Corporate Recruiter Perspectives on the Value of Intercollegiate Athletic Participation

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The existence of athletics within the academy is founded on a philosophy that athletics represents a valuable element of a holistic education (Adler & Adler, 1991; Bonfiglio, 2011; Bowen & Levin, 2003; Brand, 2006; Lapchick, 1987). Scholars have explored many of the educational outcomes fundamental to this philosophy which include overall academic success (Robst & Keil, 2000), psychological and social benefits (Singer, 2008), life lessons (Henderson, Olbrecht, & Polacheck, 2006; Long & Caudill, 1991; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Videon, 2002), and physiological benefits (Weight, Smith-Ryan, Huffman, Navarro, 2012). An additional body of literature has simultaneously grown demonstrating deficiencies in the current hyper-competitive and overly commercialized governance model. These scholars and journalists argue intercollegiate athletics in its current form conflicts with the educational mission of the university and exploits the athletes within the system (Bilas, 2013; Branch, 2011; Finkel, Martin, & Paley, 2013; Nocera, 2013; Sack, 2011; Staurovsky & Southall, 2013).

With increasing scrutiny on the role of intercollegiate athletics within the academy and critical dialogue relative to athlete treatment, one of the initiatives discussed widely in the popular and scholarly literature is the idea of compensation for elite athletes, or “pay-for-play” (eg. O’Bannon v. NCAA, 2009; Sack & Staurovsky, 1998). In order to address rising calls for reform, the notion of “pay-for-play”, and growing unrest relative to the purpose of intercollegiate athletics, it has become imperative to begin inquiry toward developing true valuation of intercollegiate athletic participation. One of the often overlooked benefits provided by college athletics participation includes the valuable skills developed by the athletes that they can use in their post-college careers. While anecdotal and limited research has shown that participation in intercollegiate athletics may make student-athletes more marketable when applying for employment (Long & Caudill, 1991), there is limited literature addressing this phenomenon. This study will contribute to the existing literature on the value of intercollegiate athletic participation by exploring the market-value of intercollegiate athletics participation through the perspectives of employers. Toward this end, the following research questions have been addressed:

RQ1: How does intercollegiate athletics participation affect the marketability of former college athletes?

RQ2: What qualities or skills do employers associate with former college athletes?

RQ3: How does intercollegiate athletic participation compare to other extracurricular activities on a resume?

RQ4: Is intercollegiate athletic participation valued differently by employers based on the gender of the athlete, the athletic success of the student-athlete, the sport played, or the level of competition participated in by the athlete?

Attribution theory was utilized to theoretically frame this research (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958). This theory posits that people rely on certain informational cues to determine whether the ultimate cause of behavior is a result of factors that are internal (dispositional) or external (situational). This theory is relevant in the selection process of an employer in a hiring position, as they are actively seeking information about the applicant’s skills and abilities. Recruiters use resume information to draw conclusions regarding the personality, motivation, abilities, and job fit of an applicant. As a result, recruiters may engage in a fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) by interpreting the presence or absence of certain resume information to be due to the applicant's dispositional factors. Fundamental attribution error may account for a recruiter to misidentify skills or abilities (or lack thereof) in an applicant, solely due to the presence or absence of information on a resume (Knouse, 1988). Attribution theory can be used to determine how the presence or absence of athletic participation on an applicant’s resume will influence a recruiter’s impression of the candidate.

The research was conducted via survey methodology distributed online to employment recruiters and sourcers from ten of the leading staffing agencies in the United States. Due to the unique nature of the study, it was necessary to develop an instrument specific to the research questions addressed based on a foundational review of literature. In
an effort to enhance validity, the survey was reviewed by a panel of experts, including three professors who are former collegiate student-athletes, two athletics administrators, two active recruiters, and an expert in survey methodology from the Odum Institute for Social Science Research. Prior to releasing the survey to the subjects, a pilot study was conducted with a sample of (n = 20) to confirm that the questions are clear and easily understood. Instrument reliability will be measured through test-retest statistics gathered through the pilot sample. At the time of submission, data collection is in progress. The anticipated sample size will be (n = 200).

Data analysis will include descriptive statistics for the majority of metrics measured and analysis of variance based on the dependent variables of extracurricular activity value, skills associated with intercollegiate athletics participation and self-reported independent variables of sex, athlete status, and employment industry. Narratives will be independently qualified by two researchers through axial-coded categories. Chi square analysis will also be utilized to test the relationship between independent variables with the major narrative themes identified.

The results of this study will offer insight relative to whether intercollegiate athletics are aligned with the goals of higher education in their mission to help develop student-athletes into future leaders (Brand, 2006; Duderstadt, 2009; NCAA, 2013). Additionally, in a time when athletic departments are often forced to cut sports for budgetary reasons, this study may demonstrate the non-financial value in providing these intercollegiate athletic opportunities for students. Finally, this study will provide a foundation of data relative to the value of intercollegiate athletics participation which will be useful in guiding policy as the concept of athlete compensation is discussed.