussed alternative (and negative) explanations, especially when including the component of race (Braddock, 1981, p. 343; Eitle & Eitle, 2002, p. 139; Sabo et al., 1993, p. 50; Shifrer, 2008, p. 20).

Since over half of today’s high school student population plays sports, information about student-athletes can be very valuable. Parents, teachers, coaches, and guidance counselors would benefit to know if athletic participation affects students' academic pursuits, and if race is a factor. These educators can play instrumental roles in the lives of students by helping to foster their educational goals. Educators should therefore know if athletes have different educational plans than non-athletes, and if student-athletes of one race have different educational plans than student-athletes of another race. These differences could be especially true for the athletes who want to play their sport in college.

As stated, prior studies have examined the effect of high school athletic participation on both students’ high school educational achievement and students’ educational aspirations for after high school. However, many more studies have examined the relationship between athletics and educational achievement. We therefore have few studies to draw from since the relationship between athletics and educational aspirations comprises the focus of this study. Fortunately, educational achievement and educational aspirations are closely related. We can learn a lot from the studies on student-athletes’ educational achievement to help us to better study student-athletes’ educational aspirations.
How Athletics Impact Educational Achievement

Studies that address the impact of athletics on educational achievement date back to the 1950s. Analysis of prior research showed that there was a positive correlation between the academic success of students and their athletic involvement. One study found that “students who participate in high school sports tend, on average or in general, to perform better academically than their non-athletic peers” (Hartmann, 2008, p. 5). Over the years, numerous evaluations of this topic have continued to prove the same point, that playing high school sports can improve grades and test scores, while lowering dropout rates (Hartmann, 2008, p. 7). Despite reaching a general consensus on the improvement of educational achievement, researchers found that the level of improvement varies within sub-categories, such as type of sport, level of participation, and parental involvement (Hartmann, 2008, p. 6).

The level of participation, such as intramural, club, or interscholastic, had a significant impact on the findings. Analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, as well as research on Colorado high school students, concluded that the grades of high school student athletes were indeed higher than non-athletes. (Broh, 2002, p. 76; Soltz, 1986, p. 22). However, the positive findings stemmed only from participation in interscholastic sports, not intramurals or cheerleading (Broh, 2002, p. 84).

Further analyses of data from the National Center for Education Statistics contribute to this discussion. One study of the 1980/1982 High School and Beyond Survey (HS&B) looked at 11,995 male high school students and created control variables for socioeconomic status, parental-adolescent relations, and cognitive development (Snyder &

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1 When two years are listed with a slash in between this indicates that the study being described was conducted in the first year with a follow-up in the second year.
Spreitzer, 1990, p. 392). The study concluded that, “a greater percentage of the students who participated in high school sports went to college as compared to non-athletes” (Snyder and Spreitzer, 1990, p. 394). However, no specification existed about whether the athletes were recruited to play their sport in college and attended for this reason. For students with lower cognitive development (a composite score from reading, vocabulary, and math tests), sports created an even greater positive effect. The researchers stated:

For example, for white students with higher status homes with good parental relations, 54% of the athletes with lower cognitive development entered college, whereas only 19% of the non-athletes in this classification of students went to college – a difference of 35 percentage points. On the other hand, among the white students with the same social status, parental relationships, and higher cognitive development, the effect of sport participation showed a difference of 7 percentage points. In short, for many students who are least disposed to entering college (based on their cognitive skills), sport participation exerts the greatest influence (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990, p. 395-396).

All of these studies support the positive relationship between interscholastic sports and educational achievement, but they did not conclude that this relationship was direct and causal.

**How Athletics Impact Educational Aspirations**

Not as many studies have focused on the relationship between athletic participation and educational aspirations, but some research exists. Educational aspirations are defined as the strong desires to further one’s education, particularly in the form of attending college or getting a college degree. Even stronger educational aspirations may include the goals of obtaining a post-graduate degree such as a Masters or Ph.D. This concept of educational aspirations connects to educational achievement because the two often go
hand in hand. Students with higher educational achievement are likely to have higher educational aspirations, and students with lower educational achievement are likely to have lower educational aspirations. Does athletic participation have a similar impact on aspirations as it does on achievement?

A few longitudinal studies have been conducted on sports and educational aspirations. A 1957/1972 study of Michigan high school male students found that participating in athletics had a positive effect on educational and occupational aspirations and attainments (Otto & Alwin, 1977, p. 108). Another study discovered athletic participation was not enough, and that “status” was the factor that strongly influenced educational aspirations. “Status” is the concept of being viewed as a successful athlete among one’s peers. The researchers found that, “Whereas 43% of those without athletic involvement aspire to college, 55% of those participating without status and 73% of those with status aspire to college” (Lueptow & Kayser, 1973, p. 29).

Research on aspirations also examines variation by race. A sample of 299 black and 1,207 white Louisiana high school male students comprised one study. The researcher incorporated control variables for parent’s education, academic performance, parental/teacher encouragement, peer plans, and athletic achievement (Picou, 1978, p. 431). The measurement of educational aspiration came from student responses to the question, “How much education do you desire and will actively attempt to achieve?” The response went from 0 (none after high school) to 8 (doctorate or professional degree). The study found that whites had higher mean scores for educational aspirations. White athletes also associated themselves more with college-oriented peers, and their peer’s plans influenced their educational aspirations (Picou, 1978, p. 435). In addition, athletic
achievement was a strong predictor of educational aspirations among black students (Picou, 1978, p. 435). Therefore, if a black male student-athlete performed well on the field/court/track, he was more likely to desire to attend college. This study established the importance of a student-athlete’s success in his sport, concluding that participation in interscholastic athletics alone would not foster educational aspiration.

Using the 1988 NELS, one study found that sports strongly and positively affected educational achievement (such as grades), but they did not have as strong of an effect was on educational aspirations (Fejgin, 1994, p. 218). Certain external factors, such as parental income and education played a larger role in students’ aspirations. This finding contradicted other studies and questioned whether athletic participation could strongly influence educational aspirations.

Racial Differences in Athletes’ Academic Success

Some research includes racial breakdown of the data. Students of all races participate in sports, but some races, blacks in particular, participate at higher levels than others (Eitle & Eitle, 2002, p. 141; Shifrer, 2008, p. 19; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990, p. 393). One study indicated that differences in college attendance, as well as educational achievement and progress, were more related to race than they were to gender. When comparing black, white, and Hispanic males and females, the positive gains were strongest for the white male and female student-athletes and weakest for the black male and female student-athletes (Sabo et al., 1993, p. 50).

One such positive gain appeared in the area of academic grades. Analysis of national data showed that white males completed more high-level math courses than black males in
the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Shifrer, 2008, p. 20). Also, “the effect of sports on grade 12 math test scores was significantly less for black males than white males in all three decades” (Shifrer, 2008, p. 22). However, once other factors were accounted for, such as the student’s family and academic history, the positive effects of sports on grade 12 math scores were almost equal for black and white males.

Some other studies also concluded that black males did not benefit as much from sports as did white males. A statistical analysis of the NLS data set concluded that the relationship between participating in athletics and enrollment in a college preparatory curriculum was only statistically significant for white students (Braddock, 1981, p. 343). For black and white students there was a strong positive relationship between athletic involvement and both high school grades and college enrollment, however this relationship was more prominent for white students (Braddock, 1981, p. 343-344). Also, athletic involvement only related to educational improvement among white males and did not relate to that of black males (Sabo et al., 1993, p. 50).

The Importance of Social Mobility as an Explanatory Factor – How Athletic Participation Influences College Plans

The concept of social or educational mobility provides an interesting addition to the discussion. Social mobility is when individuals or groups (such as genders or races) move from one socio-economic level to another, creating the possibility for further advancement in society. Educational mobility is similar, except it refers directly to the level of education reached; reaching a higher level of education provides more social, economic, and career opportunities. Some researchers have found that the white males “experienced the
greatest social mobility gains through their participation in sports” (Sabo et al., 1993, p. 51). Sports were most helpful to the students who were already advantaged in society, because those students could better take advantage of the opportunities that sports provide them. The researchers considered advantaged students to be those at the top of the race and gender hierarchies (white males).

Opposing this idea, some research demonstrated that students might choose to participate in sports for the benefit of greater social mobility, especially those students coming from disadvantaged families. One prediction stated that the weaker effect of academics among blacks could be due to the black community’s focus on the benefit of the sport in terms of the social mobility it could create. Black adolescents may view sports as a way for them to succeed in life and attain more social, career, and or economic opportunities, especially if they aspire to play in college or professionally.

It may be the case that black youth view interscholastic sport participation primarily as a means of earning an athletic scholarship to college, which might, in turn, facilitate their recruitment into a career in professional athletics. White youth, in contrast, may view their participation in interscholastic athletics largely as a means of earning a college athletic scholarship in order to obtain the educational credentials necessary to prepare themselves for careers in nonathletic professional fields (Braddock, 1981, p. 346).

Data from a study of 4,930 males showed that black males were much more likely to play basketball and/or football than other sports (Eitle & Eitle, 2002, p. 130). The authors discussed this as being potentially related to black students’ lack of cultural capital. The term “cultural capital” describes the non-financial advantages that a person has, such as knowledge, education, and skills that lead to increased social mobility. Disadvantaged and minority students may use their sports participation as a means to achieve social and
economic mobility (Eitle & Eitle, 2002, p. 139). Basketball and football are known for being highly paid professional sports, so it is possible that they are selective of students from families of lower socio-economic status (SES).

Additionally, the authors concluded that regardless of race, participation in basketball and football actually hurts students’ educational achievement while participation in other sports helps (Eitle & Eitle, 2002, p. 139). They explained that this stemmed from the possible “cultural disadvantage” of students participating in basketball and football (or lacked cultural capital); these students therefore heavily relied on their sport to make up for their lack of resources (Eitle & Eitle, 1998, p. 142). This “cultural disadvantage” could be due to an economic disadvantage, since many students of lower SES do not have the same enrichment opportunities as wealthier students. In addition, the authors suggested that basketball and football may have a disproportionate time requirement. When students dedicated so much of their time to their sport it created negative consequences for their academic achievement. This could certainly relate to the other studies that claimed blacks do not benefit as much from sports as whites.

**Main Conclusions and Research Questions**

The research shows that the overall effect of interscholastic athletic participation on educational achievement is positive, but when broken down among races the relationship may not be as strong for black student-athletes. Athletic participation also has a positive influence on educational aspirations, but there lacks direct evidence. Without accounting for race, variables such as SES, parent education/influence, status among peers, and athletic achievement also influence the relationship between athletics and educational
aspirations. When including race, the evidence shows that athletic involvement still positively correlates with educational aspirations for white athletes. However for black athletes, it is athletic achievement, not involvement, which positively correlates with educational aspirations. Finally, social mobility should be considered; more specifically, how social mobility relates to the relationship between athletic participation and educational aspirations.

Prior research concludes that athletes have high aspirations, but not why they have these aspirations. Further study of high school athletic participation’s impact on educational aspirations can delve more deeply into why male student-athletes have such strong educational aspirations. Also, it allows for more analysis on why different races may benefit or suffer from sports participation, particularly white and black males respectively. The majority of prior research targets black and white student-athletes, so these student groups comprise most of this study’s research questions and hypotheses. Not much information exists about Hispanics in regards to this topic, so any information obtained on Hispanic student-athletes will be valuable. In addition, studying student-athletes’ motivations to continue their education provides insight into why athletics affects educational aspirations. Do these students want to attend college to further their education or further their athletic careers? Finally, the previous studies often take into account parent, teacher, and guidance counselor influence, but not the influence of coaches. If coaches have strong relationships with their players they can play a significant role in players’ goals and aspirations. Studying whether a coach’s influence or encouragement has a significant impact on student-athletes’ desires to attend college adds a new component to the existing research.
These conclusions all lead to three overarching questions: Does participating in high school athletics have a positive effect on the educational aspirations of male student-athletes? Do these effects differ between black and white male student-athletes? What factors contribute to the educational aspirations of male student-athletes?

The previous studies and these questions show that further research might be valuable to test the hypotheses in Table 1 on the following page:
To answer these hypotheses we used three different research components: a quantitative analysis of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:02), a mixed-methods analysis of high school student-athlete questionnaires, and a qualitative analysis of interviews with high school soccer and basketball coaches. The ELS:02 data set provided

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Observable Implication 1</th>
<th>Observable Implication 2</th>
<th>Observable Implication 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Effects of Athletics: Athletic participation positively impacts the educational aspirations of high school male athletes</td>
<td>Participating in high school sports is associated with higher desires to attend college</td>
<td>White athletes and white non-athletes will have similar desires to attend college</td>
<td>Black athletes will have higher desires to attend college than black non-athletes</td>
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<td>2. More Positive for Blacks: The effect of high school athletic participation on educational aspirations is more positive for black athletes compared to black non-athletes than it is for white athletes compared to white non-athletes</td>
<td>The difference in aspirations to attend college between black athletes and non-athletes is greater than the difference in aspirations to attend college between white athletes and white non-athletes</td>
<td>Fewer black student-athletes will value grades as very important compared to white student-athletes</td>
<td>When asked, more black student-athletes will say that they plan to play their sport in college than white student-athletes</td>
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<td>3. Importance of Sports and School: Among high school student-athletes who plan to attend college, black student-athletes will be less focused on their academic track and more focused on their sport compared to white student-athletes</td>
<td>Fewer black student-athletes will be enrolled in a college prep program or taking AP classes compared to white student-athletes</td>
<td>Of the student-athletes who desire to play their sport in college, using this as a way to play professionally will be more important to black student-athletes compared to white student-athletes</td>
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<td>4. Using Sports for Social Mobility: As compared to white student athletes, a higher percentage of black student-athletes will view their sport as a way to increase their social mobility</td>
<td>A higher percentage of black student-athletes will view success in their sport as very important compared to white student-athletes</td>
<td>Student-athletes whose coaches have spoken to them about going to college will have higher educational aspirations</td>
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<td>5. Role of the Coach: Student-athletes whose coaches have advised them in their future planning are more likely to attend college</td>
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a strong background for the study and addressed hypotheses one and two. The interviews and questionnaires helped to answer more specific questions pertaining to hypotheses three, four, and five.

Quantitative Analysis of NCES Data Set

The Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:02) is a national survey of students who were first surveyed as tenth graders in 2002, and then resurveyed in 2004 and 2006. This data set contains rich information on: student high school academics, extra curricular activities, educational aspirations, demographic and parent information, levels of post secondary education, college grades, and work achievements. It also includes specific data on athletic desires. Based on evidence from the literature and today's societal pressures, the levels of educational aspirations may have changed slightly since the ELS respondents in the 2000s, with more students desiring post-graduate degrees. However, we do not have reason to believe that there has been much variation over time in the social mobility effects of athletics on educational achievement and desires to attend college.

The ELS survey is a public data file and the NCES provides the opportunity to download the data and manipulate the variables as desired. Descriptive and analytical statistics using only the base year of the study (2002) provided the evidence of the co-variation in support of the hypotheses. Cross tabulations showed associations, and chi square tests confirmed if there is strength in the specific associations. These cross tabulations also provided strong baseline data for the qualitative portion of the methodology (see Appendix A for specific variables used in each cross tabulation).
Qualitative Analysis of Questionnaires and Interviews – Focusing on Durham, NC

In the 2011-2012 school year, North Carolina ranked 12th (out of 50 states) for athletic participation, ranked by the total number of participating high school athletes. Males constituted 60% of participants, numbering 124,168 student-athletes. The five most popular male sports in North Carolina ranked in order of number of participants were: football, outdoor track & field, soccer, baseball, and basketball (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2012). As these constituted the most popular male sports, the study drew its participants from sports on this list that were currently in season or pre-season training. Since males participate in sports at higher rates than females and the majority of existing research focuses on male student-athletes, this study only included male student-athletes.

The sample came from three medium-sized public high schools (between 1,400 and 1,850 students) in Durham, North Carolina. To facilitate cross-race comparisons, the selected schools needed to have populations with a somewhat comparable racial breakdown. The racial percentages were determined from the North Carolina School Report Card website;² the website provides school wide End-of-Course test results broken down by race. This website also clearly showed that many of the public high schools in Durham contain majority black populations. Only three schools displayed comparable percentages of black students and white students. This led to the selection of the three high schools shown in Figure 1.

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² See http://www.ncschoolreportcard.org/src/
At these schools, male student-athletes from soccer and basketball teams made up the pool of participants. This choice of sports resulted from three factors: they were both either in season or in pre-season training, they were similar in team size with about 15-20 players (football has about 40+ players), and they were expected to provide an even overall racial breakdown. From looking at high school sports teams in Durham, most soccer teams primarily consisted of white players with a few black and Hispanic players, while most basketball teams primarily consisted of black players with a few white players. Once combined, the players were expected to create a sample that had close to equal representation of black and white male student-athletes. Football teams at the high schools in Durham were almost entirely black, so football would have skewed the racial breakdown.

After including two teams from each school, the sample included 94 student-athletes. The student-athletes on each team received parental consent forms, and those
who returned the signed forms (78%) participated in the research. Questionnaires (see Appendix B) administered to the student-athletes asked questions about their background, sports, and academics. These provided more specific information about why student-athletes have strong education aspirations, including how they prioritize sports versus school, if their coach talks to them about their education, and if they want to play their sport in college.

Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C) with the coaches of these student-athletes constituted the second half of the qualitative research. Information from coaches composed a valuable part of the research because it provided more insight into the relationship between coaches and their players. This additional information also allowed for a more in-depth look at what coaches view their role to be in influencing the educational aspirations of their student-athletes.

ELS:02 Data Results – Athletic Participation Corresponds with Higher Educational Aspirations³

Aforementioned, the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 is a national survey of tenth graders that also conducted follow-up surveys in 2004 and 2006. For purposes of this analysis, the ELS:02 data were sorted to only include males in the 2002 sample. After eliminating all of the females (8,544) from the sample, 7,653 males remained in the population. Of the males in the population, the racial breakdown is shown in Figure 2:

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³ All percentages in this section are rounded to the whole number.
Also, 4,138 (58%) students participated in sports while 2,950 (42%) students did not participate. The analysis of these data provided the following results about the relationship between participating in athletics and educational aspirations.

_Educational Aspirations of Athletes and Non-Athletes_

A cross tabulation of how far in school the student thinks he will get (educational aspirations) and participation in interscholastic athletics produced data to support the hypothesis that athletics have a positive influence. Of the students who said that they thought they would only graduate from high school or earn a GED, 63% were non-athletes and 37% were athletes. Of the students who said that they thought they would graduate college, 37% were non-athletes and 63% were athletes. Also, of those believing they would obtain a postgraduate degree (masters, PhD, MD, etc), 33% were non-athletes and 67% were athletes. These data show a positive correlation between participating in athletics...
and having high educational aspirations. Looking at this cross tabulation from a different set of percentages, 77% of all athletes said they planned to graduate college or get a post graduate degree while only 59% of non-athletes had this desire. Once again, the athletes possessed overall higher educational aspirations.

![Academic Program Enrollment](image)

Figure 3: Cross tabulation results of athletic participation and academic program.

Further confirmation of the relationship between playing sports and desires to attend college comes from data on the academic programs in which the students were enrolled, shown in Figure 3. The options were vocational, general curriculum, and college preparatory. Of all students who participated in athletics, close to 60% of them were enrolled in a college-preparatory curriculum and only about 9% of them were enrolled in a vocational program. This differed greatly from the 43% of non-athletes enrolled in college preparatory and 16% enrolled in vocational. These data demonstrate that student-athletes

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4 The Pearson chi squared number was 280.33 and the p-value was 0.00, showing statistical significance. Since this cross tabulation had six degrees of freedom and the p-value was less than 0.001, any chi squared value greater than 22.46 shows significance.

5 Vocational program includes vocational, technical, and/or business courses. General curriculum includes standard academic track courses; no vocational courses and no honors or Advanced Placement (AP) courses. College preparatory includes honors level courses and often AP courses.
not only had stronger desires to continue their education, but also more student-athletes took the academic steps to prepare for college.

**Racial Breakdown of Educational Aspirations**

The data above lacks a breakdown by race. After completing a three-way cross tabulation between educational aspirations, race, and participation in athletics, the results showed that athletes of all races had higher educational aspirations than their non-athlete counterparts. This can be viewed graphically in Figures 23 and 24 in Appendix D. In order to look specifically at the aspirations of black and white students, the focus of this study, Figures 4 and 5 show only these populations below.

![Aspiring to Graduate College](image)

*Figure 4: Percentage differences in college aspirations between athletes and non-athletes of the black and white populations.*
In Figure 4, for black students, 32% of non-athletes aspired to graduate from college, while 45% of athletes had this aspiration. For white students, 33% of the non-athletes and 40% of the athletes wanted to graduate from college. From this we see that when comparing the college aspirations of athletes and non-athletes, the impact of being an athlete was greater for the black students by 6 percentage points. However, for obtaining a post-graduate degree, as shown in Figure 5, the impact of being an athlete was greater for white students by 10 percentage points. For a more detailed breakdown of the differences in educational aspirations between black athletes and non-athletes, and between white athletes and non-athletes see Tables 4 and 5 in Appendix E.

The data in Figures 4 and 5 support previous research and demonstrate that for both college and postgraduate education, and for both white and black students, participation in athletics is correlated with greater aspirations. However, while black student athletes may have stronger aspirations to attend and graduate college than their
non-athlete counterparts, athletics may not influence them enough to affect their desire to obtain a postgraduate degree. This could be due to a number of reasons, one of which may be that playing their sport in college is a reason they want to go to college, and but postgraduate programs don’t have this influential factor. After all, the ELS 2002 data show that of all black males surveyed, 52% of them said that they would like to play athletics in college. This constituted the highest percentage of any race to want to play athletics in college, with white students nine percentage points behind.

Athletes’ Desires to Play in College and the Coach Involvement

According to data on students’ plans to further their sports career, of the students who played a sport in high school, 63% of them wanted to play their sport in college. Across all sports, only 7.5% of high school male athletes end up playing in college (at the varsity level) (“Chances of a High School Athlete,” n.d.). This includes athletes playing at all levels, from National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I to National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA). Of the athletes who said they wanted to play in college, 82% of them hoped to receive an athletic scholarship, amounting to 2,143 students. When looking at the athletes in each racial group who wanted to play in college, 62% of black student-athletes hoped for a scholarship and 51% of white student-athletes hoped for a scholarship. These are all extremely high percentages of students hoping for a college athletic scholarship. They are also very unrealistic percentages. According to the NCAA, only Division I and II schools offer athletic scholarships, and only 2% of high school athletes receive one of these fully funded scholarships (National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.).
If a high school athlete wants to play in college he can utilize many different resources to obtain information about college and college athletics. One of these resources is his high school coach. Based on the data from the ELS:02 survey, the percentage of high school male athletes who actually use their coach as a resource is not very large, especially compared to the large percentage desiring to play in college. Only 25% of athletes who wanted to play in college answered that they went to their coach for information about college. This could mean that the coach does not play a large role in his players’ college planning, or it could mean that the athletes simply prefer the opinion and help of other adults. The current study attempted to understand this issue and following two sections, Student-Athlete Questionnaires and Coach Interviews, describe the findings.

**Student-Athlete Questionnaire Analysis – High Educational Aspirations but Also High Aspirations to Play Sports in College**

The student-athlete questionnaires provided data on many themes relating to the ELS:02 data, but they also provided specific answers to hypotheses three, four, and five. The questionnaire itself can be viewed in Appendix B. The analysis of the students’ responses to the most relevant questions presented information about four main topics: educational aspirations, athletic aspirations, social mobility, and student-athlete priorities. Differences by race were also established for each of these categories.

*Division By Sport and Racial Composition*

After administering the student-athletes questionnaires to the three soccer teams and three basketball teams, the final sample population included 94 student-athletes. Of
these 94, 45 soccer players and 49 basketball players. The overall racial composition contained a similar percentage of black and white student-athletes, as desired. Black student athletes made up 43% of the total sample and white student-athletes made up 40%. Hispanics comprised only 10%, and all other races were each less than 5% of the sample. The racial composition by sport, however, differed from the total sample. Figures 6 and 7 show the racial compositions of the soccer and basketball populations, analyzed separately.

![Racial Composition (Soccer)](image)

*Figure 6: Racial percentage breakdown of the student-athletes in the soccer sample population, which consisted of 45 students.*
Figures 6 and 7 depict how a specific sport may attract a certain demographic of students. When looking at the black and white students specifically, the graphs clearly show that the soccer players were majority white and basketball players were majority black. Hispanics also made up a sizeable portion of the soccer population. The reasoning behind these demographic differences may stem from societal influences and the racial composition of these sports at the professional level. In the 2011-2012 season, the Major League Soccer (MLS) players were 49% white, 25% black, and 24% Hispanic (Lapchick, 2012a). This did not identically match the make-up of the study’s soccer sample population, but the overall population breakdown was similar. Also, in 2009 the MLS white population was 58% and in 2010 it was 54%, and these percentages correspond well with the high school soccer sample white population.

The same relationship existed between the study’s basketball sample population and the National Basketball Association (NBA) population. The NBA’s players during 2011-2012 season were comprised of 18% white, 78% black, 3% Hispanic (Lapchick, 2012b). As
compared to the high school sample, the professional level had a larger percentage of black athletes and smaller percentage of white athletes, but once again the division of the pie was comparable.

*Educational Aspirations: Differences by Sport but Not Race*

The educational aspirations of the student-athletes in this sample population were very high compared to the baseline ELS:02 data. In the ELS study 77% of all athletes were planning to graduate college or obtain a postgraduate degree, but in this sample 92% of the athletes thought they would achieve this level of education. This high percentage of student-athletes’ with strong educational aspirations did not differ among races.

Of the two students who said they only planned to go to vocational school or community college, one was black and one was Hispanic. Of the six students who said they would attend probably some college but not graduate, two were black, two were white, and two were Hispanic, showing that race did not play a role in their college plans. Though race was not a factor, parental level of education did seem to play a role. Five of the eight students with lower educational aspirations had at least one parent who had not gone to college, and two students did not know their parents’ highest level of educational attainment. Not knowing a parent’s level of education could indicate that education is not discussed in the home, and therefore attending college may not be instilled as a priority.
Figures 8 and 9 show that when broken down by sport, the educational aspirations were higher for the soccer players. Of the 45 soccer players, 38% planned to graduate from college and 53% planned to pursue a postgraduate degree after graduating from college. Of the 49 basketball players, 57% planned to graduate from college, but only 35% planned to continue their education after college. This difference between the two sports could be
due to a number of factors, including coach involvement. The coach interviews, which are discussed in an upcoming section, made it seem as though the coaches consistently speak to their players about furthering their education. The questionnaire results proved that the coaches do in fact encourage their players to attend college, but this did not correlate with the students’ educational aspirations. Soccer players had higher educational aspirations, but only 76% said that their coach had encouraged them to attend college (either to further their education, play their sport, or both). Of the basketball players, 90% said that their coach had encouraged them to attend college. Also, for both soccer and basketball players no difference existed between the educational aspirations of students who had been encouraged by their coach and the education aspirations of students who had not been encouraged by their coach.

**Athletic Aspirations: Reasons Why Playing in College is Important**

A very large percentage of both soccer and basketball players desired to play their sport in college, which was very similar to the results from the ELS:02 data. In the ELS dataset 63% of the student-athletes desired to play in college. In this smaller sample 64% of all the student-athletes answered “yes” to whether they planned or desired to play their sport in college. Also, another 26% answered “maybe.” The fact that 90% of the student-athletes at least considered playing in college could be due to the location of this study. Durham, North Carolina is right in the middle of a college sports hub. The schools in the city and surrounding area, such as Duke, UNC Chapel Hill, NC State, and NC Central, propel sports team rivalries. High school athletes are probably aware of this emphasis on college athletics and it could increase their desire to play their sport in college. Therefore,
surveying student-athletes from such a sports-oriented city could be a reason for these results. One soccer coach believed that being close to so many colleges with popular sports teams has definitely had an effect on his players. He explained, “It’s kind of a handicap to be this close to Duke and Carolina and NC State and Wake Forest, in that they think it’s Division 1 or ACC or nothing. They don’t know that in the Carolinas and in Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia how many Division 2 and Division 3 schools there are, and the different options that they have....They know that they can’t play at Duke and they think that’s the end of the road.”

When broken down by sport, basketball players desired to play in college at higher rates than soccer players. Only 56% of soccer players said “yes,” to this question while 71% of basketball players did. When the data from each sport were broken down by race the results showed that, as compared to whites, a larger percentage of minority students planned to play their sport in college. Figures 10 and 11 depict the percentage breakdown of students who answered “yes,” “maybe,” and “no” for each race.

![Desire to Play Soccer in College](image)

*Figure 10: Student responses to whether they plan/desire to play soccer in college, broken down by race. Races that comprised less than 5% of the population were omitted from this graph. This analysis is only for the soccer sample population.*
Blacks and Hispanics had much stronger desires to play soccer in college, and blacks had much stronger desires to play basketball in college. Not a single black or Hispanic athlete responded that he did not want to play in college. Among white athletes, a larger percentage of basketball players desired to play in college than soccer players.

To find out why students were planning or wanting to play their sport in college they were asked to rank the level of importance of two criteria. One criterion for why a student may want to play his sport in college was to use it as a gateway to play professionally. A second criterion was to use it as a way to get into college and further their education. The students could provide one of the following answers to these questions: very important, important, somewhat important, or not important. We then narrowed the sample to include only the students who answered “yes” to the question: do you plan/desire to play your sport in college? After this, the data were analyzed to see how many of these student-athletes viewed the above criteria as “very important.” Figures 12 and 13 show the results.

These questions are numbers 7a and 7b in the “Sports Information” section of the student-athlete questionnaire in, found in Appendix B.
Figures 12 and 13 demonstrate that for both sports, a larger percentage of minority student-athletes believed that playing their sport in college would provide them with more

Figure 12: Of the students who responded "yes" to wanting to play in college, these are the ones who said that a "very important" reason for this desire was to obtain an education.

Figure 13: Of the students who responded "yes" to wanting to play in college, these are the ones who said that a "very important" reason for this desire was to help provide them with the chance to play professionally.
professional and educational opportunities. Seven of the eight Hispanic soccer players had
the desire to play professionally and believed that playing in college would help them to
achieve that goal. The fact that so many Hispanics wanted to play professionally did not
come as a surprise because soccer is traditionally a very popular sport among Hispanic
cultures.

For all races, trying to use college athletics as a gateway to professional play was
more important for soccer players than it was for basketball players. This could relate to
the fact that basketball is a more glorified professional sport in the United States, which
would make playing at that level seem like an unattainable goal. High school athletes could
view playing professional soccer in the United States as a more feasible goal. When looking
specifically at the numbers though, male college soccer players are only .5% more likely to
continue on to a professional career than male college basketball players (College Sports
Scholarships, n.d.).

For both black and white students, a larger percentage thought that using college
athletics as a way to obtain an education was very important, as compared to playing
professionally. This was true for both soccer and basketball. For the black soccer players
who planned to play in college, 83% of them viewed this as a way to get into school,
possibly on a scholarship. For black basketball players the percentage was 70%. Although
white athletes also saw the possibility of obtaining an education by playing in college, the
percentages were 55% (soccer) and 57% (basketball), much lower than for black athletes.
Social Mobility: Athletes View Sports as a Way to Increase Their Opportunities

A very large percentage of the student-athletes desired to play their sport in college and also viewed their sport as a way to further themselves in society. This relates directly to the concept of social mobility. As previously defined, social mobility is when an individual moves from one socio-economic level to another, creating the possibility for further advancement in society. Social mobility will provide an individual with more social, career, and/or economic opportunities than they previously had. Many of the student-athletes who planned to play in college viewed it as a way to obtain more than just the enjoyment of the sport. Playing in college would be their way to advance themselves in society.

Not only did many students think that college athletics would provide them with more opportunities, but most students also thought that playing in high school has provided them with more opportunities. All students were asked the question: Do you think that playing your sport has provided you with more social, career, and/or economic opportunities? Even the students who didn't plan to play in college, or were simply considering it, thought that playing their sport had helped them. The two most common answers to the above question were, “yes, it already has,” and “not yet, but I think it will.” The students who responded “yes, it already has,” probably considered how playing their sport has given them the status of an “athlete” in school, which sometimes comes with more popularity. Also, there are many opportunities for student-athletes to find jobs as coaches, referees, mentors, and camp counselors that non-athletes would not have. The students in this sample could have taken advantage of such opportunities because they were athletes. For the students who responded, “not yet, but I think it will,” one of their
goals probably included playing in college. Playing their sport in college would provide them with the prestige of being a college athlete. College athletes are given preference for most sports-related careers, such as sports broadcasting/reporting or coaching. Also, their sport could then provide them with the gateway to play professionally. All of these ideas could have factored into what high school student-athletes think their sport will do for them in the future. The students’ responses are graphed in Figure 14.

![Figure 14: Analysis of all student athlete responses. Answers "maybe," and "no" were not included in this graph because they constituted such small percentages.](image)

Of all the student-athletes surveyed, 91% of the soccer players and 92% of the basketball players thought that playing their sport either had already improved their social mobility or thought that it would. This served as a significant percentage of the sample population, indicating that students may be playing sports for reasons other than just the enjoyment. This implies that sports have a strong influence on the lives of student-athletes, possibly encouraging them to prioritize their sport over other obligations.
Priorities: Sport Versus Schoolwork

As indicated in the previous sections, the student-athletes in both the soccer and basketball sample populations seemed to view their sport as an important part of their life. The importance that students place on their sport versus their schoolwork demonstrated to what extent they prioritize their sport. One measurement of this derived from students’ weekly allocation of time: how much time they spend on homework and how much time they spend playing/practicing their sport. The average of the students’ weekly hours spent practicing sports was higher than the average of their weekly hours spent doing schoolwork, and proved true for both sports. On average, soccer players spent less time playing their sport, but their allocated time for schoolwork was very similar to basketball players: 8.5 hours per week (soccer) versus 8.9 hours per week (basketball). Therefore, one sport does not impact the amount of time students spend on schoolwork more than the other sport.

The fact that student-athletes spent more time playing their sport than doing their homework does not mean that sports negatively affect the effort student-athletes put into schoolwork. According to the National Education Association, students should spend only about 10 minutes on their homework per night per grade level. This means that 9th graders should spend only 90 minutes on their homework per night, leading up to a maximum of two hours per night for high school seniors (National Education Association, n.d.). Since the sample population contains students from all grades, the “correct” number of hours per week should be somewhere between 7.5 and 10 hours of homework per week. This means that in a school week, the student-athletes in both the soccer and basketball populations were right on target with what is advised.
From Figure 15 we see that the average hours students spent playing and practicing their sport were also very reasonable. Based on the teams’ current and past schedules, they all had about one or two games each week and had practices on the other days, often including one weekend practice. When practices and games are about two hours long, student-athletes will spend about 12 hours per week playing their sport. The data in Figure 15 indicate that, on average, soccer players spend this amount of time on their sport while basketball players dedicate a few extra hours to their sport.

Another method to evaluate the student-athletes prioritization of sports and schoolwork looked at how they ranked the importance of success in their sport and the importance of getting good grades in school. Figures 16 shows percentages of students who ranked athletic success and academic success as “very important.” The entire sample population, soccer population, and basketball population were each broken down by race.
A much larger percentage of the minority student-athletes ranked athletic success as “very important,” as depicted in Figure 16. As compared to white student athletes, 20% more black student-athletes gave this response, and 34% more Hispanic student-athletes gave this response. This could be due to the fact that minority athletes also desired to play in college at higher rates than white athletes. It is highly unlikely to have the opportunity to play in college if you are not successful at your sport in high school.

In regards to academic success, white student-athletes prioritized good grades more than blacks and Hispanics. Hispanics stood out in particular for having such a low percentage of student-athletes to rank good grades as “very important.” However, the sample size of Hispanics was also much smaller than that of whites and blacks. When looking at the entire sample population, black and white student-athletes valued good grades at comparable levels, 73% (black) to 79% (white). This information explained that
among this sample of students, participating in a sport did not affect black and white students differently with respect to their academics.

Figure 17: The percentages were calculated the same way as Figure 16, but this graph represents only soccer players.

Figure 18: Same as Figure 17, but for basketball players. Hispanics were omitted from this graph because they did not represent a large enough percentage of the population.
Figures 17 and 18 show the differences by sport. As a whole, soccer players valued athletic success more than basketball players. Black soccer players desired to play in college more than black basketball players by 20%; black soccer players also ranked athletic success as “very important” more than black basketball players by 29%. This second example also illustrated that students who desire to play in college will think that it is vital to succeed in their sport, a logical relationship. The one relationship that did not complement this sequence existed between white soccer and basketball players. 54% of white basketball players planned to play in college while only 44% of white soccer players did. However, a slightly larger percentage of white soccer players valued athletic success.

For academic success, a larger percentage of the basketball players, both black and white, valued academic success. A very small percentage of Hispanics, only 38% thought that getting good grades was “very important” to them. In comparison to how they valued athletic success, it shows that they could be putting a lot more time and effort into their sport than their schoolwork, which could present a problem.

Coaches’ View of Their Role: They Seek to Have a Positive Influence on the Educational Aspirations of Student-Athletes

After conducting six interviews,7 three with soccer coaches and three with basketball coaches, a clear trend formed: coaches are very invested in the educational achievement and educational aspirations of their players and they take many measures to assure the educational success of their players. These interviews provide more information about the relationship between coaches and student-athletes. We already

7 A list of the interview questions and a table of the interview lengths (Table 3) are provided in Appendix C.
have data from the students, in which they indicated their ideas about the coach’s role and his influence on their education. This section adds a different dimension to the concept of the coach’s role in fostering his players’ educational aspirations. These interviews allowed the coaches to impart their beliefs about education and explain what they think their role is, and should be, in their players’ lives.

**Checking on Grades**

In the Durham Public Schools there is no minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) requirement that must be met to be eligible to play sports. However, students must adhere to a certain set of standards, including passing five of seven classes from the previous semester if on a traditional school schedule. The North Carolina High School Athletic Association (NCHSAA) mandates this academic requirement, and it varies slightly depending on whether the school operates on a traditional, block, or A/B schedule (North Carolina High School Athletic Association, 2012). This means that technically, student-athletes could play after having two failing grades and five Ds. Some other school systems in North Carolina have implemented minimum a GPA requirement, such as a required 2.0 in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Schools (Velliquette, 2010). The NCHSAA said that they have not considered raising the state GPA requirement because athletes are already achieving higher than non-athletes; Athletes have an average GPA of 2.8 and non-athletes have an average GPA of 1.9 (“Raise academic standards,” 2011). However, an average of 2.8 does not mean every athlete is reaching that standard. Also, some school districts will have a lower athlete GPA average than 2.8. Since there is no GPA standard in Durham schools, sports do not directly induce students to excel in their classes. It is for this reason that the
coach plays such an important role. All six coaches said their teams have relatively strong academic tracks, the majority of the players maintaining average grades, with a handful of players excelling and only few falling behind.

All of the coaches explained that they stay very up-to-date on their players’ grades, check progress reports and report cards, and talk to teachers about every three to four weeks during the season. If a player is doing poorly they monitor his progress almost every week. In the off-season they all said that they keep track of their players’ academic progress. However, this is less frequent in the off-season due to the decreased time of contact with their players. Four of the coaches also mentioned that their players tend to do better academically during the season. One coach described the off-season as a time that is “easier for them [the players] to get away.” Another coach said that in the off-season the players “get out of my eyesight a little bit, and I don’t have as much control over them.”

This relationship of higher grades during the season and lower grades during the off-season suggests the strong influence that a coach has on his players’ education. The extra time commitment of sports might take away from study or homework time, but a coach’s emphasis on grades will often prevent student-athletes’ grades from dropping. If the coach makes his players understand that doing poorly in school will harm their position on the team, this also has an impact. One soccer coach explained, “there’s definitely something to knowing that I’m checking up on them and that it’s tied to soccer.”

On top of monitoring their players’ grades, all three of the basketball coaches discussed having required study hall hours for the Junior Varsity (JV) players, and one team requires it for the Varsity players as well. They explained that mandating study hall hours for the JV is necessary, while the members of the Varsity team are more mature and have
already learned the importance of studying. However, two of the coaches said that if a Varsity player is struggling academically, that player also has to attend study hall. From these interviews it became clear that when coaches stress the importance of performing well in the classroom it helps instill the concept of the student-athlete, with “student” coming first.

*Systems of Academic Accountability*

Two coaches talked specifically about their systems of sanctions and rewards, which connect the student-athletes’ academic performances to their sports. One basketball coach explained that if a player isn’t doing well academically, he will lose playing time; if a player is a starter, he won’t start; if a player fails to go to study hall, he will have to do extra conditioning at practice. The coach emphasized how important it is to hold his players accountable for their academic performance.

One of the soccer coaches has an even more elaborate accountability system for his team, a system that affects the entire team for the successes and failures of every player. Every three weeks when progress reports come out he checks all the players’ grades and calculates the total “stakes” for the team. Stakes are what he calls the disincentives, which will be something like pushups or sprints. The system works as follows: for every grade point below 90 the team gets a stake, for every grade point above 95 (in an AP or honors class) a stake is removed, and for every grade point above 100 three stakes get removed. The coach explained that his system has given his players a reason to work harder, and to take more challenging courses, resulting in greater achievement. This type of system seemed extremely innovative, as no other coach had such an elaborate accountability
system. Athletes generally dislike being punished with excessive fitness, so they will do whatever it takes to prevent it from occurring. In this case, the way to prevent the punishment is by doing well in school. This coach has made it clear that doing well in school is paramount to his players’ successes.

Encouraging Higher Education

Every coach interviewed said that he talks to his players about going to college, but some do so more frequently than others. A few coaches said that they discuss this topic at the beginning, middle, and end of the season, while others said they bring it up consistently throughout the season. Players’ pursuit of education after high school also varies, from a four-year college or university to a two-year community college or vocational school. Two coaches mentioned that players looking at community colleges often attend either Durham Tech or Wake Tech. Two of the coaches also discussed that some players choose to join the military instead, but have gone to school after completing their service using the G.I. Bill. One basketball coach said that his players understand that graduating from high school and going to college are very important; his team has a 100% graduation rate and they “have to continue their education somehow.”

A few coaches have assumed an additional role, one closer to a guidance counselor, making sure that their players are on track to further their education. Two of the coaches mentioned talking to their players’ parents about academics and making a strong academic plan. Two coaches, one of whom also talked about speaking to parents, said they talk to their players about taking the SAT and/or ACT and make sure they have all signed up. If a player has yet to take one of the tests the coach will schedule it for him. Two other coaches
said that they make sure their players are looking into college and going on college visits, sometimes even setting up visits for them. They also check on the senior players' progress in filling out college applications. Very strong relationships between coaches and players often exist, particularly with smaller teams like basketball and soccer. Therefore encouragement from a coach to attend college may have a greater impact than encouragement from a guidance counselor who may not know the individual student as well. Another coach explained that both he and his assistant coaches “encourage kids to think about the future; whether or not basketball is a part of it is secondary.” The most definitive explanation from a coach included that he tells his players, “getting accepted to college is primary goal number one.” This is a very strong statement for a student to hear, and coming from a coach it can have a very positive effect.

**Student-Athletes’ Desires to Attend College and Play Sports**

Five out of the six coaches said that they believed all of their players wanted to attend college. One coach said, "there's not a guy on the team that doesn't have aspirations to continue his education.” However, the one coach who didn’t follow this pattern thought that over the years the players haven’t been pursuing college as much as they had in the past. He explained that some get caught up in the streets, some start working, and some go into military service, rather than continuing to college.

When asked whether they know how many players on their team want to play their sport in college, the coaches gave the answers shown in Table 2:
Table 2: Coaches’ Responses About Their Players’ Athletic Aspirations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coach 1 (basketball)</td>
<td>“All of them. They all think they’re going to play in college. They all think they’re going to be the next Michael Jordan, come out of Carolina and go pro.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 2 (basketball)</td>
<td>“I think to a certain extent they all want to. But I think, I would probably say out of 15 kids, 10 or 12 of them really, really desire to play at the next level.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 3 (basketball)</td>
<td>“All of them. All of them want to go to the next level. Even though they don’t possess the talent to go, they want to go.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 4 (soccer)</td>
<td>“All of them want to play in college, but you and I realistically know that it’s going to be really hard.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 5 (soccer)</td>
<td>“We’ve got 24 on Varsity this year and I would probably say that about half have in their heads that they would like to play in college.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 6 (soccer)</td>
<td>“A lot of them would like to pursue their sport in college.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This shows a very clear trend among both soccer and basketball players at three different schools. The six coaches all thought that the vast majority of these student-athletes would like to play their sport in college. The coaches’ predictions about their players’ athletic aspirations matched the data from the student-athlete questionnaires in which 90% of the student-athletes responded that they were at least thinking about playing in college.

The coaches often followed up their discussion with the fact that the players are probably not being realistic in these aspirations, one coach even said “by their junior year hopefully some sense of reality is starting to set in, but definitely by their senior year.”

However, the coaches could have been making assumptions about their players because
they were not asked about each player individually. They also did not specify at which level they believed each player is pursuing: Division 1, Division 2, or Division 3.

When it comes to actual college recruiting, the coaches differed in what they thought their role is. One soccer coach explained that his role is minimal in the college process because players are often recruited out of the club programs. This answer differed greatly from another soccer coach who described how he organizes college visits for his players to see college soccer teams practice. He also tries to introduce his players to the Division 2 and 3 schools where they could possibly play. The third soccer coach said that currently none of his players are being recruited, but in the past he has helped his players by filming them and sending the film to college coaches. One basketball coach said that Junior College is a popular route for some of his players to improve their grades and athletic ability before trying to play in college. The other two basketball coaches expressed that some of their players are being recruited and that they are trying to help with the process.

Discussion

This research shows that high school athletic participation has a positive effect on the educational aspirations of male students, however not all of the hypotheses were proven to be accurate.

Positive Impact of Athletics

The data analysis of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 demonstrated that athletes have higher educational aspirations than non-athletes. A larger percentage of athletes than non-athletes desired to go to college and obtain a bachelor’s degree and a
larger percentage also desired to obtain a post-graduate degree. The questionnaires also concluded that students’ educational aspirations are not negatively affected by participation sports. Almost all of the student-athletes, regardless of race or parents’ level of education, wanted to attend and graduate college, many desiring a postgraduate degree. Also, basketball players did not have low educational aspirations as some research has concluded (Eitle & Eitle, 2002, p. 139). Both soccer and basketball players had high educational aspirations (refer to Figures 8 and 9). This all supports Hypothesis 1, The Effects of Athletics, which states, “Athletic participation positively impacts the educational aspirations of high school male athletes.”

No Major Difference Between Blacks and Whites

The ELS:02 data concluded that both black and white athletes had higher aspirations than their non-athlete counterparts, and that blacks did not benefit more than whites. Blacks showed a larger gap in this relationship in regards to desires to graduate from college, while whites showed a larger gap in this relationship in regards to desires to obtain a postgraduate degree (refer to Figures 4 and 5). For the lower educational aspirations, such as to graduate from high school or attend a 2-year college, the differences between athletes and non-athletes were the same for both whites and blacks. Therefore, Hypothesis 2, More Positive for Blacks, is not fully supported. Hypothesis 2 states, “The effect of high school athletic participation on educational aspirations is more positive for black athletes compared to black non-athletes than it is for white athletes compared to white non-athletes.”
Black Students Focus More on Their Athletics than Academics

All students in the questionnaire sample were planning to attend college, and race did not affect the students’ aspirations. However, a smaller percentage of black students than white students valued academic success as “very important,” but these percentages differed only by 6% (refer to Figure 16). Also, in both the ELS:02 sample and the questionnaire sample, a larger percentage of black students wanted to play their sport in college (refer to Figures 10 and 11). In the questionnaire this difference was 36%. Finally, in the questionnaire sample, 82% of the white students were enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses while only 53% of the black students were enrolled in AP courses. This data supports Hypothesis 3, Importance of Sports and School, which states, “Among high school student-athletes who plan to attend college, black student-athletes will be less focused on their academic track and more focused on their sport compared to white student-athletes.”

Blacks Students View Sport as a Tool for Social Mobility

Almost all of the athletes thought that playing their sport had already helped or would help to increase their social mobility. However, the percentage of black students prioritizing athletic success was much higher (20%) than the percentage of white students doing so (refer to Figure 16). Also, as compared to white soccer players, 31% more black soccer players wanted to play their sport professionally. For basketball this percentage differences was only 12%, but blacks still sat on the higher end (refer to Figure 13). This information supports Hypothesis 4, Using Sports for Social Mobility, which states, “As compared to white student-athletes, a higher percentage of black student-athletes will view
their sport as a way to increase their social mobility.” This all corresponds with the prior research claiming that black athletes view sports as a tool for social mobility, possibly because they lack a cultural capital (Braddock, 1981, p. 346; Eitle & Eitle, 1998, p. 142).

Encouragement from a Coach Can Increase Students’ Educational Aspirations

Based on the student-athletes’ responses, those whose coaches had encouraged them to attend college were no more likely to desire to attend college than those whose coaches had not encouraged them to attend college. However, what must be noted is that coaches had encouraged a very large percentage of the students to attend college (76% of soccer players and 90% of basketball players). In addition, 77% of the student-athletes had either already gone to their coach for information about college or were planning to in the near future. This shows that the students valued the input and assistance of their coaches in regards to their education. Based solely on the questionnaire data, Hypothesis 5, Role of the Coach, can be only partially supported. Hypothesis 5 states, “Student-athletes whose coaches have advised them in their future planning are more likely to attend college.” However, from the coach interviews there is reason to believe that coaches are very influential because of how much they make their players prioritize education.

Social scientists have also studied the ways that a coach can impact the lives of his players. One study claimed that the most important component of the coach-athlete relationship is the coach’s level of expectations for his athletes, mainly concerning athletic achievement (Short, 2005, p. 29). The authors explained that athletes respond to the expectations of their coaches. This can certainly apply to a coach’s academic expectations for his players. For this reason, coaches must set feasible goals and to be clear about what
their players should strive to achieve, both on the field/court and in the classroom. Coaches serve as mentors as well, and research has found that successful coaches are those who try to improve the lives of their players both inside and outside of the sport (Short, 2005, p. 30). This once again provides coaches with the opportunity to influence their player’s educational aspirations.

Possible Limitations

Although many factors were taken into consideration, there were some limitations to the study. Both encouragement and involvement from parents can influence students’ educational aspirations, and this was not measured through the quantitative or qualitative research. Some studies have measured the impact of parental involvement through parent questionnaires asking about home discussions, school communication, and school participation (O’Bryan et al., 2008 p. 14). The researchers found that parental involvement was positively associated with student desires to attend college and the behaviors that relate to this aspiration. Also, educational encouragement from parents has shown to have a significant effect on student educational aspirations, but only for white students (Picou, 1978, p. 435). None of these factors were included in this study.

Another limitation relates to socioeconomic status (SES). The student-athlete questionnaires did not ask about SES because this would be too sensitive and unethical. Not having this information creates a difficulty in assessing the role that SES plays in students’ desires to attend college or play their sport in college. Some research indicated that aside from gender, parent education and family income have had the largest impact on sports participation (Fejgin, 1994, p. 220). The findings indicated that high school students
with higher SES participated in sports more (Fejgin, 1994, p. 220; Shifrer, 2008, p. 6). If the students in the sample were in fact of a higher SES, this could have an effect on students’ academic track and educational plans.

Finally, the difference in the grades (i.e. 9th, 10th, 11th, or 12th) of the students in the sample population could have a significant impact on their answers. These are shown in figures 19 and 20.

![Grade Composition (Soccer)](image1)

Figure 19: Percentage of students from each grade to comprise the soccer sample population.

![Grade Composition (Basketball)](image2)

Figure 20: Percentage of students from each grade to comprise the soccer sample population.
Figure 20 shows that the basketball sample population had more 9th and 10th graders, and students at this age are often still developing and unsure of their future plans. They will most likely not know what type of college they want to apply to, and they will also be less aware of their possibilities of playing their sport in college. As one of the basketball coaches explained, by their junior year “a sense of reality will probably set in.”

Conclusions

Student-Athletes Have High Educational Aspirations

Both the ELS:02 data and the questionnaire data support the theory that high school athletic participation has a positive effect on the educational aspirations of male student-athletes. Since the questionnaires provide a more detailed analysis, the majority of the conclusions come from the questionnaire data. The questionnaire data show that the student-athletes have very high educational aspirations. Both basketball and soccer players, and players of all races, had aspirations to graduate from college, and many also desired a postgraduate degree. Also, overall, students whose parents held a Masters or Ph.D. did not have higher aspirations than students whose parents had only graduated from high school. Therefore, the variables of specific sport, race, and parental education are not correlated with the students’ desires to further their education. This finding contradicts previous studies, which indicated that black athletes and basketball players had lower educational aspirations (Braddock, 1981, p. 343; Eitle & Eitle, 2002, p. 139; Sabo et al., 1993, p. 50; Shifer, 2008, p. 20).
Athletic Aspirations and Social Mobility Influence Blacks and Hispanics

One explanation for this study’s alternative findings could relate to the reasons why the student-athletes want to attend college. The data clearly demonstrate that many of the students have strong aspirations/desires to play their sport in college; this could influence their intent to attend college. Social mobility plays an important role in relation to these desires. If the students think sports can provide them with more opportunities, it follows that they also believe playing in college will provide them with opportunities to improve their socio-economic status. From the entire sample of 94 students, 88 of them expressed that they thought playing their sport either had already provided them with more social, career, and/or economic opportunities, or thought that it would in the future. With 94% of the students providing this answer, it demonstrates that the student-athletes consider how athletic participation can provide them with social mobility. However, based on the students’ responses to other questions, the concept of using athletics as a tool for social mobility applies more to blacks and Hispanics than it does to whites.

Although students of different races had the same aspirations for their education, they had different aspirations for their athletics. A much larger percentage of black and Hispanic students wanted to play their sport in college than the white students. In fact, every single black and Hispanic athlete expressed an interest in playing in college, with the majority answering “yes” to whether they planned/desired to play in college. Further confirming the importance of social mobility to these races, a larger percentage of black and Hispanic students prioritized their athletic success than those who prioritized their academic success. White student-athletes had the opposite values, with more whites prioritizing good grades than success in their sport. A much larger percentage of white
students were enrolled in AP classes than black or Hispanic students. In addition, more black and Hispanic students hoped to use college athletics as a way to further either their education or their athletic career (to play professionally). These findings continue to suggest that sports are a motivating factor for minority students more than for white students. This relates back to the idea of social mobility, and that black and Hispanic athletes may rely on their sport to further themselves in society.

*The Coach Can Play a Crucial Role in Fostering Aspirations*

Despite the possibility that playing college sports is the reason why some student-athletes want to attend college, all of the student-athletes still had very high educational aspirations. For this reason, we must consider other influencing factors, especially since the students who wanted to play in college expressed the importance of obtaining a college education. The value of education was clearly instilled in these students, regardless of their athletic aspirations. This is where coaches come into play. One main similarity in the lives of these students is that they all have coaches who are very invested in their education. The student-athletes’ strong desires to continue their education may be due to the influence of their coach. Although the coaches’ influence on their players’ college aspirations did not stand out when looking at some of the questionnaire data, the interviews with coaches indicate that the coaches have a strong influence on their players’ academic lives, especially during the season. This influence creates immense potential for the impact of the relationship between a coach and his athletes.

Research on how a coach can impact his players’ educational aspirations is limited. However, one study demonstrated that when student-athletes were asked to choose the
people who had the most influence on their future education, the coach ranked third in importance. Players of lower SES were also more likely to rank the coach as the most important person (Snyder, 1972, p. 316). This relates once again to social mobility, but this time the players of lower SES viewed the coach, as opposed to their sport, as a way to help them increase their social mobility.

Although the student-athlete questionnaires cannot assess whether SES influenced the student-athletes’ views of their coach, the data can assess whether race played a role. Students were asked whether they had gone to their coach for information about college. Figure 21 shows the students’ responses broken down by race.

![Value Coach Input About College](image)

**Figure 21:** Percentages of students in each race who responded that they had spoken to their coach about college or planned to speak to their coach about college.

The data from this question help gauge whether the students viewed their coach as important in influencing their educational and/or athletic aspirations. When combining students who answered “yes,” and “not yet, but I plan to,” the racial breakdown shows the following: 63% of whites, 90% of blacks, and 100% of Hispanics valued the input of their
coach. This clearly shows that the majority of all students valued their coach as a valuable resource, but the minority student-athletes relied on their coach more than the white student-athletes. The fact that so many blacks and Hispanics utilized their coach as a resource could correlate with their higher aspirations to play their sport in college. Once again, black and Hispanic student-athletes have proven to value their sport, and the individuals involved in their sport, more than white student-athletes.

The consistent differences between the responses of the minority student-athletes and the white student-athletes support the theory that minority students may value their sport for reasons of social mobility.

**Implications and Recommendations**

*For Coaches*

Since so many players claimed to value their coach’s input, coaches are in the position to positively influence their players’ future plans. One key area in which they can do this is to help their players determine the feasibility of playing in college. This needs to be more transparent. Every coach interviewed said that he believed most of his players wanted to play in college but that this would not be possible. Based on the findings we recommend that coaches take more time to discuss college options with their players, in both the athletic and academic realm. They should provide their players with all the facts about playing in college. The student-athletes in this sample population probably did not realize that only 5.7% of high school male basketball players and 9.1% of high school male soccer players actually go on to play in college (“Chances of a High School Athlete,” n.d.). This includes participation at every intercollegiate level.
When looking at the entire population of students-athletes, 64% said that they planned/desired to play in college. This segment of the population responded to what they believed their chances were to play in college, as shown in Figure 22.

![Chances of Playing in College](image)

Figure 22: Analysis of the responses of the student-athletes who said "yes" to planning/desiring to play in college.

We cannot determine if the students were being realistic with their assessment, however this is the perfect opportunity for the coach to step in. For players with an average or below average chance of playing in college, the coach should either help them find a Division III or NAIA school where they can play or start encouraging them to pursue college only for their education. Coaches should collaborate with the teachers and guidance counselors of the student-athletes to determine what schools each student can feasibly attend. They should also set up meetings with their players’ parents/guardians during the season and off-season to make sure the parents are involved in their child’s educational and athletic plans. After this, coaches can begin to help their players determine if playing at specific colleges is possible, and if an athletic scholarship is an option. If a
coach takes these steps to encourage his players to attend college, he will not only enforce the fact that education should be valued higher than sports, but that simultaneous success in the two areas can be achieved.

Specifically regarding education, coaches should continue to enforce academic accountability among their players. In schools such as the ones in this study, where there is no minimum GPA requirement to play sports, coaches have to take it upon themselves to ensure that the student-athletes strive to achieve good grades. Coaches should require their players to write out their short and long-term goals for their sport and their academics. One of the coaches interviewed mentioned doing this and said it has been effective and has taught him a lot more about what his players want to achieve. Coaches of different teams should also work with one another to find the most successful methods of academic accountability and goal setting.

For Schools and School Administrators

From this research we have established many recommendations for coaches, but many implications for schools and school administrators evolve from this data as well. In order to successfully foster the student-athletes’ educational aspirations, coaches must have support from the school administration. First and foremost, school administrators should understand that athletics can have a positive impact on students’ educational achievement and aspirations. However, if schools place too much emphasis on the value of athletics it could negatively impact the student-athletes’ educational goals. High school athletes should not get any special treatment from school personnel, especially teachers.
This could cause student-athletes to think that being an athlete, or a successful athlete, is more important than being a good student.

School administrators should also consider implementing a minimum GPA requirement to play sports. This standard does not have to be high, but it should help to make student-athletes more accountable for their grades. It will also encourage student-athletes to strive to achieve in their academics and not just their athletics. School administrators should also provide coaches with resources on college planning to share with their players. In addition to this, they should encourage teachers and guidance counselors to work with coaches on academic planning. A final recommendation for schools is that, when possible, they should try to hire coaches who are also teachers at the school. Coaches who are teachers will emphasize the importance of education and will understand the school system better. If coaches and school administrators follow all of these suggestions, they will better be able to foster student-athletes’ educational aspirations and help these students to achieve both their educational and athletic goals.
References


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Appendix A

Variables

- Student’s race/ethnicity composite
- How far in school student thinks will get
- High school program student self-report (college prep, vocational, etc.)
- Participation in interscholastic athletics (team sports)
- Has gone to coach for college entrance information
- Would like to play athletics in college
- Hopes to receive athletic scholarship for college

Cross Tabulations

After dropping all females
2-way:
Student’s race/ethnicity composite*Participation in interscholastic athletics
Student’s race/ethnicity composite*High school program student self-report
How far in school student thinks will get*Participation in interscholastic athletics
High school program student self-report*Participation in interscholastic athletics

3-way:
Student’s race/ethnicity composite*How far in school student thinks will get*Participation in interscholastic athletics

After dropping all non-athletes (still only males)
2-way:
Would like to play athletics in college*Has gone to coach for college entrance information
Would like to play athletics in college*Hopes to receive athletic scholarship
Student’s race/ethnicity composite*Hopes to receive athletic scholarship
Appendix B

Student-Athlete Questionnaire

Background Information

1. What best describes you?
   a. Asian or Pacific Islander
   b. Hispanic
   c. African American
   d. Caucasian
   e. American Indian
2. What grade are you in?
   a. 9
   b. 10
   c. 11
   d. 12
3. What is your age _______
4. Do you speak a language other than English at home?
   a. Yes (what language) ________________
   b. No
5. Which of the following people live in the same household as you?
   a. Only father/male guardian (or step father)
   b. Only mother/female guardian (or step mother)
   c. Both parents
   d. No parents/other relatives
6. How far did your father go in school?
   a. Did not finish high school
   b. Graduated high school or equivalent (GED)
   c. Attended a vocational school, junior college, community college, or other 2-year school
   d. Attended college but did not complete a 4-year program
   e. Graduated from college (bachelor's degree)
   f. Attained a Master's degree or equivalent
   g. Attained a Ph.D., M.D., or other professional degree
   h. I don't know
7. How far did your mother go in school?
   a. Did not finish high school
   b. Graduated high school or equivalent (GED)
   c. Attended a vocational school, junior college, community college, or other 2-year school
   d. Attended college but did not complete a 4-year program
   e. Graduated from college (bachelor's degree)
   f. Attained a Master's degree or equivalent
   g. Attained a Ph.D., M.D., or other professional degree
   h. I don't know
Sports Information

1. What varsity sport do you play? ____________
2. How much time do you spend playing/practicing your sport? ____ hours/week
3. Compared to the athletes in your sport what do you consider your skill/success level to be:
   a. Below average
   b. Average
   c. Above average
   d. The best on my current team
4. How important is success in your sport to you?
   a. very important
   b. important
   c. somewhat important
   d. not important
5. Do you plan/desire to continue this sport in college?
   a. Yes
   b. Maybe
   c. No
6. If yes, what do you think the chances are of you playing in college:
   a. Below average
   b. Average
   c. Above average
   d. The best on my current team
7. If you plan to continue playing your sport, how important is each of these reasons for why you want to play in college?
   a. To further your sport career and use it as a gateway to play professionally
      i. very important
      ii. important
      iii. somewhat important
      iv. not important
   b. To attend college on a scholarship so you can further your education
      i. very important
      ii. important
      iii. somewhat important
      iv. not important
   c. To play your sport because you love it
      i. very important
      ii. important
      iii. somewhat important
      iv. not important
8. Do you think that playing your sport has provided you with more social, career, and/or economic opportunities?
   a. Yes, it already has
   b. Not yet, but I think it will
c. Maybe, but I’m not sure
d. No, it hasn’t and it won’t
9. If you plan to continue your sport, what are the criteria for the colleges you are looking at?
   a. Very strong program for your sport and decent academic program
   b. Very strong academic program and decent program for your sport
   c. Very strong academic program and very strong program for your sport
   d. Decent academic program and decent program for your sport
10. If you can receive a college scholarship will you definitely attend college?
    a. Yes
    b. Maybe
    c. No
11. If you do not receive a scholarship, will you attend college?
    a. Yes
    b. Maybe
    c. No
12. Have you ever gone to your coach for information about college?
    a. Yes
    b. Not yet, but I plan to
    c. No, and I don’t plan to
13. Has your coach encouraged you to attend college?
    a. Yes, to continue my education
    b. Yes, to play my sport
    c. Yes, to continue my education and play my sport
    d. No

Academic Information

1. What is your current GPA? ________ (prefer not to answer)
2. Compared to other student-athletes in your grade what do you consider your academic performance to be:
   a. Not as good as it should be
   b. On the same level of other student-athletes
   c. Better than most student-athletes
3. How important are good grades to you?
   a. very important
   b. important
   c. somewhat important
   d. not important
4. How much time do you spend doing your schoolwork? ____ hours/week
5. Are you currently enrolled in a college preparatory (honors) curriculum?
   a. Yes
   b. No
6. Are you currently taking any advanced placement (AP) courses?
   a. Yes
b. No
7. Do you plan to attend college?
   a. Yes
   b. Maybe
   c. No
8. How far do you think you will get in school?
   a. Won't finish high school
   b. Will graduate from high school
   c. Will go to a vocational, trade, or community college after high school
   d. Will attend some college but not graduate
   e. Will graduate from college
   f. Will pursue a higher degree after graduating from college (Masters, PhD, MD, etc)
9. Do you see attending college as a way to provide you with more social, career, and/or economic opportunities?
   a. Yes
   b. Maybe
   c. No
Appendix C

Coach Interview

Open Ended Questions – Conversational

1. Do you stay updated on how your players are doing academically?
2. Is there a GPA requirement at your school for students to be able to participate in sports?
3. What is the general trend of academics on your team?
4. Does this differ whether it’s during the season or during the off-season?
5. Do you know how many of your players want to play their sport in college?
6. Do you know if all of your players want to go to college?
7. Do you talk to your players about going to college? For sports? For academics?
8. Do you encourage them to continue their education after high school?
9. Do you encourage goal setting for their lives both on and off the field/court?

Table 3: Length of Coach Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Length of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coach 1 (basketball)</td>
<td>7 minutes 3 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 2 (basketball)</td>
<td>7 minutes 25 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 3 (basketball)</td>
<td>4 minutes 41 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 4 (soccer)</td>
<td>4 minutes 47 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 5 (soccer)</td>
<td>2 minutes 44 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 6 (soccer)</td>
<td>8 minutes 15 seconds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 24: Cross tabulation results of educational aspirations, race, and athletic participation. The y-axis values represent the percentages of students from each racial group who had the educational aspirations listed in the x-axis.
### Appendix E

#### Table 4: Difference Between Black Athletes and Black Non-Athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Aspirations</th>
<th>Athletes</th>
<th>Non-Athletes</th>
<th>Percentage Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate high school or GED</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend/complete 2-year school</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend some 4-year school</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate college</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>+13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain Masters, PhD, MD, etc.</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Table 5: Difference Between White Athletes and White Non-Athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Aspirations</th>
<th>Athletes</th>
<th>Non-Athletes</th>
<th>Percentage Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>.4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>-.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate high school or GED</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>-9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend/complete 2-year school</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend some 4-year school</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate college</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain Masters, PhD, MD, etc.</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>+14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>