Community Service and College Athletics: The Philosophy of Student-Athlete Engagement for NCAA Athletic Departments

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The United States Department of Education (2012) released a call to action to advance civic learning and democratic engagement in higher education. One of the recommendations included fostering “a civic ethos across all part of campus and educational culture” (p. 31). Thus, higher education institutions are increasingly focused on developing educational opportunities outside of the classroom (Boyer, 1987) and promoting civic responsibility (Astin & Sax, 1998; Sax, 2004) among college students. College and university athletic departments also started advocating the importance of community service in their respective mission statements (Andrassy & Bruening, 2011). Similarly, branches of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have encouraged their respective institutions to emphasize civic responsibility and engagement through community service efforts. NCAA Division II has created an “I Chose Division II” campaign to emphasize “academic excellence, athletics achievement, and community engagement” (NCAA, 2013a, para 1). NCAA Division III presidents have also called for a revision of the Division’s philosophy by specifying a “commitment to supporting a student-athlete’s right to meaningful participation in non-athletics pursuits as a method of enriching the overall educational experience” (Brown, 2011, para. 4). Division III also hosts a “Division III Week” in which student-athlete citizenship and responsibility are promoted through engagement in community service activities (NCAA, 2013b). Furthermore, the NCAA and college athletic administrators consider community service and engagement an important public relations tool (Potts, 2003). For example, the NCAA and Division I men’s basketball Final Four participants partnered with Samaritan’s Feet to provide shoes for boys and girls in need. Not only did this community engagement provide an opportunity for student athlete service, the NCAA and Final Four institutions leveraged their affiliation with Samaritan’s Feet to emphasize “giving back” to the host community, New Orleans.

Not only do college athletic administrators perceive developing civic responsibility among student-athletes to be important (Andrassy & Bruening, 2011; Toma, Wolf-Wendel, & Morphew, 2001; Ward & Hux, 2011), but prior literature suggests an institution (e.g., athletic department) can increase the likelihood of successful service experiences for student-athletes through increased involvement and positive community relationships (Astin, 1984; Chupp & Joseph, 2010). Chalk (2008) utilized Organizational Leadership Theory to investigate whether athletic departments assisted student-athletes by making connections with community service organizations. The results highlighted connections between volunteer opportunities created through the NCAA Student-Athlete Advisory Committee and team competitions initiated through athletic administrators and coaches as connections through both the human resources and structural frames.

This study utilizes Organizational Leadership Theory (OLT) (Bolman & Deal, 2003). OLT defines that the leader of an organization has four specific frames (structural, human resource, political, and symbolic) that help them evaluate the organization. These frames allow the leadership of an organization to assess the situation and effectively communicate their mission to their constituents. Of specific importance is modifying the human resource frame to envision the leader as a servant, catalyst, and coach (Sriram, 2012). The human resource frame is about protecting and developing the constituents of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The political frame identifies the authority that is harnessed over the organization. This power can be in the form of mandatory community service (Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 1999). Lastly, the symbolic frame highlights the traditions that are infused within the organization. Athletic traditions may focus on playing field success, but can also be attributed to successful events and participation off-the-field as well (Gaston-Gayles, Rockenbach, & Davis, 2012).

While studies have examined the development of civic responsibility skills for student-athletes (Jarvie & Paule-Koba, 2013; McHugo, 2005; Sax, 2004; Westfield, 2010), there is little understanding about how athletic departments promote community engagement to their student athletes or the type of community organization with whom student-athletes engage. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine NCAA athletic departments’
philosophies on community service and engagement. This study was guided by four primary research questions: 1) How are athletic departments promoting community service? 2) Who selects service projects? 3) What types of sites are selected for service opportunities? 4) How often are student-athletes participating in community service?

This mixed methods study utilized an online survey to gather descriptive information on four main topics: (a) athletic department mission, (b) community agencies with whom student-athletes participate in community service, (c) student-athlete participation in community service, (d) selection of community service sites. We also compared an institution’s location and NCAA division with the type of community service organization with whom the department and student athletes engage. The sample was selected from a target population of athletic administrators who supervise student athlete community service and engagement at NCAA Division I, II, and III universities. The researchers disseminated on-line surveys in September 2013 via Qualtrics to approximately 700 athletic administrators working at NCAA Division I, II, and III universities. Results from these surveys are still pending.

This presentation will provide important information on the frequency of student-athlete community service as it relates to the institution’s location and/or NCAA division. The results may also have important implications for the relationship between the university athletic department and local community partnerships. Furthermore, this study will provide insight on the level of choice student-athletes possess in choosing the frequency and location of the community service they perform.