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An Investigation and Analysis of Graduation Delays Among Undergraduate Sports Majors in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of nationwide higher education expansion, which has lowered the threshold for university admission, the issue of delayed graduation has become increasingly severe. As a significant segment of higher education students, physical education majors possess unique identity attributes. Compared to "academic students," "arts and sports students" face more pronounced delayed graduation phenomena. Through case interviews with sports students at a Double First-Class university in Southwest China, this study reveals that factors such as training backgrounds, mindset, and learning motivation, combined with the absence of effective academic supervision mechanisms, peer support, and parental backing in universities, make sports students more prone to becoming "chronic truant" and "academic underachievers." This leads to their gradual marginalization in both interpersonal and academic spheres, ultimately resulting in delayed graduation. The path to redemption for delayed graduation among sports students requires reconstructing their value systems, improving academic guidance frameworks, enhancing psychological resilience, and rebuilding social support functions. These measures may mitigate delayed graduation rates and promote students' holistic physical and mental well-being.

Keywords: athletic students, academic difficulties, delayed graduation, self-redemption

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, China's gross enrollment rate in higher education has doubled from 30% in 2012 to 60.2% in 2023. Concurrently, students exhibit significant disparities in academic proficiency and performance. While universities recognize top students through honors programs and graduation commendations, the lowest-performing students face delayed graduation or, in extreme cases, dismissal. Academic research on delayed graduation in China remains limited. A search of the CNKI database using the keyword "delayed graduation" yields only 105 academic articles, most of which focus on graduate students.

The academic research on delayed graduation in China is limited. A search for the keyword "delayed graduation" in the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) database yields only 105 academic journal articles. Among these 105 articles, the vast majority focus on graduate students, particularly doctoral candidates, with very little research dedicated to undergraduate delayed graduation. [1] Among undergraduates, athletic students constitute a distinct group and form a significant portion of delayed graduates. Academic research on this specific demographic is even scarcer. Therefore, investigating the causes of delayed graduation among athletic undergraduates and implementing targeted prevention, guidance, assistance, and support measures to mitigate this phenomenon holds greater practical significance.

1 Conceptual Definitions

This paper primarily addresses two core concepts: undergraduate sports students and delayed graduation. Our research subjects are undergraduate sports students, who have unique admission and study pathways. These are primarily reflected in the ways sports students gain university admission: Sports-specific admissions (for students holding Level 2 athlete certificates or higher, exempting them from the national college entrance examination); High-level athletes (athletes with outstanding athletic achievements and strong academic

performance, eligible to apply for non-sports majors); and Direct admission for outstanding athletes (exceptionally talented athletes who have achieved success in national or major international competitions, granted direct admission without examinations). This demonstrates that athletic undergraduate admissions prioritize competitive performance, with academic scores requiring only minimum qualification thresholds.

Second, delayed graduation serves as a crucial measure in university academic registration and teaching management, offering students an additional opportunity for choice and "self-redemption." Graduation deferrals can be categorized as voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary deferrals occur when students choose to retain their enrollment status for reasons such as civil service exams, graduate school entrance exams, military service, or other factors. These decisions are typically linked to personal development or career planning. Involuntary deferrals arise from objective circumstances like insufficient credits, illness preventing academic completion, or family emergencies. In such cases, students often have no choice but to accept the deferral passively. [2]

2 Research Design

This study employs qualitative research methods, utilizing purposive sampling to conduct long-term follow-up investigations with students experiencing varying durations of academic extension. Six sports science students who extended their studies were selected for interviews: three extended for half a semester, two for one year, and one for two years. The tracking period ran from September 2023 to March 2025. Corresponding interviews and exchanges were also conducted with their academic advisors, primarily through one-on-one face-to-face interviews supplemented by telephone interviews. Each student and their advisor was allocated a minimum of 120 minutes for discussion.

Table 1: Student Respondent Information

ID	Gender	Age	University Admission Method	Major	Reason for Deferred Graduation	Duration of Deferred Graduation
Student A	Male	22	Recommended admission for outstanding athletes	Sports Training	Insufficient credits to graduate	0.5 academic year
Student B	Male	22	Physical Education Unified Examination	Physical Education	Insufficient credits to graduate	0.5 academic year
Student C	Male	23	Physical Education Unified Examination	Sports Rehabilitation	Insufficient credits to graduate	0.5 academic year
Student D	Female	22	Physical Education Unified Examination	Recreational Sports	Psychological factors, insufficient credits	1st Academic Year
Student E	Male	23	Sports Special Admission	Physical Education	Insufficient credits to graduate	1st Academic Year
Student F	Male	22	Sports Special Admission	Sports Training	Insufficient credits to graduate	1 academic year

Table 2: Respondents (Teachers)

ID	Gender	Status	Years of Service
Teacher A	Female	Counselor	3
Teacher B	Male	Counselor	2
Teacher C	Female	Specialized Coach	10
Teacher D	Female	Counselor	2

3 High Start, Low Finish: A Rollercoaster Life Journey

The article begins by discussing the four pathways for athletic students to enter university, focusing on the two most common and highest-admission methods: the national sports unified examination and the sports-specific independent enrollment. In 2024, approximately 360,000 students registered for the national sports unified examination across China's 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities. Ultimately, around 135,000 were admitted to undergraduate programs, yielding an admission rate of 37.5%. In 2024, 63,725 applicants registered for the national sports-specific admissions program, with 19,672 ultimately admitted. The undergraduate admission rate stood at 30.87%, with rates for Double First-Class universities, 211 Project universities, and 985 Project universities being 5.4%, 4.1%, and 1.1%, respectively. [3] Thus, for an athlete to gain admission to a Double First-Class university represents a remarkable breakthrough. What appears to be a promising start to life has only just begun. For athletes who graduate late, their university experience resembles a rollercoaster ride—climbing from the lowest point to the highest peak, only to plummet abruptly into the darkest depths. The suffocating pressure this creates leaves students gasping for breath. This article explores the reasons behind delayed graduation among athletes from four perspectives: mindset, academics, mental health, and family dynamics.

3.1 Fixed Mindset: Prioritizing Training Over Academics

Due to their unique identity, athletic students—regardless of how they gained university admission—rely primarily on physical fitness and athletic skills. Once they choose the athletic path, training becomes the dominant theme of their daily lives. Only through grueling training can they achieve competitive results that serve as the key to university admission. Take the students interviewed in Table 1 as an example: "Our daily lives are very structured. We start training right after waking up—three hours in the morning, three hours in the afternoon, and sometimes extra sessions in the evening. When preparing for upcoming competitions, training sessions can extend to 8-10 hours daily. As professional athletes, our lives revolve around training and competitions. Academic studies are limited to subjects directly related to our sport, leaving little room for other areas. This routine has been my reality since I was 10 years old." (Student A, 22, Sports Training) The vast majority of professional athletes are selected for training at sports academies during childhood. While these academies offer some academic courses, they focus on foundational, general knowledge that falls far short of the level required for academic students. "Choosing the sports college entrance exam path disrupted my original study routine. Since I only started athletic training in my first year of high school, my foundation is weaker than others'. Now I need to dedicate 2-3 hours daily to training. If my sports score doesn't meet the cutoff, no matter how high my academic scores are, I won't get into university." (Student B, 22, Physical Education)

Research findings indicate that for students entering university through the unified sports entrance examination, the cultural requirements in most regions can be met with a Gaokao score of just 350 points (out of a total of 750 points), representing only 70% of the local undergraduate admission threshold. For the sports-specific recruitment track, the cultural examination covers only four subjects—Chinese, Mathematics, English, and Politics—significantly fewer than the six subjects required for the general Gaokao. Athletes recommended for admission are exempt from cultural examinations altogether. This indicates that sports undergraduates enter university with weaker academic foundations than other students. However, once enrolled in undergraduate programs, their public courses are identical to those of academically admitted students. English, ideological and political theory courses, and computer science are all mandatory public courses. However, in specialized courses, they require both liberal arts and science knowledge. Science-oriented courses like

Sports Anatomy, Sports Physiology, and Sports Psychology are major failure zones for sports students. For example, at a certain sports university, Sports Anatomy—a foundational course required upon enrollment—has a failure rate of 26% and a retake rate of 10%. In athletic training programs, alongside public required courses and specialized theory courses, practical training courses constitute over half of the curriculum. For disciplines like basketball, soccer, volleyball, track and field, swimming, and gymnastics, these practical sessions are mandatory. Additionally, elective practical courses cover sports such as table tennis, tennis, and badminton. This demands that every student excels in both theoretical knowledge and specialized skills, achieving mastery in both academic and athletic domains. However, most athletic students believe that honing skills and physical fitness is all that matters, dismissing the importance of academic theory. "We have several hands-on courses each week, and the training intensity is quite high. For some sports we never encountered in high school, learning them is really tough. Not only do we have to pay close attention in class and train hard, but we also need to find time on our own to reinforce and improve our skills. For courses like gymnastics and swimming, we have to spend double the time studying independently just to barely meet the teachers' requirements. For those courses that are intellectually demanding, I'd rather sweat on the training field than sit in a classroom staring at 'obscure' texts" (Student E, 23, Sports Training). This entrenched mindset leads most athletic students to prioritize physical training over theoretical learning. Over time, this imbalance results in high failure rates, delayed graduation, and frequent academic probation.

3.2 Academic Momentum: From Self-Indulgence to Falling Behind

The phrase "college will be easier" often repeated by high school teachers becomes an indelible imprint on every student's mind. During high school, athletic students endure a more grueling life than their peers, balancing intense training with academic demands—a dual physical and mental challenge—all for the goal of university admission. Thus, "college will be easier" is treated as gospel by countless athletic students. Thus, "ease, enjoyment, and freedom from constraints" became their initial perception of university. After successfully entering college, nearly every freshman experiences a transition period—a role adaptation phase—shifting from high school's daily academic pressure and rigorous training to self-management. Everything is free and open. Vast amounts of free time are yours to control and arrange, and even attending classes isn't as strictly enforced as before. "After entering university, I felt a bit unsettled at first. I no longer had to wake up at 6 a.m. for early training, and I had more free time. Hobbies forbidden in high school could now be pursued openly

without question. At first, I still managed to attend 8 a.m. classes regularly. But as I realized there was little cost to sleeping in or skipping class, I grew increasingly fond of that carefree, 'unfettered' lifestyle. Naturally, this led to a loss of interest in studies, and I coasted through training whenever possible. Anyway, I'm not chasing scholarships or personal honors. I just want to graduate when I can, take things one step at a time. The top students don't seem much better off than me." (Student C, 23, Sports Rehabilitation) Once you develop habits of self-indulgence and laziness, it becomes nearly impossible to redeem yourself and transform later on. From having little ambition for academics or honors, students gradually become indifferent to failing courses, retaking exams, and academic warnings—slowly setting themselves on the path to delayed graduation. [4]

3.3 Mentality Deviation: "I'm Just Average Now"

A prevailing trend in contemporary society promotes a "Buddhist-style" or "lying flat" mentality, suggesting people avoid excessive "competition," adopt a level-headed attitude, and refrain from imposing undue pressure on themselves. However, within the university setting, this trend gradually morphs into a complete absence of competitive spirit, drive, and ambition. Students confront life with a decadent, passive attitude, succumbing to self-destructive resignation and deliberate decline, a mindset that influences many peers. Every athlete admitted to the surveyed universities was a top performer in their high school, some even ranking first in local athletic exams. Yet upon reaching this higher platform, some students experience a shift in mindset. They realize that their former excellence now places them only at an average level, creating a psychological gap. Had they embraced reality and leveraged their new platform for rigorous training, they could have achieved greater heights. Instead, their mindset shifted—they refused to accept their new reality, self-sabotaged, and marginalized themselves. Guilt, regret, frustration, and confusion now surround them daily, as inner turmoil and resistance clash with an unchangeable reality. [5] "With my high school achievements—ranking among the top three locally—I entered university brimming with confidence. After a year or two, I realized that while I once placed in the top three at provincial youth competitions, I now struggle to secure a decent spot even in the professional division of our school's athletic meets. My academic performance plummeted too. As an athletic student, I couldn't even compete with others in sports, let alone academics. Defeats in

competitions eroded my confidence in studies. Surrounded by more accomplished peers, I gradually stopped training and studying." (Student F, 22, Sports Training) Rigid thinking, academic marginalization, and psychological marginalization intertwine, becoming key factors triggering delayed graduation.

3.4 Family Disappointment: From Parental Support to Unbearable Pressure

From the moment they gain university admission, sports students become their families' pride. During their academic studies, their poor grades led parents to believe a bachelor's degree was out of reach. Yet pursuing sports offered these academically struggling students a second chance. "When my college entrance exam results came out, my parents were overjoyed. Though my academic score was only around 400 points, combined with my prior athletic test scores, I had a strong chance of getting into a good university. They even threw me a celebration banquet and shared the news far and wide. At that moment, I felt the whole family was proud of me. Since learning I'd be delaying graduation, I couldn't bring myself to tell my parents. I feared they couldn't accept this reality—from their initial pride to my current predicament. I feel deeply guilty, but it's too late now." (Student D, 22, Leisure Sports) Parents of students facing graduation delays are usually forewarned of the potential risks. According to university regulations, departments issue academic warnings to students with excessive failed courses and notify parents, keeping them informed of their child's academic standing. Upon hearing this news, parents typically react with shock, disbelief, and deep contemplation. "Whenever we inform parents during graduation season that their child will be delayed, they usually struggle to accept this reality. They immediately ask us what to do and if there's any way to remedy the situation. You can sense their anger, helplessness, and anxiety in these conversations. We generally advise parents not to blame their children, but they can only silently accept and process this fact after the conversation ends." (Teacher A, Counselor) Graduation deferral delivers another heavy blow to parents' emotions, shifting them from hope to despair.

4 Path to Redemption: Preventive Strategies for Academic Delay

Based on the unique characteristics of sports students and practical circumstances, four preventive measures have been identified from the mechanisms underlying delayed graduation. These focus on: reconstructing perceptions, improving academic guidance, early warning, and evaluation systems; enhancing psychological resilience; and fostering home-school collaboration.

4.1 Paradigm Shift: Strive Academically for One's Own Sake

The realm of meaning constitutes an essential dimension of human existence, expressing aspirations for life experiences and ideal living while providing the rationale and foundation for practical actions. [6] Students facing delayed graduation must rediscover themselves after completing their studies, confront reality, accept the farewells as peers depart for careers, and embrace the solitude of remaining behind. Regarding delayed graduation, two paths exist: striving to complete coursework and graduate successfully, or regrettably withdrawing if dual credentials cannot be obtained within the maximum study period. Weighing the pros and cons, successful graduation remains the most cost-effective option for 90% of delayed graduates. Most can complete their credits within the extended timeframe, trading their completion certificate for a degree and academic credentials. "After learning my graduation was postponed, I discussed it with my family. I was ready to accept it, but everyone urged me to give it one more shot—to fully let go of the past and start anew." (Student B, Physical Education Unified Examination) Extended enrollment offers students who had given up on themselves another chance at redemption. Yet this opportunity brings immense pressure. Students must genuinely re-examine themselves, confront current pressures and realities, bid farewell to their past selves, and subjectively recognize the meaning and value of restarting their studies—learning and living for themselves. For deferred students, this mindset shift is paramount. In every conversation with graduating students, we first focus on their perspective—helping them understand the consequences of deferral and the benefits of graduating on time. They must confront their past, learn to let go of the past, and embrace the present. Yet this transformation can happen in an instant for some, while others require considerable time. When students recognize the implications of deferral and are willing to restart, the wounds of deferral begin to heal. (Interviewed Faculty Member B, Counselor) From another perspective, delayed graduation does not signify failure in higher education. Rather, it represents a positive outcome of interaction between the educational institution and the individual. Delayed graduation offers students an additional opportunity for "self-renewal and self-redemption," granting them time and space to re-examine themselves and reconsider their path.

4.2 Refining Academic Guidance and Early Warning Systems

Unlike the high school academic model, China's universities primarily operate on a credit system. This requires students to complete the minimum total credits for graduation

within the prescribed academic years. Students rely on a combination of self-direction and guidance to select and pursue courses, granting them a degree of autonomy and diversity in knowledge acquisition. Ultimately, delayed graduation stems from insufficient credits, necessitating improvements and supplements to academic guidance. Typically, upon entering university, students receive a program curriculum plan—akin to an instruction manual—outlining required courses and credit requirements. Some institutions also offer introductory courses where renowned professors provide an overview of the discipline, giving students a basic understanding of university studies. The reality, however, is that students often struggle to fully comprehend their program requirements. The plans are frequently perceived as unclear, overly complex, or difficult to interpret, leaving many unaware of their credit obligations. "After enrollment, faculty explained the program plan, repeatedly stressing its importance. I only grasped that courses were categorized into several types and noted the total credit requirement. The rest felt vague and confusing—I never understood what actions I could take," one student shared. After that, I basically ignored the curriculum plan until my senior year graduation review, when I discovered I was short on elective credits. Electives are further divided into categories like general education electives and major-specific electives. I had assumed I could graduate, but unexpectedly, this became the issue, forcing me to extend my graduation by half a year. (Student A, age 22, admitted as an outstanding athlete) Therefore, enhancing students' interpretation and comprehension of relevant policy documents—ensuring they fully grasp the policies and details, particularly the specifics of the training program—will further alleviate graduation delays caused by information gaps.

Academic warnings are issued when students accumulate excessive failed courses within a specific period. The college will formally notify students of their academic crisis through written warnings, documenting the failed credits and subjects. These warnings serve as a wake-up call. If academic issues persist, students face the risk of demotion or even dismissal. The academic warning system functions like a beacon, providing early alerts to students at risk of academic failure to prevent accumulation of issues that could prevent graduation. In this era of artificial intelligence, we must fully leverage digital and intelligent technologies to implement academic warnings for students. Simultaneously, we must refine the academic warning mechanism and streamline communication channels between home and school. Although college students are adults, they still require parental supervision and reminders in certain areas. When issuing academic warnings, university regulations stipulate that only the student needs to be informed and sign the warning notice upon reaching

adulthood. However, in reality, students facing academic crises often lack self-discipline, exhibit strong inertia, and have low motivation to study. For such students, the warning notice only serves as a short-term reminder or deterrent. Over time, they tend to disregard it. Therefore, in our daily work, we notify each student's parents individually about academic warnings. This keeps parents informed about their child's performance at school and prevents students from exploiting loopholes between home and school. Based on current observations, direct parental intervention in academic matters yields far greater results than school teachers alone. (Teacher D, Counselor)

4.3 Enhancing Self-Efficacy and Cultivating Resilience

Though college students have reached adulthood, their mental maturity often lags behind. They require psychological resilience training and cognitive rehabilitation. University demands self-management, self-awareness, and self-improvement. Beyond imparting knowledge, skills, and character, this stage critically cultivates psychological functions—particularly stress tolerance and adversity resilience. For these athletic students who overcame immense obstacles to enter university through the college entrance exam, they must learn to accept defeat on the field as well as academic setbacks. Among athletes, a single loss, injury, or moment of mental retreat can lead them to abandon their athletic path: "Coach, I'll stick with academics. I just can't handle the grind of sports." This is a common refrain among athletic students, whose psychological vulnerability far exceeds that of their peers due to repeated setbacks and blows. Therefore, we organize various psychological activities to enhance students' mental resilience, alleviate stress and tension from academics and training, and cultivate psychological fortitude to match their physical strength. Moreover, due to generally insufficient cultural education, athletes' psychological maturity often lags behind that of their peers. Despite their muscular physiques, most remain "big kids" at heart, exhibiting somewhat immature behaviors and thought patterns. We guide them through value-based leadership and career planning, instilling mainstream values and societal norms. We uphold a long-term perspective, emphasizing "beginning with the end in mind." When adversity seems insurmountable, we empower them to harness their subjective efficacy, forge character, and reshape themselves. [7] "After learning I'd be delayed graduation, I spent a long time mentally preparing. Though I knew it was coming, when it was officially announced at graduation, it felt like the sky had fallen. This was the biggest setback I've faced so far in my life. Over the summer break, I consulted a psychologist and talked to many

friends. My parents didn't blame me but fully supported me in continuing my studies, which made me feel much better. I decided to pick myself up again." (Student F, 22, Sports Special Admission)

4.4. Multi-Party Collaboration to Support Students

The occurrence of delayed graduation hinges primarily on the students themselves, yet it is also intrinsically linked to the era's backdrop, social environment, and family support. The complex social landscape and the fast pace of the internet age expose college students to varying degrees of influence and stimulation. We need a positive social ethos and guidance. The state should provide diverse employment opportunities, moving beyond the narrow focus on civil service positions, prestigious universities, and elite credentials. There should be greater understanding and tolerance for so-called "academic setbacks." In reality, delayed graduation is quite common in China's higher education system. According to relevant statistics, the delayed graduation rate for doctoral students reaches 60%, while for master's students it stands at 20%. While the undergraduate rate fluctuates around 5%. For certain disciplines with demanding curricula, this figure can reach 10%. We must shift society's stereotypical views on delayed graduation. Our society requires both elite individuals and ordinary people. Increasingly, public discourse emphasizes that "without proper education, you cannot secure a good job or achieve a comfortable life." While this statement holds truth, the definitions of "good job" and "comfortable life" vary significantly from person to person and lack universal consensus. For sports students, becoming a physical education teacher is certainly a viable path. Yet China's rapidly expanding sports industry has created numerous new opportunities and roles. Recent trends like live sports broadcasting, sports culture industries, and phenomena like "Village BA" and "Super League" have opened up job prospects for sports graduates—offering delayed graduates an alternative route.

Moreover, family influence is crucial, especially when students face pivotal life decisions or setbacks. Parents play a vital role in such moments. Students who have extended their graduation are often less emotionally mature and may not have experienced significant failure. When confronted with the reality of delayed graduation, they can easily become discouraged, resort to self-sabotage, abandon their studies, and take a different path. Conversely, if families provide sufficient support and reassurance, using this opportunity to teach their children how to properly confront setbacks and turn adversity into opportunity—delivering a valuable lesson in personal growth—the impact on the child's future will be

profound. [8] The reality is that when schools notify students and parents of academic probation, the student often remains unperturbed, having anticipated this outcome. Parents, however, typically react with shock, anger, and helplessness. Unable to believe their pride and joy has become an academic failure, they berate and blame the child, leaving the already-struggling student without forgiveness. "During university, parents dread receiving calls from the school. Unlike high school, professors rarely contact parents without cause—such calls usually signal trouble. When we inform parents their child will be delayed, most struggle to accept reality. They blame their child for immaturity and plead for solutions from teachers." (Interviewed Teacher D, Counselor)

When home-school communication is open, teachers inform parents about the delay, its causes, impacts, and solutions, gaining their understanding and support. Once parents accept the reality of the delay, it greatly aids the student's academic progress. The student shifts from "fighting alone" academically to working collaboratively with multiple parties toward a shared goal.

5 Conclusion

The occurrence of academic delays is directly linked to societal, institutional, personal, and familial factors, but fundamentally stems from the student themselves. Weak psychological resilience, insufficient motivation, and poor self-management skills make students prone to academic delays during their undergraduate years. Each student represents a family's hope, particularly for athletic students who gain university admission through a distinct pathway to secure broader future opportunities. Delayed graduation serves as a relatively low-cost lesson for such students. Though it places them in a passive position, they can still recover through personal effort. Failure to do so risks plunging into another "abyss": withdrawal, signifying complete academic failure. By examining the mechanisms behind delayed graduation among undergraduate athletes and reflecting on these findings, this paper aims to offer insights and benefits to student-athletes, serving as a cautionary reminder to contribute their own efforts toward building China into a sporting powerhouse.

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