

# Studies and Sports

A Perfect Match for College Student-Athletes?

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As a teacher, chances are you have already discussed, in a formal or informal setting, the academic success of student-athletes attending your college. Whether it is with students, teachers in your department, athletics staff or administrators, these discussions are often marked by mixed opinions, sometimes based on preconceived ideas about this group of students. Some mention the fact that playing sports as part of extracurricular activities seems to promote academic success, especially among boys. In contrast, others argue that student-athletes tend to prioritize their athletic pursuits, often to the detriment of their studies, and that these young people have a negative impact on classroom climate. They may even be perceived as *dumbjocks*—a term often used to describe them—i.e., ignorant people who put little effort into their studies, as opposed to their sports practice. That said, beyond impressions and informal discussions, we still know little about this topic. In fact, despite the significant financial and human resources allocated by colleges to support and guide these students, no large-scale survey in the Quebec college network has specifically looked at the academic success of student-athletes. This data is nonetheless necessary in order to intervene effectively with these students.

In order to provide new knowledge and an interpretative framework, a study funded by the Programme de recherche et d'expérimentation pédagogiques [Pedagogical Research and Experimentation Program, Ed.] (PREP)

of the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, was conducted to understand the academic success dynamics of student-athletes evolving in the Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec [Quebec Student Sports Network, Ed.] (RSEQ)<sup>1</sup> and to better identify the influence of intercollegiate sports practice on academic results (Jobin Lawler and Boutet-Lanouette, 2021). Based on research results and findings, this article proposes three areas of intervention to support certain groups of RSEQ student-athletes for whom academic success is more difficult. The presentation of the most significant results of the survey not only provides a concrete contribution to the discussions taking place in Quebec colleges concerning this group of students, but also supports the decision-making of the school teams that support and guide these college students in their academic success.

### Some methodological clarifications

To further our understanding of student-athletes' academic success, a quantitative methodology was employed, based on the analysis of records provided by administrators at four private, subsidized colleges in Quebec.<sup>2</sup> The documents obtained included anonymized information from three different cohorts of first-session students. In addition to sociodemographic data (e.g., gender, program, RSEQ student-athlete or not, full-time or part-time, etc.), these data also provided academic information (e.g., number of courses taken, grades by

course, third-session re-enrollment, etc.) that allowed for analysis of academic success and perseverance. In total, we were able to analyze information on 755 RSEQ student-athletes and 5,666 students from the same colleges who were not participating in an RSEQ-governed sport, in order to compare these 2 groups of students on various success indicators.

### Who are the RSEQ student-athletes?

RSEQ student-athletes practise their sport within the context of intercollegiate competitions.<sup>3</sup> The college sector of the RSEQ (which includes Quebec's CEGEPs and subsidized private colleges), encompassed 619 sports teams in the province in 2019-2020, across 16 different sports, for a total of over 11,000 student-athletes (RSEQ, 2020). Among these student-athletes, 3,567 were on girls' teams, 5,281 played

<sup>1</sup> The RSEQ is the governing body for interschool sports in Quebec.

<sup>2</sup> Because of its methodological approach and the characteristics of its sampling, the researchers do not claim to generalize the results to all colleges in the network.

<sup>3</sup> There is also another category of student-athletes who are not part of the research presented in this article. They are enrolled in a Quebec college and, in parallel with their studies and external to their institution, practise an individual or team sport. Some of them are involved in high performance sports that are attached to a sports federation. They are generally guided and supported in CEGEPs and colleges by the Alliance Sport-Études.

on boys' teams, and 2,287 were on co-ed teams (e.g., cross country or cheerleading). These youth thus represent their college through a championship grouped by type of sport, gender (with some exceptions) and level of competition (division). It must be said that research involving the same student profile at the Canadian university level shows that the academic journey of some student-athletes is often more arduous than one might imagine, as the expectations and pressure to perform on the field and in the classroom mean that they face many pitfalls that can interfere with their academic success (Rothschild-Checroune *et al.*, 2013; White *et al.*, 2013).

### First result

**Student-athletes enrolled in RSEQ sports perform better in class and are more perseverant in their studies than other students attending the same colleges.**

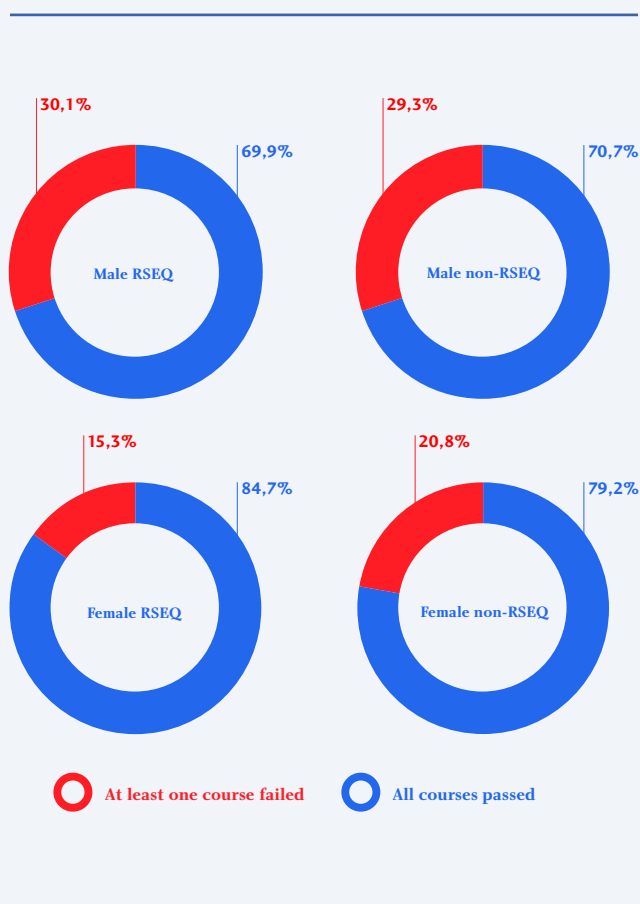
The data obtained shows that student-athletes have a higher rate of course completion than students who are not enrolled in RSEQ sports activities. It is also possible to see that student-athletes are more perseverant in their studies than the group of other students. First, student-athletes are more likely than non-athletes to re-enroll in their third session in the same college and program. This is true for both male and female students. Second, in terms of retention, college students enrolled in RSEQ sports have a lower average number of "dropped" courses—that is, courses with a very low grade (a grade between 0 and 29%)—than students who are not involved in such sports.

Survey results also show a difference in success by gender. In the female group,

significantly more RSEQ student-athletes pass all of their first-session courses than their female peers who do not participate in any RSEQ sport at school, and fewer of them fail one or more courses. This is not the case, however, for the male group (athletes and non-athletes), where the rates are similar. This is shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1

### Course completion rates, by gender and status (RSEQ athlete or non-athlete)



There are a number of hypotheses that may explain why, in general, the student-athlete group performs better academically than other college students. First, RSEQ student-athletes enter college with a higher high school GPA (HGPA) than other students. In fact, college students who participate in RSEQ sports are under-represented in the below 70% HGPA category.<sup>4</sup> Involving these youth in such sports activities in the first session is also conducive to their academic, social, and institutional integration (Jobin-Lawler *et al.*, 2019), and this could impact their desire for perseverance and academic success. The implementation of a variety of college success support measures and programs may also lead some student-athletes to reconsider their desire to drop one or more courses

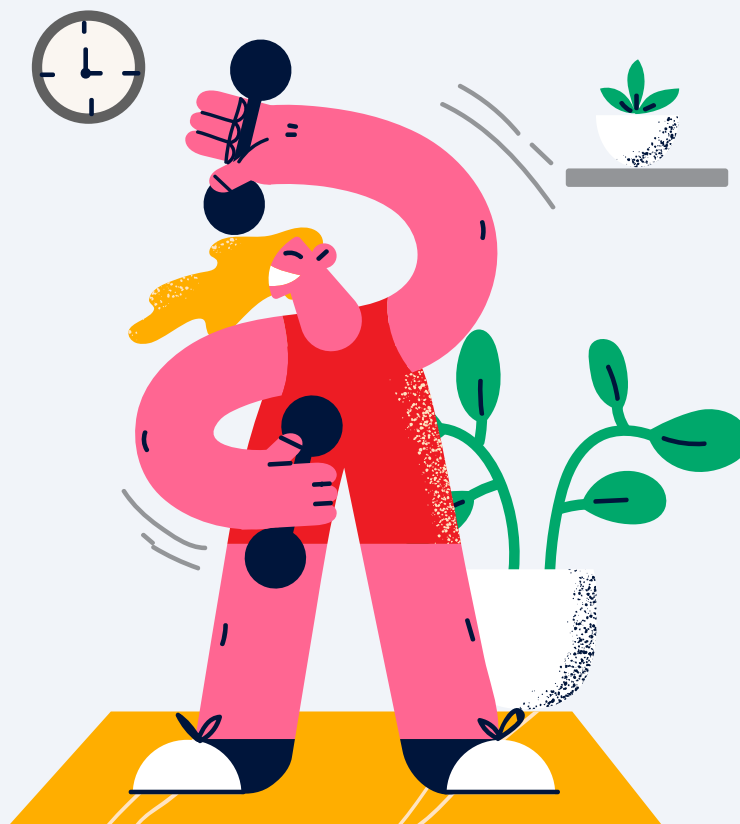
during the session, especially since they make greater use of the support offered to them during their first session of CEGEP studies than other students (Jobin-Lawler *et al.*, 2019). Finally, this situation may be the result of RSEQ eligibility policies that require, among other things, that student-athletes who participate in their activities pass a minimum of 8 courses or 14 units in a single academic year.

### Second result Male athletes have more difficulty in school than female athletes, but...

There are some academic differences between male and female athletes. Looking at **Figure 1**, it can be seen that a much greater proportion of girls who participate in RSEQ sports (84.7%) pass all of their courses

compared to boys (69.9%). In addition, **Figure 2** shows that female athletes tend to re-enroll in their third session at a higher rate than their male counterparts. Thus, on these indicators, male athletes, unlike female athletes in the same group, show more academic shortcomings. This may relate to the fact that male athletes have a harder time balancing their athletic participation with their academic engagement, especially during their athletic season (Jobin-Lawler *et al.*, 2019; Wilson, 2011).

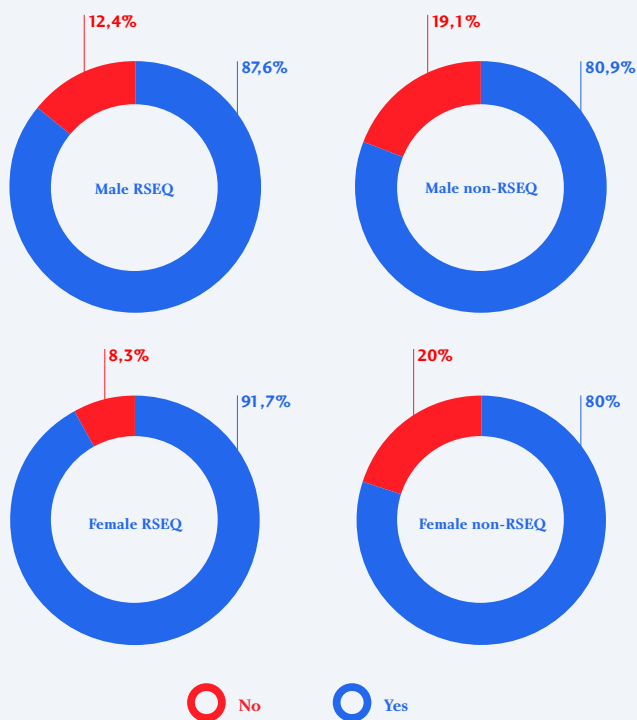
<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it should be noted that a HGPA of 70% and lower (some researchers place this mark at 75% instead) has been shown to be a significant risk factor for academic success (Beaulieu *et al.*, 2017; Gingras and Terrill, 2006).



Source: Denis Novikov/iStock

Figure 2

**Proportion of 1<sup>st</sup> session students who re-enrolled in their 3<sup>rd</sup> session in the same college and program, by gender and status (RSEQ athlete or non-athlete)**



In contrast, the gender comparison among the athlete group shows that there is no difference between female and male athletes on three academic success indicators, namely, average number of courses dropped, average number of courses failed, and overall grade average. In this sense, the situation of male athletes may not be as negative as it seems. Indeed, some U.S. researchers have noted that the size of the educational institution that athletes attend, as well as the types of support and guidance available to them, are variables that are far more significant than gender in the academic success of student-athletes (Horton, 2009; Wilson, 2011).

**Third result**

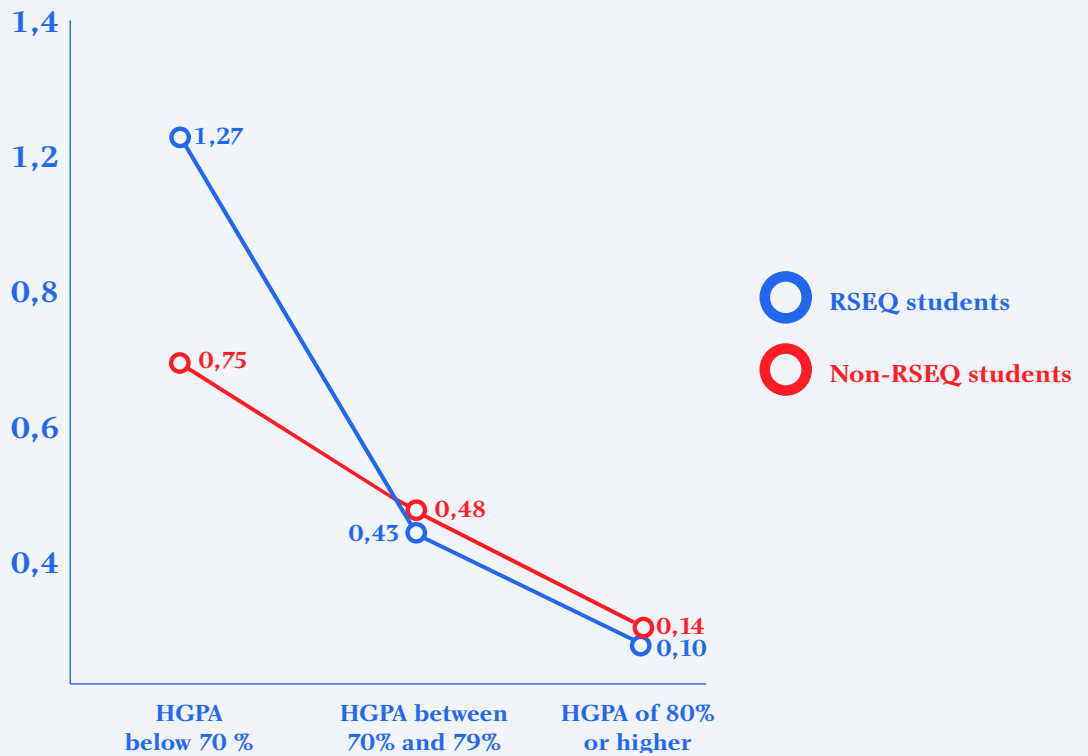
**Student-athletes with low high school GPAs are at greater risk for first-session failures at the college level than non-athlete students.**

The first result discussed in this article shows, in general, that student-athletes are more successful academically than other students. However, one indicator used in the study shows the opposite. **Figure 3** shows that students with a HGPA below 70% who are enrolled in RSEQ activities have a significantly higher average number of failures in college compared to the average number of failures of students not involved in such activities.

This situation could be explained, on the one hand, by the fact that students who enter college with a weak academic background are sometimes too involved in sports. In this sense, some student-athletes with more difficulties in the classroom would find themselves in a situation where high pressure on the field, poor time management, and difficulties in balancing

Figure 3

### Interaction between student status (athlete or non-athlete) and HGPA on the average number of 1<sup>st</sup>-session failures



sports and studies (Jobin-Lawler *et al.*, 2019; Rothschild-Checroune *et al.*, 2013; White *et al.*, 2013) would result in a higher average number of courses failed. It should be noted that Quebec college student-athletes, such as first division football players, are sometimes called upon, despite certain limits imposed by the RSEQ on teams, to train and play for more than 30 hours per week for an entire session (Jobin-Lawler and Boutet-Lanouette, 2017). As a result, most of them follow an atypical academic path (e.g., they opt for fewer

courses per session and therefore take more sessions to complete their program of study).

On the other hand, while interschool sports eligibility policies and measures can be an incentive for perseverance and academic success, as mentioned above, it is conceivable that student-athletes who enter college in an at-risk context for failure and dropout, such as those with a low HGPA, are desperate to pass all of their courses during the session in order to remain

eligible to play their sport. However, likely due to difficulties accumulated since high school, their efforts end in failure more frequently than other students. This type of situation has already been noted in a few studies specifically about this group of students (Jobin-Lawler and Boutet-Lanouette, 2017; White *et al.*, 2013).

A final element of explanation that should be highlighted concerns a less well-defined vocational project among RSEQ student-athletes, compared

to other college students, a trend identified in a previous study (Jobin-Lawler *et al.*, 2019). Yet, we know that collective clarity lies at the heart of student perseverance and motivation (Beaulieu *et al.*, 2017, p. 5). The vocational indecisiveness observed in many college students is also often associated with lower academic performance in high school and CEGEP, as well as a negative perception of the importance of success (Beaulieu *et al.*, 2017). In this context, it is conceivable that poorer academic and career guidance affects the academic outcomes of student-athletes with a low HGPA. While they may have the desire to persevere in their college studies in order to access university studies and, more particularly, in order to

play their sport in a school context, accumulated academic problems hinder their success.

### Conducting effective interventions

As we have just seen, college students on an RSEQ sports team generally perform better academically than other students, but two subgroups of student-athletes present slightly more difficulties: male student-athletes compared to their female counterparts, as well as student-athletes with a HGPA below 70%. Support and guidance provided in colleges should therefore be focused on these two groups of athletes, in three areas of intervention.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> area of intervention

#### Raising awareness of time and priority management

The issue of organization and management of time and priorities should be given special attention by the college stakeholders involved with RSEQ student-athletes. This is in fact an existing problem for many students in the network, mainly those who present academic difficulties when they enter CEGEP, especially boys, as well as an important skill that needs to be further developed among college students (Gaudreault *et al.*, 2014). In this regard, it should also be mentioned that one of our previous surveys concerning the integration of student-athletes revealed that the reconciliation of



Source: Denis Novikov/iStock



sports and studies, as well as time management issues, were of concern and represented a significant challenge for more than half of the student-athletes who practise an intercollegiate sport overseen by the RSEQ (Jobin-Lawler *et al.*, 2019). This management of time allocated to study and school sports also represents an issue that is very often identified by administrators of university athletic programs across the country (Rothschild-Checroune *et al.*, 2013; White *et al.*, 2013).

In this context, although some Quebec colleges and CEGEPs already have measures in place to inform and warn student-athletes about the demands related to their involvement

in sports and their academic success, more emphasis should be placed on developing the skills associated with managing their priorities. Close support could be offered to male athletes who present academic difficulties when they enter CEGEP in order to help them develop their personal autonomy and organization of time and priorities. In this regard, a team effort is needed, including individuals in charge of school sports programs, coaches, academic success support staff and teachers. Discussions between these stakeholders would make it possible to find solutions acting on the effective coexistence of academic success and the sometimes-intensive commitment that this type of involvement in sports requires. Then, teachers would certainly have a role to play by intervening directly with the student-athletes enrolled in their courses. Thus, teachers could, with the support of other stakeholders involved with student-athletes, implement means, tools or activities adapted to the training context of student-athletes that emphasize on the study to be planned, the work to be done and the deadlines to be met. For example, this could be a comprehensive planning strategy implemented right from the beginning of the session. Note that this type of meeting can be planned on a departmental level, in program families with a large number of student-athletes, such as Social Science. Student-athletes should meet with their teachers, coaches, and tutors at the beginning of the session to determine everything they need to do for all courses and athletic activities during the session in order to target and discuss the major issues and key moments that need to be well-prepared to ensure their success. This way,

athletes could discuss their involvement in sports and the challenges they face (or think they will face) with regard to their participation in sports. Why not propose that throughout the session, certain student-athletes, for example those in their second or third year, take on certain responsibilities with respect to their peers: reminding them of deadlines for handing in assignments, organizing study sessions, planning review or exam preparation activities, etc.? In short, whether these interventions are proposed or organized by individual teachers or on a departmental level, they would make it possible to establish an initial contact with the student-athletes, to be attentive to their difficulties and to determine priorities in order to better accompany them in their academic success and achievements.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> area of intervention

### Better defining the vocational project

Tailored support for vocational guidance aimed directly at first-session student-athletes experiencing academic difficulties should be a preferred means for professional staff and college teachers. Indeed, as this seems to be lacking in many students who participate in sports, and more so in boys than in girls (Jobin-Lawler *et al.*, 2019), the development of clear academic and career goals would certainly foster greater motivation and commitment to their studies. Generally speaking, departments, as well as guidance counsellors and academic advisors, can play a positive role in the development of the vocational project of certain students, among other things by setting up in-class or out-of-class activities (formal or informal discussions, training, conferences, etc.). In this regard, high-level





athletes with university training, such as Laurent Duvernay-Tardif, Mathieu Proulx or Joé Juneau, are often role models for young people and can deliver messages of academic engagement that stimulate vocational orientation, while promoting academic success in the context of sports involvement. We also believe that sports coaches, because of the bonds of trust they develop with many of their players (Hartmann, 2008; Jobin-Lawler *et al.*, 2019), should be an integral part of this support process.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> area of intervention Taking action through mentoring

Peer mentoring is a tool that promotes students' adjustment to college, provided that they can benefit from several meetings with their mentors (more than 10 meetings per year) and that they have a high degree of agreement with their mentors on the goals pursued through this activity. If this is the case, this method can actively contribute to clarifying the mentees' vocational project, while promoting their adjustment to college in terms of scheduling priorities (Beaulieu *et al.*, 2017), which refers specifically to the two areas of intervention previously proposed.

The benefits of mentoring programs apply equally to first-year student-athletes when they are supported in their academic endeavours by another member of their athletic team. Indeed, first-year student-athletes who participate in such programs improve their academic performance through, among other things, better planning of their time spent on study and sports (Comeaux, 2013). In this regard, Comeaux (2013, p. 270)

explains: The results of this research demonstrate that mentoring as an intervention strategy for first-year student-athletes having difficulty to balance their different roles positively influences their academic and future goals. Thus, this type of activity allows first-year athletes with certain academic difficulties to not only get support in their studies, but also to meet other students who have had the same journey as them and discuss the challenges they face, as well as their career plans.

## Conclusion

The results presented in this article provide a better understanding of the academic success of college-level student-athletes who participate in RSEQ sports. This represents a critical starting point in the effective implementation of interventions for these youth. The study reveals that, overall, RSEQ student-athletes are equally successful and sometimes even more successful in their college careers than non-athletes. For example, they have a higher rate of course completion, a lower average number of courses dropped, and they re-enroll more often in their third session. This new knowledge may also, we believe, help to dispel some of the prejudices or unfavourable ideas that sometimes circulate in college institutions about the success of this group of students.

That being said, two subgroups of student-athletes present more academic difficulties. Male student-athletes are less likely than female student-athletes to pass all of their courses and show signs of difficulty in persevering in their program of study. Student-athletes with an overall HGPA below

70% have a higher average course failure rate than non-student-athletes with the same HGPA. In response to this finding, actions are proposed in this text. These courses of action aim to act effectively and as a priority on elements that seem to be lacking mainly in these two sub-groups of student-athletes. In short, just as with professional athletes, in order to guarantee success and improve the chances of academic success, student-athletes must feel supported by those around them. They also have a duty to organize their time effectively to combine studies, sports, and other commitments, while having a vocational focus to stimulate their academic motivation. ■

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