

5-10-2019

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Recommended Citation

Rockwell, Gabrielle (2019) "Educating Latin American Baseball Players:How MLB Should Protect Their Players for After Their Careers," *Pepperdine Policy Review*: Vol. 11, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/ppr/vol11/iss1/5>

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Educating Latin American Baseball Players:

How MLB Should Protect Their Players for After Their Careers

By: Gabrielle Rockwell

Abstract

Latin American players represent approximately one third of Major League Baseball's (MLB) signed players. These players often do not possess a basic high school diploma before they are signed to a contract. While the MLB capitalizes on Latino players during their careers, the organization fails to show concern for their players' post-baseball success and opportunities. By mandating contribution to a scholarship for all signed players on all 30 teams, the MLB and individual baseball teams would help encourage educational attainment as well as baseball talent development in their players. This paper will demonstrate the need for Latin American baseball players to earn the equivalent of a high school diploma and options that MLB has for correcting this disparity. The MLB Players Association's "Baseball Tomorrow Funds" are already designed to help finance the Northeastern College partnership. Thus, the MLB should consider expanding this to include partnering with a high school-level online education platform to help Latin American baseball players improve their post-baseball opportunities.

Keywords

Major League Baseball (MLB), Latin America, education, baseball, scholarship, secondary education

Introduction

Baseball has long been considered “America’s past time.” Over the last few decades, baseball has enjoyed increased international popularity. International signings for new players have expanded tremendously since the introduction of the sport in the region in the 1880s (Storms, 2018). In 2010, 29.8% of Major League Baseball (MLB) players were born outside of the United States (Winfree, 2010). Of the 259 international players on the 2017 Opening Day rosters for all 30 teams in the MLB, 84 players were born in the Dominican Republic, 74 in Venezuela, 17 in Cuba, 11 in Mexico, 5 in Colombia, and 3 each in Brazil, Panama, and Nicaragua. Approximately 50% of all MLB players in 2017 were Latin American (Anderson, 2018). The teams earn an estimated \$500,000 more in annual ticket revenue for every additional foreign-born player signed to their rosters (Winfree, 2010). The individual teams and the MLB capitalize on their new international players, but they are not as concerned with what happens to players once their baseball career has finished.

Latin American players are significantly behind other international players when it comes to educational attainment. Considering that nearly 75% of all MLB international players come from Latin America, the MLB and its teams should actively be working to increase educational opportunities for those players. At the moment, the MLB is not supporting Latin American players in gaining high school education for their post-baseball careers. After nearly 10 years in the minor league system, and an average of 5 years in the majors, players return to their home country without having gained much more than money and travel miles (Issacs, 2017; Witnauer et al., 2007). The MLB should require or provide more high school education opportunities for all players - regardless of their birth country - to support them in successful post-baseball careers rather than use them simply to boost ticket revenue or get a good batter for the season.

Educational Issues for Latin American Players

Educational institutions in Latin America are divided into three main sections: primary education, lower secondary education, and upper secondary education. Primary education is similar to elementary school in the United States and usually covers students between the ages of 6 and 10 years, with slight variation between countries on the exact age of attending students. Lower secondary education, similar to American middle school, covers students between 11 and 13 (D'Alessandre & Mattioli, 2015). Upper secondary, equivalent to high school, aims to educate students ages 14 to 18 (López et al., 2017). Latin American countries began mandating minimum formal education requirements during the 1990s. In 1997, all Latin American countries required at least primary school education and lower secondary education, with the exception of Nicaragua, who only mandates primary school education (D'Alessandre & Mattioli, 2015).

Latin American players who show exceptional talent often drop out of school between the ages of 13 and 16 - during their lower secondary years (Elk & Moreno, 2018). These individuals typically have been in contact with MLB scouts who claim that they have a real shot at playing in the major leagues. Latin American players are a large part of the free agency plan, so there is not a requirement to graduate. If they sign as free agents, these players often abandon school all together to go work and develop in the minor league system (Elk & Moreno, 2018). The interruption of education because of baseball means that the primary, and possibly lower secondary, education is the most schooling that many of these players will complete.

In MLB, there is a rule mandating that anyone born in the United States, Canada, or Puerto Rico must have the equivalent of a high school diploma before being drafted (Remington, 2014). Players can be drafted or signed as free agents. As of 2012, the MLB draft consists of 40 rounds where the team with the worst record signs players first until the World Series winner signs last in that round (MLB,

2018). Only 1,200 players can be drafted every year: 1 player per round for each of the 30 teams over 40 rounds. However, teams sign more than 40 players per year because of free agency. Free agency is the process where scouts select and sign players outside of the month-long draft period. Players signed in free agency do not count towards their 40-player limit of draft signings (MLB, 2018). Players of any country are eligible for free agency contracts, but Latin American players make up the majority of these signings. Under free agency, the only restriction is that the signed player must be at least 16 years of age - no stipulations of educational requirements presently exist, unless signees are U.S., Canadian, or Puerto Rican born (MLB, 2018).

Often times, Latin American players will lie about their age to scouts and agents because they are trying to escape their poverty-stricken countries and provide for their families. Buscones are illegal talent agents that advocate for players to the MLB staff in exchange for a cut of the signing bonus that players get because of them (Gordon, 2013). Upon signing, there is an identity verification period. Once approved, the players are either invited to Arizona or Florida for Spring Training with the minor league farm teams of the major league team that they signed with, or they are sent to the team's baseball training facility in the Dominican Republic (Bates, 2016). Latin American baseball players made up 77% of the international players on the MLB rosters in 2017 on Opening Day. Those international players comprise around one third of all MLB players, and they are not as educationally insured for post-baseball careers as the American-born players are because of the pre-existing educational policies impacting the region.

Once their baseball careers are over, these Latin American players' statuses as P-1 Visa holders, rather than green card holders, require them to return to their home country if they fail to obtain citizenship during their career (Anderson, 2018). A P-1 visa does not grant citizenship, just temporary residency. Upon showing success in the team's system, the MLB Player's Association (MLBPA) will work

with an international player's team to get a green card under the EB-1 (extraordinary ability) or EB-2 (exceptional ability) process only once they make it to the major leagues (Anderson, 2018). Only 2.5% of the Latin American players signed make it to the major leagues, meaning the other 97.5% return to their home countries after playing minor league (Gordon, 2013). Of the 97.5%, most are below the age of 28 years old (Issacs, 2012). If the players do not make the majors or retire early, they do not get a chance to work towards a green card. Post-baseball, international players are required to return back to their home country having earned some money playing baseball, but they are still young and will need to work at home to provide for themselves and their families. Latin American players are most at risk because they are regularly signed under free agency and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent degree. For this reason, the MLB must change the educational requirement of all signed players - regardless of whether they are drafted or free agency - to show proof of a high school diploma equivalent before being signed. This paper will explore options and provide a recommendation that raises educational standards for the MLB in a financially practical and efficient manner.

Criteria for Correction

As outlined, free agency signings do not require or emphasize educational attainment and high school graduation. Most Latin American players in the MLB system are signed as free agents, and a majority do not have even a middle school education. Dropping out of school to focus on a future in baseball is a common theme among Latin American baseball players. This trend necessitates a new league-wide emphasis on education for all players - particularly those of the Latin American region. This change would require that by the end of their major league baseball career, all players on the team would earn at least the equivalent to a high school diploma. If this change were enacted, players would be provided with opportunities to further their education or more easily find a new career after baseball.

Educational opportunities, should they be provided through the MLB, must emphasize English language skills and financial literacy (topics regularly highlighted in secondary school courses internationally) for all players. There are countless news articles documenting situations where newly signed players came to the United States for training in the minor league system and were unable to order food at a fast food restaurant due to their lack of English skills (Kitsu Lihosit, 2016). Players struggle to learn English on the move while trying to foster team camaraderie during their time in the minor leagues. To truly integrate foreign players into the country and their new teams, English language skills are a critical first step. These language skills come from completing a secondary degree. Therefore, these skills should be acquired before signing to play professional baseball or mid-career. Many Latin American players come from poverty-stricken areas and do not have much money to their names. Once players come into wealth, they often do not understand how the banking system works, the importance of saving money and investing, or how to responsibly use the money that they have in the moment. Financial literacy would help to correct these problems.

Secondary to English and financial literacy, however, should be mathematics and trade skills to prepare players for success once their baseball careers have come to an end. Focusing on these areas should not be mandatory aside from taking courses necessary for their high school diploma equivalent - foreign language (English in this case) and math - but they should be available options for players to further their own education in a preferred subject area.

Options for the MLB to Change Educational Attainment

The MLB has a number of options for implementing a successful educational program for their players. They can simply mandate a minimum of high school graduation before allowing players to be signed to any team, regardless of signing method. This sweeping decision would prevent loopholes and encourage education for all players, regardless of birth country. All 30 teams, and any future expansion

teams, would need to adhere to this mandate. All incoming baseball players would be required to graduate, regardless of their birth country and country of residence. However, this would have the unintended consequence of deterring coaches from scouting in the Latin American region. The region's low secondary school graduation and retention rates and unstable or poor governments would vastly reduce the pool of local players that could be signed. Potential MLB stars coming from Latin America may not be able to attend secondary school because of pre-existing infrastructure.

On the other hand, MLB players returning to their countries are looked at as heroes by their town and are in a high-profile position to emphasize the importance of education in order to develop human capital and create a better life for themselves. Latin American players could completely change the emphasis of completing secondary education for the country, helping to reverse the traditionally negative outputs of the region. This policy option would protect future players for their post-baseball careers by mandating secondary education and inspiring future generations to value it as well. Notably, a scouting deterrence could rise from the current circumstances and educational infrastructure in Latin American.

An in-house education program for players who do not have at least a high school diploma or want to further their education is another option for the MLB. At the moment, there are already six teams in MLB who offer such educational attainment programs: the New York Mets, the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Detroit Tigers, the Philadelphia Phillies, the Arizona Diamondbacks, and the Seattle Mariners in their Dominican Republic training facilities (Bates, 2016). In Boca Chica, Dominican Republic, the New York Mets spent \$8 million in 2008 to build an educational facility: New York Mets Baseball Academy in the Dominican Republic (Pabón, 2008). The Baseball Academy is an "open concept, relaxed space" where signed Dominican players can get proper nutritious meals, learn English through Rosetta Stone on computers, and attend lecture styled classes with TSOL students from University of Central Florida to

help them earn the equivalent of a high school diploma (Honors UCF, 2008). This was the first educational facility of its kind for Latin American players and inspired the other five teams to follow suit. One down side to this facility is the financial burden of initial construction costs, upkeep, and funding for teachers and supplies. Every MLB team has a baseball development facility in or near Boca Chica, Dominican Republic: the baseball capital of the country (Gordon, 2013). However, only the six aforementioned teams use those facilities to also provide educational classes for their players. Recommending educational facilities in pre-existing baseball training facilities is a viable option, but it would come at high implementation and maintenance costs, making it potentially unattainable for smaller teams, like the Los Angeles Angels or San Diego Padres, who do not have a large revenue budget compared to other MLB teams.

An alternative option to these team-funded educational facilities would be partnering with an online, high school degree program to educate all foreign-born players who have not earned their secondary school degrees. In the United States, there are pre-existing programs that provide this service for homeschooled students. By partnering with a program that best meets the language needs of foreign players, the MLB would not only be educating their players in English, financial literacy, and other valuable skills, but it would also have a potential global marketing partner. The MLB is a powerful company that has global influence. It has the potential to change the way that secondary education is talked about, obtained, and valued internationally through partnering with and using online high school degree platform for their players. As of June 2017, MLB partnered with Northeastern College to provide online college courses for interested players, which is a massive human capital and marketing opportunity for the company (Jaschik, 2017).

The MLB's and MLBPA's Northeastern College partnership outlines one-on-one instruction, remote meetings and access, and online courses that could be emulated at a high school level for

international players. Educating players during their MLB orientation upon signing would include explaining the importance, value, and flexibility of the online secondary school degree program in the player's native language. The funds for the courses, translators, and laptop computers for the players who elect to take the courses would come from the MLB and MLB Players Association's "Baseball Tomorrow Funds," which already help to afford the Northeastern College partnership (MLB, 2018). This would be an expansion of an existing infrastructure to cover those who may not otherwise have had access to secondary school education.

Recommendation for the MLB

MLB has three competitive options to help their players - particularly for free agent Latin American players - become educated to similar standards that the U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico born players are held to. All options would help decrease the educational gap between players across all 30 teams. A sweeping declaration of mandatory high school diplomas would be the quickest and most economic option for the MLB to implement, but the potential deterrence from Latin American signings is an unintended consequence that may prove even more detrimental than the current lack of educational attainment in the region's players. Following in the New York Mets' footsteps by adding an educational component to a pre-existing Dominican Republic baseball training facility would be a feasible option as all 30 teams have training facilities there. However, this option has high immediate and maintenance costs. The third option of partnering with an online accredited high school degree program would offer flexible options for *all* players while expanding on an existing infrastructure that covers online college credits. This third option is the recommended policy for the MLB and its Latin American players.

Conclusion

Latin American baseball players are disproportionately undereducated compared to their American, Canadian, and Puerto Rican teammates. The MLB must act to correct this lapse in player advocacy and protect future players, regardless of whether they are drafted or signed under free agency. Education will allow these players to get a safe, legal, and paying job after their baseball careers. Most baseball players, regardless of country of origin, return home to coach the next generation of players, but there are only so many coaching jobs (Storms, 2008). With only 2.5% of Latin American players making the major leagues, as stated earlier, the rest of the players get only minor league experience. Consequentially, they may not be qualified to coach children in their home countries due to the limited coaching positions. Providing a high school diploma for players without one allows current and even retired players to work higher skilled jobs and have a multitude of doors opened post-baseball career with a degree. The most effective policy option for the MLB is a marketing partnership with an accredited, online, high school degree program for all international signees who have not already earned it. This option would use the MLBPA's "Baseball Tomorrow Fund" to cover costs of startup and maintenance, along with the necessary technology accommodations for course completion. MLB makes millions of dollars off of these players. Accordingly, they should reinvest a portion of that money into providing a quality education to ensure players have ample opportunities for financial security after their baseball careers have ended.

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