An Exploratory Study of the Transportation Practices Utilized by NCAA Universities: Preventative Measures for Coaches and Administrators

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Abstract

Currently more than 1,000 NCAA member institutions have intercollegiate athletic programs. The athletic teams from all of these institutions must travel in order to participate in sanctioned competitions as well as some training sessions. Transportation methods vary and consist of airplanes, chartered buses, 12 and 15-passenger vans, university-owned vehicles, minibuses, and student-athlete vehicles. The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine and compare the current transportation practices of Division I, Division II, and Division III teams, in particular those transportation practices involving teams for sports which are typically non-revenue producing. A total of 120 colleges were randomly selected for this study, and 43% of these institutions responded. Results indicate that many teams are not using the safest methods to transport their athletes. Coaches are frequently called upon as drivers and 15-passenger vans are used at a high rate. Schools also failed to implement the majority of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) recommendations for the transportation of student-athletes.

Key Words: transportation, NCAA, coaches, 15-passenger vans
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During the 2007-2008 academic year, more than 400,000 student-athletes competed for National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions (McKindra, 2009). Most of these athletes were required to travel in order to compete and, sometimes, practice. Colleges and universities have a legal duty to safely transport student-athletes whether travel time is a few minutes, hours, or days (Pitman, 1994). Collegiate transportation practices and policies vary greatly among institutions and can range from the most desirable scenario (chartered vehicles with professionally contracted drivers), to the most dangerous (student-athletes transporting themselves and others in private vehicles). Despite the emphasis that is placed upon the safe transportation of college athletes, it remains an often-overlooked risk management issue facing intercollegiate athletic administrators; consequently, collegiate coaches may need to become proactive and make the changes necessary to ensure safe transportation practices for their teams. A well-planned and highly organized athletic event can quickly transform into a disaster as a result of a vehicular mishap (Fried, 1999).

College administrators have been increasingly concerned with the risk involved in the transportation of student-athletes, beginning with the Marshall University football disaster four decades ago. Evidence abounds to substantiate their concern. The January 2001 plane crash that claimed the lives of 10 individuals associated with the Oklahoma State University athletics program brought national attention to the issue of student-athlete transportation. More recently, in March 2007, the Bluffton University baseball team was traveling in a chartered bus that plunged off an Atlanta highway ramp killing six passengers. The baseball team was headed to Florida and planned to travel throughout the night. At 5:30 a.m., the bus toppled over the side of a highway overpass landing on a major interstate 30 feet below. The NTSB investigators found no skid marks and the driver had just taken over for the initial driver an hour before the accident (Morris & Torpy, 2007). Even though chartered buses seem to be a safe means of transportation, during the 2007-2008 academic year 85 Division I schools used chartered bus companies that had one or more deficient federal safety score (Lavigne, 2009). The bus companies flagged had a less-than-satisfactory rating or had deficient drivers, buses, or management.

Although the aforementioned high-profile accidents occurred while student-athletes were being transported through means that are considered to be among the safest options (i.e., air travel or chartered bus), such disastrous consequences more typically occur during the use of the more wide-spread and less-safe means of transporting athletes. In particular, accidents involving the transportation of student-athletes of smaller, non-revenue producing teams can usually be attributed to the use of relatively unsafe vehicles or less-than-ideal driver practices.

Fifteen-passenger vans are the primary means of transportation for college athletes of minor sport teams (USDT, 2004). This type of vehicle differs from all others in that it has a
larger payload capacity and the occupants sit fairly high up in the vehicle (Garrott, 2001). In fact, these vehicles were originally designed specifically to carry cargo, not large numbers of passengers. As the weight in the vehicle increases, so does the rollover tendency due to the increased center-of-gravity height. In 2001 the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) found that rollover rates more than double when 15-passenger vans are overloaded with passengers and cargo. The additional weight also changes the center of gravity of these vans and increases the vertical load on the rear tires (NHTSA, 2004). When loaded and driven above 50 miles per hour, the vehicles become substantially more unstable than SUVs or pickup trucks. According to the 2004 NHTSA analysis of crashes involving 15-passenger vans, statistics reveal that there were 1,576 vans involved in fatal crashes from 1990 to 2002. Fatalities related to these vans numbered 1,111, and of those, 657 vans were in single-vehicle crashes in which 349 of the vans rolled over (USDT, 2004).

There are a number of well-publicized accidents involving collegiate athletes being transported to and from contests or practices in 15-passenger vans. Although many accidents go unreported, in a five-year period between 1999 and 2004, there were 14 highly publicized road accidents involving collegiate athletes being transported in vans, which resulted in 88 injuries and 14 deaths (Franke, 2006). Within this same timeframe, most of these accidents occurred within a 15-month stretch between 2000 and 2001, and there were 10 accidents resulting in five deaths and 73 injuries (Garber, 2001). More recently, in 2008, the cross country team from Franciscan University suffered one fatality and six injuries as their van rolled over on a return trip from a practice site (Gorman, 2008).

While federal law prohibits the sale of 15-passenger vans for the school-related transport of high school age and younger students, no such prohibition exists for vehicles to transport college students or other passengers. Clearly, the higher profile college teams (i.e., football) are frequently transported by the safest means, usually with chartered vehicles and professional drivers. However, smaller, non-revenue producing teams (in most instances) (e.g., cross country, golf, tennis, and volleyball) do not typically receive the same consideration.

As the tendency for accidents involving 15-passenger vans increased, the NTSB (2003) expressed concern and made several recommendations regarding the use of 12- and 15-passenger vans for colleges and universities. These recommendations included:

1. Drivers should obtain a commercial driver’s license, be at least 21 years of age, have passed a medical examination, obtained an emergency vehicle operator’s course certification, and be well-rested for trips.

2. Large vans should NOT be driven with maximum occupancy
   -12-passenger vans should carry no more than 8 passengers and equipment
   -15-passenger vans should carry no more than 10 passengers and equipment
Mini-busses should not be used to transport more than 20 passengers
(3) Fifteen-passenger vans should have dual rear wheels
(4) Vans should have 155-inch wheel base

Not only is the use of 15-passenger vans to transport collegiate athletes a risk management concern, the drivers of these vehicles and the circumstances under which they are driving have come under greater scrutiny. Chartered buses with professional drivers are generally viewed as a cost-prohibitive mode of transportation for smaller schools; however, the alternative is for coaches, athletic trainers, faculty or even students to drive students-athletes in 15-passenger vans. This alternative has led to accidents such as the one involving the men’s basketball team of Lindenwood College, where a 15-passenger van overturned when the team’s athletic trainer fell asleep at the wheel and six players and an assistant coach sustained injuries (Garber, 2001).

Deaths and injuries of student-athletes have led governing bodies to study the issue further. For example, the College Athletics Administrators of New Jersey sampled Division III athletic directors regarding their 15-passenger van policies. Results indicated that 80% of the responding schools utilized 15-passenger vans to transport athletes, and that one-third of these colleges do not have any driving requirements for coaches, and approximately 40% allow student-athletes to drive. Additionally, less than half of the institutions surveyed set driving time and distance limitations for their coaches (NCAA, 2002). Lastly, only one in five of the respondents limited the number of passengers to fewer than 15 (NCAA, 2002). If administrators do not take the lead in addressing these problems, collegiate coaches in these non-revenue sports must raise transportation safety issues with their athletic administrators and seek alternative and safer forms of transportation for their athletes.

After the Oklahoma State University incident in 2001, the school’s athletic department formed a task force to provide a framework for safe and efficient athletic team travel for the OSU Department of Intercollegiate Athletics. The NTSB also developed a number of recommendations for the safe transportation of student-athletes. In addition, the American Council on Education, the NCAA, and United Educators Insurance partnered and worked for many years to develop risk-avoidance policies that resulted in a 64-page manual Safety in Student Transportation: A Resource Guide for Colleges and Universities, which was released in 2006 (Franke, 2006). Prior to 2000, the NCAA did not have any policies regulating athletic team travel, but instead, individual institutions were responsible for regulating travel (Hawes, 2000).

Due to the increased number of incidents involving the transportation of student-athletes, the purpose of this study was to gain knowledge of Division I, II, and III university travel policies and procedures in selected non-revenue producing sports.
Methods

To acquire knowledge of NCAA university travel policies and procedures, an exploratory survey was constructed for this research project. The survey was validated on subjective measures of how suitable the items were when reviewed by four athletic directors and three coaches at various NCAA institutions. A set of preliminary questions was evaluated on the basis of question clarity and wording, appropriateness, and applicability. Modifications were suggested and the final instrument was limited to 30 questions. The survey was constructed with three focus areas: (1) transporter and transportation mode, (2) mental and physical state of the driver, and (3) current travel policies and procedures of NCAA universities. Section three of the survey was also utilized to ascertain each athletic department’s implementation of the NTSB recommendations when 12- and 15-passenger vans are used for any athletic transportation.

Study participants included head and assistant coaches who were randomly selected from the 2003-2004 men’s and women’s National Directory of College Athletics. The study was limited to coaches of five typically non-revenue-producing collegiate sports (cross country, golf, gymnastics, tennis, and volleyball) because such teams are smaller and would normally not travel to competitions on charter flights or buses. Researchers used a random number generator that was then correlated to schools within the National Directory of College Athletics. Email requests for participation in the survey were then sent to 120 randomly selected college coaches. Three weeks after the initial email, a follow-up email with the survey link was again sent to participants. Seventeen emails were undeliverable, thus a total of 103 surveys reached the appropriate coaches. The resulting return rate was 43%. The majority of respondents (43%) were from the Division I level, followed by Division II (32%) and Division III (25%). Seventy-five percent of the participants were male head coaches between the ages of 20-40 years old. Of the five targeted sports, 25% percent coached volleyball and cross country, followed by golf (18.2%), tennis (18.2%) and gymnastics (11.4%).

Results

The results of this study should be deemed as preliminary in nature, given the marginally acceptable subject response rate of 43% and the unevenness of response rates between Division I, II, and III institutions. Results will be discussed in conjunction to the three focus areas identified by the survey design: (1) transporter and transportation mode, (2) mental and physical state of the driver, and (3) current travel policies and procedures. Data were analyzed using frequencies and cross tabulations. In regards to the first area of focus, many schools relied heavily on both the head and assistant coaches to transport athletes. Head coaches (81%) at all three NCAA divisions had the highest frequency of driving student-athletes to and from competitions followed by assistant coaches (63%). For the coaches that did transport athletes, 75% listed their driving qualifications as having only a state driver’s license. Division III athletic
programs had the greatest variation; subjects responded that head coaches, assistant coaches, and student-athletes transport teams and themselves to and from competitions. Refer to Figure 1 for results.

Figure 1: Transporter by NCAA Division

The typical vehicles utilized to transport athletes in non-revenue-producing sports were either school-owned or contracted 15-passenger vans (75%). Subjects also responded that other forms (43.2%) of transportation not listed were utilized. Results are presented in Table 1.
Table 1: Mode of Transportation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contracted Van (12)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracted Van (15)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Van (12)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Van (15)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Minibus</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Charter Bus</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Provide Own</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>43.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Respondents checked all that applied.

In determining the drivers’ readiness for travel, results indicate that prior to competitions, 79% of the subjects reported that they strongly agreed or agreed that they were preoccupied. In spite of this, 52% disagreed that they were distracted prior to competitions while only 20% strongly agreed or agreed that they were distracted. Post competition, coaches indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that they were both physically (65.9%) and mentally (68.1%) exhausted. Coaches also responded that they were focused on the results and mistakes (81.8%) of the athletic competition. Only a small percentage of coaches had ever been involved in a traffic accident transporting athletes; however, 43.2% responded that they knew other coaches who had been involved in an accident while traveling for athletic contests.

When questioned about NTSB recommendations for the transportation of athletes, the respondents indicated that the majority of suggestions had not been implemented or that he/she was unsure of the current policy. Only 2.3% stated that drivers must have a Class C(P) driver’s license or medical exam prior to transporting athletes. Out of the eight recommendations made by the NTSB, the one schools were most likely to adopt was requiring the driver to be at least 21 years of age and rested (38.6%). When traveling in 12- or 15-passenger vans, 52.3% had not implemented or were unsure of the policy of passenger limits when carrying equipment. Refer to Table 2 for results.
### Table 2: NTSB Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Implemented</th>
<th></th>
<th>Not Implemented</th>
<th></th>
<th>Unsure of Policy</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drivers have Class C(P) License</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Vehicle Operator’s Course Certification</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver at least 21 years of age and rested</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver has medical exam</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Passenger vans carry no more than 8 passengers and 15 passenger vans have no more than 10 passengers with equipment</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Passenger vans have dual rear wheels</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vans have 155-inch Wheel base</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mini bus is not used to transport more than 20 passengers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

This exploratory study clearly indicates that the transportation of smaller, non-revenue producing intercollegiate sport teams is far from ideal. Having coaches and assistant coaches drive student-athletes to competitions is a common practice. However, coaches’ primary responsibility is guiding the team on the field or court; they are not professional drivers and are not clearly focused on this aspect of intercollegiate management. At the Division III level, the transportation scenario is even worse because student-athletes often transport themselves or other student-athletes to practices or competitions. In fact, a 2005 study found that 50% of four-year colleges still use students in the transportation of student-athletes (La Vetter, 2005).

Furthermore, few colleges have implemented the NTSB guidelines that enhance the safety of 12- and 15-passenger vans – the primary means of transporting student-athletes on the smaller, non-revenue-producing teams. For example, the current study indicates that: (1) none of colleges polled had installed dual rear wheels on their vans; (2) only one in four schools restricted the number of individuals being transported to specified NTSB guidelines; and (3) at least 40% of the schools transport over the recommended maximum of 20 individuals in mini-vans. What makes this data all the more disturbing is that few substantive steps were taken by collegiate athletic administrators despite the rash of accidents involving collegiate athletic teams from 1999 to 2001. Specifically, in the five or six years preceding this study, 10 well-publicized accidents involving collegiate athletes in 15-passenger vans occurred within a 15-month period, resulting in 70 injuries and six fatalities (Garber, 2001).

The use of 12- and 15-passenger vans as the primary mode of transportation for collegiate athletic teams is dictated by budgetary constraints, which have undoubtedly been exacerbated by the current economic environment. Notably, this phenomenon is not limited to four-year colleges; La Vetter (2005) found that, similar to the four-year institutions, 50% of two-year colleges also use student-drivers to transport student-athletes. Community college coaches need to make their athletic directors aware that these vans are one of the most dangerous forms of transporting student-athletes and suggest alternative forms of transportation. Some college administrators have recommended that the use of such vans to transport athletes be discontinued; however, such a policy is unlikely to be implemented. The NCAA has deferred to the colleges to make their own transportation decisions independently. Consequently, economic constraints will most likely continue to outweigh increased travel risks in collegiate sports.

Given the economic realities for smaller, non-revenue-producing collegiate sports teams, and the fact that very few institutions will commit the resources for charter buses driven by professional drivers, perhaps the best course of action for schools to take is to implement comprehensive risk management plans relative to the transportation of athletes. In this type of planning, athletic directors and coaches can seek ways of ameliorating the risks of transporting
teams by creating transportation policies and guidelines. The risk management plan should include recommendations for ground and air travel, vehicle maintenance, documentation, driver sanctions, passenger safety, emergency procedures, mandatory training, and compliance with NTSB guidelines.

In addition, all university vehicles should be properly maintained, and the appropriate documents for each vehicle should be organized and accessible. This should include preventative maintenance and routine care (e.g., tire rotation, tire pressure checks, etc.). Outsourcing vehicle maintenance can be cost-effective and will transfer liability from the university to a third party if using qualified and certified mechanics.

To eliminate driver errors, administrators can impose the following sanctions: confirm the driver has a valid driver’s license, require the driver to be of a certain age, check the driver’s motor vehicle record, require defensive driving training, limit the distance and number of hours for the driver, require drivers of 15-passenger vans to hold a commercial driver’s license, and require all passengers to wear seatbelts. Other creative solutions that can be generated among the coaching staff include: (1) schedule competitions such that more than one sport or both men’s and women’s teams travel together, which might produce enough critical mass to warrant chartering a bus with a professional driver; (2) institute policies that do not allow students to drive one another and that do not allow coaches to drive their own teams – and instead hire drivers with chauffeur’s licenses; and (3) implement as many of the NTSB guidelines as possible (e.g., limiting the number of passengers in the vans). This type of due diligence on a comprehensive level falls short of the goal of having all collegiate teams transported via reputable charter buses with professional drivers, however, it perhaps provides financially realistic added measures of safety, which represent a vast improvement over the status quo.

This study was limited to NCAA member schools. Future studies, involving a much larger sampling of institutions can provide a more comprehensive and clearer indication of the nature of the problems associated with the transportation of NCAA intercollegiate athletes. Further research focused upon this topic may also reveal if positive changes in transportation practices have occurred from the time this preliminary data was collected. Additionally, future studies should investigate the transportation of athletes in other intercollegiate settings such as junior colleges and NAIA member schools. Often, such schools are more financially challenged than NCAA member schools and athlete transportation safety issues are even more prevalent among these institutions. Uncovering these colleges’ practices would provide a more complete picture of the challenges and problems being faced by colleges in the transportation of their athletes.
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