Hiring Student-Athletes as a Solution to the Leadership-Succession Crisis in Corporate America

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Executives throughout corporate America have been critical of higher education recently due to a lack in leadership readiness of college graduates (Fife and Losco, 2000). The leadership epidemic of young professionals is being described as a Leadership-Succession Crisis in corporate America where companies are set to lose the majority of their upper-level management personnel due to workplace demographic changes. (Ready and Conger, 2007). A direct result in the executive-level personnel turnover is departure from the workplace with nearly one-third of Americans reaching retirement age (Dychtwald, Erickson, and Morison, 2006). Corporate boards, upper-level management teams, and Human Resource (HR) departments are feeling pressure like never before to develop a pipeline of young, high-potential leaders (Groves, 2010; Byham, 2000). One emerging solution is the recruitment and hiring of collegiate student-athletes who are perceived to have increased leadership abilities as compared to their collegiate non-athlete peers. In a recent study of 56 corporate recruiters, 89% felt that athletics contributed to leadership development (McAfee, 2011).

Participation in sports has long been viewed to provide athletes with increased leadership ability dating back some 2,500 years to ancient times (Crowther, 2007; Plato, 2008). Sociologists and historians maintain that sport helps define a sense of self and determines behavior (Guttmann, 2004). Athletic involvement is widely believed to provide enhanced leadership development with the perception that “sport builds character” (Rudd and Mondello, 2006). Competitive sports serve as an excellent training ground for the game of life (Shulman and Bowen, 2001). Athletics, if done properly, can provide opportunities for students to acquire leadership skills that the classroom environment simply cannot. Literature suggests that the sport-to-business transition can be more natural for student-athletes given the many parallels of athletic participation, particularly at the collegiate level, and the business world. Explanations for the hypothesized smoother college to employee transition for student-athletes can be as simple as business language that is full of expressions borrowed from and used in athletics (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1995). More complex explanations are that athletics instill responsibility, competitiveness, leadership, teamwork, cooperation, and time-management skills (Denhart, Villwock, and Vedder, 2009) and a better understanding of business principles with collegiate athletics becoming a system of commercialization and big-time business (Covell and Barr, 2010).

Despite the long-held view that participation in sports grows leadership abilities, limited empirical evidence exists when comparing leadership development through sports (McAfee, 2011; Shulman and Bowen, 2001; Dobosz and Beaty, 1999). In fact, recent research suggests that athletic involvement actually reduces the development of moral character (Shields and Bredemeier, 1995; Rudd and Stoll, 2004) and other studies have suggested no increase in leadership skills of student-athletes compared to their non-athlete peers (Shulman and Bowen, 2001). Limited empirical evidence and conflicting literature combined with a trend for HR departments to hire student-athletes based on their perceived leadership skills provides the need for empirical research on the comparison of leadership and sport participation.

The purpose of this study was to compare whether collegiate student-athletes are better leaders than their collegiate non-athlete peers based on self-perceived leadership skills. The study utilized the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (Student LPI) to measure self-perceptions of leadership behaviors of students (n = 1,454). Participants recruited for this study consisted of current NCAA Division I, II, and III student-athletes and non-athlete peers between the ages of 18-25 from around the country. Colleges and universities were targeted based on convenience sampling such as accessibility and relationships with previous and current faculty members, coaches, and administrators. Kouzes and Posner's LPI is one of the most widely used leadership assessments in the business world and the Student LPI is one of the few leadership instruments designed for and validated on students (Posner, 2004). The instrument uses a 5-point Likert-scale to measure when students are “at their personal best” as leaders through five practices (Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart). Participants were asked to fill out the survey posted online or in-person depending on...
preference or location. The majority (85%) of students completed the survey online. Data was collected for two months before, during, and after Christmas break in December and January of 2012-13.

The study hypothesized that collegiate student-athletes engage more frequently in the five leadership practices than their collegiate non-athlete peers. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), 2x3 factorial design was performed to measure the relationship between athlete status (student-athletes (n = 660) and non-athlete peers (n = 794)) and division level (Division I (n = 398), Division II (n = 328), Division III (n = 728)) on the five leadership practices. Two-way ANOVA was used because each of the two explanatory variables (athlete status and NCAA division level) “can be exposed to any combination of one level of one explanatory variable and one level of the other explanatory variable” (Seltman, 2012, p. 267). All analyses were performed using Statistical Package for the social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0.

The study provides empirical evidence that collegiate student-athletes reported engaging more frequently in four out of five leadership practices (Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Encourage the Heart) compared to their collegiate non-athlete peers. The only leadership practice that was not significant (p < .05) was Enable Others to Act. The results indicate that athletic involvement can serve as a type of leadership development experience for collegiate student-athletes, and that it is reasonable for HR departments to consider candidates with athletic backgrounds as more likely to possess some leader skills than their non-athlete peers during the hiring process. The Leadership-Succession Crisis is an issue that will continue to be relevant (Ready and Conger, 2007) and creative leadership learning environments such as athletics will be important as corporate America puts more and more pressure on higher education to develop young leaders. Despite the many criticisms surrounding the NCAA and intercollegiate athletics and administrators today, this study suggests that athletics must be doing something "right" when it comes to leadership development.