

Fighting the 'dumb jock' stereotype

April 22 2013, by Andy Mcglashen , Deborah Feltz

College coaches who emphasize their players' academic abilities may be the best defense against the effects of "dumb jock" stereotypes, a Michigan State University study suggests.

Researchers found that student-athletes were significantly more likely to be confident in the classroom if they believed their coaches expected high [academic performance](#), not just good enough grades to be eligible for sports.

"Coaches spend a lot of time with their players, and they can play such an important role to build academic confidence in student-athletes," said lead author Deborah Feltz, University Distinguished Professor of [kinesiology](#) at MSU.

Published in the *Journal of College Student Development*, the study focused on the concept of "[stereotype threat](#)." The theory holds that [stereotypes](#) are self-fulfilling prophecies: They create anxiety in the stereotyped group, causing them to behave in the expected way.

Feltz and her graduate students wanted to see what factors influence student-athletes' [susceptibility](#) to the "dumb jock" stereotype.

"It's well-documented in the literature that many student-athletes hear prejudicial remarks from [professors](#) who say things like, 'This test is easy enough that even an athlete could pass it,'" Feltz said. "They're kind of the last group of students who can be openly discriminated against."

The researchers surveyed more than 300 student-athletes representing men's and women's teams from small and large universities and a range of sports, from basketball and football to cross-country and rowing.

They found the more strongly student-athletes identified themselves as athletes, the less confident they were with their [academic skills](#), and the more keenly they felt that others expected them to do poorly in school. Players in high-profile sports were more likely to feel they were weak students.

Feltz said the data suggest that coaches who put a premium on education may be in the best position to boost their players' confidence in the classroom, but professors, academic advisers and classmates also have a part to play.

"They don't have to do much," she said. "It may be enough to just remind players they are college students, which is a big deal, you know? A lot of these students are the first in their family to go to college."

Provided by Michigan State University

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