Civic Engagement Activities of College Athletes and Non-Athletes

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The decline of young people’s (including college students) interest in politics and participation in civic life has been a topic of much concern (Boyte, 2008; Putnam, 2000; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, Delli Carpini, 2006). Research indicates that while college students are the most engaged of young people on several civic engagement measures they are not as engaged as expected (Longo & Meyer, 2006; Lopez & Kiesa, 2009). Studies have shown a “scissor effect” occurring where years of decline in political participation has been reported along with a surge in community service and volunteering (Longo & Meyer, 2006; Sax et al., 2003). Higher education has perhaps contributed to students’ greater involvement in community service through Universities and Colleges adopting various service learning initiatives (Jacoby, 2009). One example in athletics is the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) CHAMPS/life skills program that seeks to support student-athlete personal development through providing opportunities to engage in service projects both on and off campus (NCAA, 1999).

In addition, the literature suggests that college students have become more civically engaged because they care about their communities and feel they can make a difference (Higher Education Research Institute, [HERI], 2005). In particular, college athletes enjoy engaging in service projects and believe the experience is valuable (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006). Participation in extracurricular activities such as sport is argued to develop citizenship (LaVoi & Power, 2006).

However, research suggests that except for African American athletes, collegiate athletic participation does not lead to increased civic engagement (Shulman & Bowen, 2001) and sport participation discourages political involvement (Coakley, 2004). Given higher education’s attempts to institute civic education and service initiatives on campus for the general student population and specifically student-athletes, little is known about how college athletes’ civic engagement activities compare with their non-athlete peers. The emphasis placed on athletes to also “give back” (Ortiz, 2009) to their communities through volunteering within the CHAMPS/Life skills program, it is important that athletic administrators gain an understanding of what types of engagement athletes are participating in beyond volunteering in comparison with their non-athlete peers.

Framed from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement’s (2006a, b) notion of civic engagement that is organized around three categories (civic activities electoral activities, and political voice activities), the current study will examine college athletes and non-athletes’ civic engagement activities. In particular, the following research questions were posed:

Research Question 1: How do college athletes and non-athletes differ in their civic activities?

Research Question 2: How do college athletes and non-athletes differ in their electoral activities?

Research Question 3: How do college athletes and non-athletes differ in their political voice activities?

A cross sectional survey design will be used where at least 300 undergraduate students enrolled from three different universities in the Midwest, Northwest, and Southwest regions of the United States (100 students from each institution that includes 50 athletes and 50 non-athletes) will complete the National Civic and Political Health Questionnaire (CIRCLE, 2006a, 2006b) that contains 19 indicators of civic engagement. All completed survey instruments will be assessed for usability. Using SPSS 17.0, descriptive statistics will be generated to describe the characteristics of the sample. To determine if athletes and non-athletes differ in their civic engagement activities, multiple one-way ANOVAs within groups and ANOVA between group comparisons will be calculated.

Results will be discussed relative to appropriate theory and related literature. Practical implications concerning to civic education and sport derived from the results will be discussed. Suggestions for future research will also be offered.