Sexual Identity and the Male Student-Athlete: Connecting Literature From Student Affairs, Student Identity Development, and Sociology Perspectives

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Student-athletes represent a specific subset of student populations on college campuses everywhere. Life as a student-athlete can be very complex and propose many unique challenges (Watt and Moore, 2001). The duality of academic and athletic responsibilities requires disciplined management on the part of the individual, and is often combined with support efforts and services provided by coaches, academic advisors, team psychologists, teammates, and/or other designated athletic department personnel (Carodine, Almond and Gratto, 2001). Although responsibilities relating to their campus role and life may differ from non-athletes (Carodine, Almond and Gratto, 2001), the opportunities for personal growth and identity development offered during the collegiate years for student-athletes remain similar.

In addition to providing academic resources, college campus constructs also typically offer services and organizations dedicated to providing information and guidance relating to racial, ethnic, cultural, gender and sexual identity. Sociologists have broadly defined sport as a defining element of a young male's masculinity (Anderson, 2002; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990). Additionally, researchers have concluded the institute of sport innately incorporates great levels of homophobia (Coakley, 1998; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990), largely in response to society's traditional views of sport being aggressive and masculine in nature (Messner, 1992). When also considering the nature of social constructions, research indicates that social structures and interactions also reinforce behavioral and identity norms as masculine for males (Harris, 2010). Because of these traditional views of sport, combined specifically with athletic pressures and visibility, and in consideration of social expectations, male college level student-athletes may experience great personal conflict regarding their own sexual identity exploration and disclosure.

As Erik Erikson introduced and defined identity development through a series of stages from infancy to the latter years of adulthood, Arthur Chickering (Evans, et al., 2010) discussed identity development through his seven vectors of which he applied to college students. Specific to college student identity development, Chickering proposed seven factors he identified as "key influences". Among these seven influences are three in particular that may have more of a direct impact upon an individual's sexual identity development: 1) Student-Faculty Relationships; 2) Friendships and Student Communities; 3) Student Development Programs and Services. When considering male student-athletes participating within the parameters of an intercollegiate varsity team, these three key influences as labeled by Chickering may translate to the following: 1) Coach-Athlete Relationships; 2) Teammates and Athlete Communities; 3) Student-Athlete Support Services.

This presentation will explore the literature from student affairs, student identity development, and sociology as it pertains to males, sexual identity and sport. Previous research indicates that participation in intercollegiate athletics can impact an individual's psychosocial development both positively and negatively (Hamilton and Sina, 2001). As many theorists agree that sexual identity occurs through a developmental process (Evans, et al., 2010), sociologists have stated that for male athletes dealing with their own sexual identity, components of masculinity, acceptance, and the homophobic nature of sport are all factors that may deter one from disclosing their sexual identity as gay (Coakley, 1998; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990).

The framework outlined in this paper creates a foundation for future research that addresses research questions such as: 1) What are male student-athletes attitudes towards homosexuality?; 2) In what capacities do male student-athletes feel they can safely explore and/or discuss issues pertaining to their own sexual identity?; 3) How do institutional components contribute to male student-athletes disclosing their sexual identity as gay? This poster seeks to connect literature from a variety of disciplines and proposes research questions that explore male student-athlete sexual identity development in regards to how it occurs and in what capacity athletic departments encourage and support individuals through this process.