Intercollegiate Student-Athletes Perceptions of Equity: Are Perceptions Changing?

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Equity theory suggests that inequity will be perceived when a person believes that their ratio of outcomes (scholarship level, pay, benefits) to inputs (time, effort) is different than the ratio of others (Adams, 1965). Responses to a perceived inequitable situation may include altering output; altering outcomes; or leaving the situation. Equity theory is often applied to payment compared to output (Adams, 1965; Hums & Chelladuri, 1994). Research has indicated that when employees perceive they are underpaid, productivity will diminish (Andrews, 1967; Evans & Simmons, 1969). Additionally, those who perceive they are not compensated equitably tended to produce lower quality work (Lawler & O’Gara, 1967; Pritchard et al., 1972). Within sport, a majority of the studies related to equity have focused on professional sport (Harder, 1991; Duchon & Jago, 1981) or coaches/administrators (Hums & Chelladuri, 1994).

The debate associated with equity within intercollegiate athletics centers around payment of student-athletes. Schneider (2000) found that the most frequently discussed arguments for paying student-athletes were that (a) students athletes are limited to an athletic scholarship (Byers, 1995; Sage, 1998); (b) the scholarship does not cover the total cost of attending college (Fish, 1997; Huma, 2010); and (c) paying student-athletes would reduce cutting (Adams, 1996). Others argued that a scholarship is adequate payment (Dooley, 1995; Richards, 1996); there are no funds available to make additional payments (Bradley, 1994; Thompson, 1995); and additional pay may compromise the non-profit status of the NCAA (Byers, 1995; Shultz, 1990).

While much has been written by journalists about payment of intercollegiate student-athletes, there has been a dearth of scholarly analysis of the perceptions of those who are at the center of the debate – the student-athlete. Sack (1988) found that a majority of the Division I student-athletes studied felt they were adequately rewarded. However, Schneider (2004) reported that the Division I student-athletes surveyed disagreed when asked if they were adequately rewarded. Student-athletes also believed that they should receive a stipend for participation in intercollegiate athletics.

While these studies provide a beginning in understanding intercollegiate student-athletes perceptions of equity, more research is needed. Without a complete understanding of student-athletes perceptions on this issue the NCAA and other sport related organizations cannot properly propose new by-laws.

The recent influx of publicity from head coaches salaries, illegal payments from agents, and sport video games has again made payment of college athletes an even more popular topic. The average salary of head football coaches at NCAA Division I institutions is now over $1 million per year (USA Today, 2007). Sport video games, using unique characteristics of college athletes, account for over 14% of total game sales (ESA, 2008). With money available to head coaches and recent opportunities created by technology such as video games, it was vital that current intercollegiate athlete’s perceptions are understood.

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of equity for intercollegiate student-athletes competing in revenue generating sports (Football, Women’s Basketball, Men’s Basketball) at the Division I level. Further, the results from this study are compared to previous studies (Sack, 1988; Schneider, 2004) to determine any trends related to student-athlete perceptions. The data analysis included descriptive statistics (means for: gender, scholarship level, grade level, sport). Further analysis included a t-test to determine differences between the groups by gender (male, female) and scholarship status (full, none) as well as analyses of variance to examine mean differences of grade level (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) as well as sport participation (Football, Women’s Basketball, Men’s Basketball). A total of 283 student-athletes participated in the study.

The results indicated that student-athletes strongly disagreed (M = 1.57) that they were adequately rewarded for the time and effort they give to their respective athletic team. Other findings include the fact that senior student-athletes strongly agreed (M = 4.89) they should receive a stipend for intercollegiate athletes participation whereas freshman agreed (M = 3.68). Female student athletes (M = 4.11) and male student-athletes (M = 4.92) almost equally strongly agreed that college student-athletes deserve a portion of the revenue generated through College Sport Video Games.

In the late 1980′s, student-athletes felt that they were adequately rewarded for intercollegiate athletic participation (Sack 1988). However, in the mid-2000′s this perception of equity had reversed (Schneider, 2004). The results from this study indicate that a greater percentage of student-athletes believing that inequity exists. Additionally, as student-athletes progress through their career, they were increasingly likely to perceive inequity exists. More female student-athletes perceive inequity than was found in 2004.
White v. NCAA was a landmark case in regards to student-athletes attempting to share the profits earned through college athletics. However, the question of whether or not they can demand compensation still remains. This study gives more detail as to student-athletes perceptions of equity. It is anticipated that as revenue continues to increase, student-athlete perceptions of inequity will also increase. While studies that access student-athletes perceptions of equity have been limited, this study provides insight that intercollegiate student-athletes are becoming increasingly unhappy with current NCAA restrictions.