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THE SCHOLARSHIP DIVIDE

It's Not an Adventure, It's a Job

By [BILL PENNINGTON](#)

A few months into her first year at Villanova, Stephanie Campbell was despondent.

As a high school senior in New Jersey, she had been thrilled to receive a \$19,000 athletic scholarship to play field hockey at [Villanova University](#), a select, private institution outside Philadelphia. But she had not counted on the 7 a.m. start of every class day, something required so she could be in the locker room by noon to prepare for a four-hour shift of afternoon practices and weight-lifting sessions. Travel to games forced her to miss exams and classes. There were also mandatory team meetings, study halls and weekend practices.

She was overwhelmed.

“Plus, her roommate had a typical college student’s social life, while Stephanie was in her room on weekend nights trying to sleep because she had a game the next day,” her mother, Kathleen Campbell, said last month. “She came home crying.”

So Kathleen Campbell sat her daughter down, waited for a break in the sobs and said: “Villanova costs more than \$40,000 a year to attend. They’re paying you \$19,000 to play field hockey. At your age, there is no one out there anywhere who is going to pay you that kind of money to do anything. And that’s how you have to look at this: It’s a job, but it’s a great job.”

Campbell, 22, kept at it all four years, serving as a team captain last fall while majoring in marketing. She is expected to graduate this spring.

“I’m missing the sport terribly already,” she said last month. “But it was a ton of work. Receiving an athletic scholarship is a wonderful thing, but most of us only know what we’re getting, not what we’re getting into.”

Dozens of scholarship athletes at [N.C.A.A.](#) Division I institutions said in interviews that they had underestimated how taxing and hectic their lives would be playing college sports. They also said others share a common misperception that athletes lead a privileged existence.

“You know, maybe if you’re a scholarship football player at Oklahoma, everything is taken care of for you,” Tim Poydenis, a scholarship baseball player at Villanova, said. “But most of us are nonrevenue-sport athletes who have to do our own fund-raising just to pay for basics like sweat pants and batting gloves. We miss all these classes, which obviously doesn’t help us or make our professors happy. We give up almost all our free time. Our social life is stripped bare.

“Friday happy hour or spring break? Forget it. I haven’t had a spring break since I was a sophomore in high school.”

The athletes were interviewed over several weeks from a cross section of sports at two representative Division I institutions, Villanova, a charter member of the Big East Conference, and the [University of Delaware](#), a state-run institution that is a member of the Colonial Athletic Association. None of the athletes asked for or expected sympathy. They know there are many overscheduled college students who devote extra hours to academic and extracurricular activities or part-time jobs and internships.

“We love what we do, and it is worth it,” Poydenis said. “But everybody thinks every college athlete is on a pampered full ride. The truth is a lot of us are getting \$4,000 and working our butts off for it.”

The life of the scholarship athlete is so arduous that coaches and athletes said it was not unusual for as many as 15 percent of those receiving athletic aid to quit sports and turn down the scholarship money after a year or two.

“I came in with 10 recruited girls,” Stephanie Campbell said. “There are four of us left as seniors. Not everyone was on scholarship, but maybe half who left were getting money.”

Campbell said she had a teammate who wanted to be an engineer but that the classes and off-campus projects in that major clashed with field hockey practices and trips.

Katie Lee, a senior softball player at Delaware, said at least one scholarship player had quit the team in each of her seasons. Of her former teammates, she said, “I see them around campus, and they look happy.”

Emily Schaknowski, a sophomore lacrosse player on athletic scholarship at Delaware, said 5 of the 12 women she entered with were no longer on the team. Most had relinquished their scholarships.

Joe Taylor, a junior soccer player at Villanova, said he was one of four left from a freshman recruiting class of 10.

“You wonder if you should try to talk them out of it,” Taylor said. “But for most of those guys, it probably is the best decision to walk away.”

At Villanova, Poydenis said he thought the defections resulted from the shock that set in after a youth sports culture ethos collided with the realities of college athletics.

“Kids who have worked their whole life trying to get a scholarship think the hard part is over when they get the college money,” he said. “They don’t know that it’s a whole new monster when you get here.”

His coach, Joe Godri, says he tries to warn recruits before they accept athletic aid. He tells them that being a Division I student-athlete is a full-time job. “It’s not even close to being a normal college student,” Godri said.

The Division I athletes interviewed indicated they devoted at least four hours a day to their sport, not counting the time it takes to play or to travel to games. Classes must be scheduled in the early morning to free the afternoon for practices and games. Practices often last from 4 to 6:30 p.m., although several athletes talked about how they had to arrive early for treatment of injuries or to have old injuries taped or harnessed. Highly competitive, demanding practices come next.

There is often a team dinner, perhaps a short meeting and a mandatory study hall in some cases. Weekday away games, which are common, can mean a bus ride that begins at 1 p.m. and a return trip that reaches campus at 10 p.m.

“You come back to your dorm room ready to crash,” Taylor said. “But you’ve got homework or maybe a test the next morning. The rest of the dorm is starting to get a little rowdy because those guys have all finished their homework. They might be getting ready to go out. A lot of them took a nap in the afternoon.”

College athletes routinely said there was one accouterment not often mentioned in recruiting trips but essential to the athlete’s equipment bag: ear plugs.

“They help you sleep on those nights when you have a game the next day,” Jamie Flynn, a junior soccer player at Delaware, said.

Many athletes tend to gather together in off-campus housing, so at least their apartment is quieter on the nights before games. Most teams have a rule prohibiting alcohol 48 hours before a game. The Villanova field hockey team, for example, pledges to not to drink alcohol for the entire season.

And the players police other teammates who might not be abiding by the rules about partying before games or practices. Jillian Loyden, a senior All-Big East goalie on Villanova’s soccer team, said it was usually first-year players who slipped up.

“They get to college and want to be normal college students on a Friday night,” said Loyden, who has raided parties to usher first-year teammates out of a building so they would head home to bed. “You have to make them understand that our team is not a social club.”

Athletes from the nonrevenue sports also customarily have to do extra work on campus to raise money to pay for equipment or apparel not normally financed by the athletic department, like warm-up jackets. Cortney Barry, a scholarship swimmer at Delaware, cut short her Thanksgiving Day break at home last year because the swim team had agreed to clean the garbage from the football stadium bleachers to pay for some expenses.

For this and other reasons, college athletes often refer to students who are nonathletes as “normals” or “regulars.” When asked why, Stephanie Campbell answered, “Because we’re not normal.”

“Look, we are fortunate to be athletes and to get tuition money to do it,” Campbell added. “I have loved my time here. I’m going to get a prestigious degree, and I know there are a lot of people who would have wanted to trade places with me. But I’d still say Division I athletics is not meant for everybody. Nobody tells you that.”

Campbell, who was an All-Big East selection in her final season, has gone back to her hometown, Gibbsboro in South Jersey, to help coach the club team she played for as a youngster.

“I worry about the kids I see now, because they’re under so much stress to get something out of field hockey,” she said. “You can never lose sight of why you play. Yes, I got a scholarship, but in the end, I put up with the sore muscles, lost sleep and everything else because I loved playing that much.”

These days, she is trying to make up for lost time on the business networking front, attending vocational seminars and fairs aimed at easing college graduates into the workplace. It is a new game for Campbell.

“Well, I’m graduating in May,” she said. “I need a job.”

Griffin Palmer contributed reporting.

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