The Role of Psychological Contract Violation in Student-Athlete Retention

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Student retention has remained a popular yet challenging topic for researchers within higher education (Tinto, 2006). Beginning with Spady’s Sociological Model (1970) and Tinto’s Interactionalist Theory (1975), researchers have continued to develop new and increasingly complex models in an attempt to identify factors related to retention. The increasingly diverse student populations present at most institutions have contributed the complexity of the issue (Tinto, 2006). Unfortunately, very little of the focus on retention has been directed at student-athletes. Student-athletes should not be ignored. They are a vital part of the success of athletic programs and visible members of the community. According to Fulks (2009), National College Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Series (FBS) institutions spent a median of $68,709 per student-athlete in 2008. And, while research indicates that student-athletes do graduate at rates higher than that of the general student population, an investigation sponsored by the NCAA also indicates that student-athletes who transfer institutions graduate at a lower rate than those who do not (Hosick, 2007). Furthermore, the introduction of the Academic Progress Rate (APR) in 2004 gave the NCAA the ability to place sanctions on Division I institutions that fail to sufficiently retain student-athletes.

Research has indicated that retention models designed to study the general student population are largely ineffective for special populations (Bean & Metzner, 1985). In general, student-athletes are different than their non-athlete counterparts. Often, their choice of school is guided by athletic opportunity not academic fit (Hyatt, 2003). Once on campus, the rigors of athletics place unique constraints on their social and academic endeavors (Hurley & Cunningham, 1984; Coakley, 2001). Student athletes often report that they feel isolated from the general student population. The lack of interaction between student-athletes and the general student population places increased importance on relationships formed with teammates and coaches (Hurley & Cunningham, 1984; Coakley, 2001). There is evidence that the coach-player relationship plays a significant role in student-athlete retention yet few researchers have explored this area (Rivera, 2004). Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to examine the role of the player-coach relationship and the affect it has on student-athlete retention by inspecting psychological contracts in student-athletes.

Psychological contracts (PCs) can be defined as, “Individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding the terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization,” (Rousseau, 1995). Research indicates that violations of PCs (PCV) can affect intentions to leave amongst employees from a wide variety of organizations (Robinson, 1996). Recently, research on PCV has been shown to influence intentions to leave among coaches and volunteers in sport organizations (Bravo & Won, 2009; Taylor, Darcy, Hoey, & Cuskelly, 2006). Other consequences associated with PCV include lower levels of trust between the individual and the organization (Deery, Walsh, & Iverson, 2006), lower organizational commitment (Lester, Turnley, Bloodgood, & Bolino, 2002; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Restubog, Bordia, & Tang 2006), lower job satisfaction (Bunderson, 2001), poorer job performance (Robinson, 1996), and lower levels of organizational citizenship behaviors (Turnley et al., 2003; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). We hypothesize that violations of the PC between coaches and intercollegiate athletes will result in similar outcomes.

To test our hypotheses, an instrument was developed to determine student-athletes’ perceptions of the PC and the outcomes following PCV. The instrument will be administered to student-athletes, participating in a variety of sports, at a large Division I institution. Student-athletes’ perceptions of the psychological contract are based on a two component measure used by Won (2008). The first component, designed to measure perceived coach’s obligations was adapted from items developed by Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000, 2002) and Won (2008). The second component, designed to measure perceived fulfillment of obligations was adapted from Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000, 2002) and Won (2008).
Trust in coaches will be measured using items adapted from Robinson & Rousseau (1994). Using a Likert type scale, student-athletes will indicate their trust level on several items. The items were designed to measure current trust levels. Initial trust levels were assumed to be strong based on Judson, Aurand, and Karlovsky's (2007) research.

Affective commitment was measured using items adapted from Meyer and Allen's (1991) scale.

Satisfaction was divided into two parts. Athletics satisfaction will be used to measure the student-athlete’s satisfaction with their role as an athlete. Items were adapted from the Athlete Satisfaction Scale (Weiss & Friedrichs, 1986). Institutional satisfaction is intended to measure the student-athlete’s overall satisfaction with the university. It was measured using items adapted from the College Student Attrition Survey (Freeman, Hall, & Bresciani, 2007).

Performance will be used to assess the student-athlete’s perceptions of their overall athletic performance. Items were adapted from the In-role Performance Scale developed by Williams and Anderson (1991).

Intention to leave will be measured with the item, “I frequently think about leaving this university.” It was adapted from Hackman and Oldham (1980).

Tests will be conducted to determine the strength of relationships between variables. Specifically, statistical analysis will be used to examine the significance of PCV on trust, affective commitment, satisfaction, performance, and intentions to leave in student-athletes. We anticipate that student-athletes will exhibit lower levels of trust, commitment, and satisfaction following PCV. We also anticipate PCV will increase their desire to leave their institution. In other settings, PC theory has been widely accepted by employers and employees (Anderson & Schalk, 1998). We believe this fact holds promise for retention practices based on PCs. However, our research represents an initial attempt to test PCs in student-athletes. Other implications for athletic administrators and future research studies will also be discussed.