Profiles of Football Student-Athlete Commitment and Their Effects on Transfer Intentions and Satisfaction

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During the 2008 fiscal year, National College Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Series (FBS) institutions spent a median of $68,709 per student-athlete (Fulks, 2009). Furthermore, according to Fulks, close to half of the revenue generated by athletic departments comes from football. With this sizeable financial investment, intercollegiate coaches and athletic administrators must make strategic decisions regarding the recruitment and retention of their student-athletes (specifically, football student-athletes). Similar to turnover in business settings, a lack of student-athlete persistence (i.e., their desire to transfer) is detrimental to individual teams and athletic departments as a whole; thus, every effort needs to be made to retain them. Additionally, Riener and Chelladurai (1998) argued that the success of an intercollegiate athletic department should be, at least to some degree, based on the satisfaction of its student-athletes. An important first step in this regard is to understand the dynamics of student-athletes’ continued participation with (or intention to transfer from) their institution and their degree of satisfaction.

Commitment has often times been used to examine turnover intentions and satisfaction of employees. Most studies on commitment in sport management have used Meyer and Allen’s (1997) multidimensional conceptualization of commitment (e.g., Turner & Chelladurai, 2005). Meyer and Allen felt there were three commitment components—affective commitment (AC; emotional attachment to the organization), normative commitment (NC; obligation to the organization), and continuance commitment (CC; need to stay with the organization). However, recent research has found a gap in their three-component model. Wasti (2005) stated “One issue that has been neglected is the coexistence of the commitment components or forms and its implications. Previous research has been largely variable-centered, looking at the antecedents and outcomes of each commitment form separately through correlational or regression analysis. This type of analysis fails to recognize the fact that employees endorse varying levels of affective, continuance, and normative commitment concurrently” (p. 292). Previous work by Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) hypothesized that individuals could be high or low in AC, NC, and CC, thus creating eight profiles ($2^3$). Gellatly, Meyer, and Luchak (2006) found support for this model.

Commitment is also multi-dimensional in the foci, or entities, to which an individual could be committed. While a majority of studies focus on organizational commitment, individuals could also be committed to their occupation, supervisor, or work group. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to develop commitment profiles for student-athletes based on Meyer and Allen’s three-component conceptualization and three foci of commitment (university, coach, and team). Also, differences in the profiles based on demographics were examined, along with differences in transfer intentions and satisfaction.

All football student-athletes ($n = 86$) from an NCAA Division I FBS institution completed a questionnaire regarding their commitment to their university, their coach, and their team. Modified items from Meyer and Allen’s (1997) commitment scales were used, along with items to measure transfer intentions and a single-item to measure overall satisfaction. Age and ethnicity were also included on the instrument as demographic variables.

Initial reliabilities (Cronbach’s alpha) for two of the CC measures (university and coach) were low (.49 and .63, respectively), so it was decided to examine only AC and NC to the three foci in the study. Thus, six commitment variables were used in the analyses: a) University AC; b) University NC; c) Coach AC; d) Coach NC; e) Team AC; and f) Team NC. Reliability for the transfer intention measure was .76.

Using the k means cluster function on the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), a number of possible clusters were examined. Based on Wasti’s (2005) initial criteria recommendation (i.e., theoretical interpretability and adequate cell sizes), four clusters emerged. These profiles of commitment were labeled: a) Committed (high in all six commitment variables; $n = 8$); b) Non-committed (low in all six commitment variables; $n = 31$); c) Moderately
committed (SD between .20 and .76 on all six commitment variables; n = 23); and d) University committed (positive SDs for two university commitment variables, negative SDs for other four commitment variables; n = 23).

Chi-square analyses showed there was no difference in the profile groups based on race, χ²(18) = 15.95, p = .596. Because of the discrepancy in group sizes (i.e., there were 8 in the Committed group and 31 in the Non-committed group), there is a concern with violating the assumption of homogeneity of variance (Field, 2005). To counteract this issue, the Brown-Forsythe F was used. Results showed there were no differences in the groups based on age, F(3, 37) = .53, p = .664.

Finally, the Brown-Forsythe F test was used to examine differences in transfer intentions and satisfaction between the four groups. There was a significant difference in transfer intentions, F(3, 34) = 6.57, p < .001. Games-Howell post hoc procedures were used (because of the unequal cell sizes) to compare means between each of the four commitment profiles (Field, 2005). The Non-committed (M = 6.45; SD = .77) had higher transfer intentions than the University committed (M = 4.96; SD = 1.93; p = .008) and the Moderately committed (M = 5.09; SD = 1.37; p < .001). Although the Committed had the lowest transfer intentions (M = 4.44; SD = 1.76), there was no statistical difference with the Non-committed (p = .055). This, however, could be an artifact of the small number of individuals in the Committed group and the conservative statistics from the Games-Howell post hoc procedures.

Regarding overall satisfaction, there was a significant difference between groups, F(3, 38) = 18.41, p < .001. Games-Howell post hoc tests showed the Committed (M = 4.38; SD = 1.19) were significantly higher in satisfaction than the Non-committed (M = 1.39; SD = .62; p < .001), the University committed (M = 2.14; SD = 1.29; p = .003), and the Moderately committed (M = 2.77; SD = 1.07; p = .027). Also, the Non-committed were significantly lower in satisfaction than the University committed (p < .001).

Based on the results of this study (and consistent with Sinclair, Tucker, Cullen, & Wright, 2005), athletic departments should consider using commitment-based interventions aimed at certain profiles. These “profile-focused” interventions may be effective in moving student-athletes from one profile to another (and ultimately minimizing turnover intentions and increasing satisfaction). Also, interestingly in this study, a group committed only to the coach did not emerge. It is often assumed that student-athletes choose an institution because of the head coach; that assumption did not emerge in this study. Finally, limitations of the current study and future research will be discussed in detail.