Student-Athletes in the Balance: Perceptions of College Coaches on the NCAA Division II Life in the Balance Legislation

Matt Huml, University of Louisville
Mary Hums, University of Louisville

Governance Thursday, June 4, 2015 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Capitale)

Abstract 2015-069 4:15 PM

Participation in intercollegiate athletics profoundly impacts the daily activities of student-athletes. Student-athletes enter higher education with lofty athletic expectations, while also balancing academic requirements and integrating their social life. Research has explored how student-athletes’ athletic obligations impact their success in various academic outcomes (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013; Lally & Kerr, 2005), but no previous studies have examined the impact of NCAA legislative changes on the balance of athletics, academics, and social life for student-athletes.

In an effort to further delineate their division’s student-athlete experience from the Division I student-athlete experience, the NCAA Division II Presidents’ Council conducted a review of the time commitment student-athletes make to their sport. The vision statement for Division II states that the NCAA is a governing body committed to “supporting the mission of higher education and striking a balance among academic excellence, athletics competition, and social growth” for student-athletes (NCAA, 2014). The intention of the Presidents’ Council review was to create new policy to ensure Division II athletes have more time to focus on academics (NCAA, 2010a). Upon the conclusion of the review, the results presented to the President’s Council were revealing - Division II student-athletes had the same time commitments, with some spending more time, for their sport as Division I student-athletes (NCAA, 2010a). From these results, NCAA Division II implemented the “Life in the Balance” (LITB) package at the 2010 NCAA Convention. LITB made the following changes to NCAA Division II athletics: a later reporting date for student-athletes in fall sports, a mandated seven-day period over the winter holiday break where no sport would be allowed to have any team-related activities, and a contest reduction in most sports (NCAA, 2010b). This legislation was perceived by university Presidents as an attempt to give student-athletes the opportunity for enhanced well-being, improved work/life balance, and additional time to dedicate to their educational experience (NCAA, 2010a).

For some time now, scholars have been concerned about the time student-athletes are required to devote to their sport (Adler & Adler, 1991; Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Paule & Gilson, 2010). While NCAA regulations limit the amount of time student-athletes are allowed to dedicate towards their sport (NCAA, 2013), research has shown they frequently exceed that amount (Benford, 2007). The time commitment required by student-athletes has been likened to full-time employment (Hood, Craig, & Ferguson, 1992; Wolverton, 2008). Student-athletes are also aware of their lack of time available outside of sport, expressing a shortage of time to study, eat properly, and sleep adequately (Paule & Gilson, 2010; Rothschild-Checroune, Gravelle, Dawson, & Karlis, 2012). When trying to manage courses, homework, practice, games, and travel time, one student-athlete stated, “I’ve never been as busy as I am right now. I thought recruiting was busy, but now I never have the time to just sit down” (Hardin & Pate, 2013, p. 235).

As previously mentioned, student-athletes face the daunting task of balancing their academic responsibilities while spending a significant amount of time honing their athletic trade. This delicate “balance” reflects a connection to role theory. According to role theory, as someone utilizes time and energy toward a specific task, his/her available time and energy to complete other tasks is reduced (Barnett & Gareis, 2006; Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003). Researchers have previously applied role theory in the sport management field through an examination of female college basketball coaches balancing their work and family commitments (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007) and the work/life balance of athletic trainers (Mazerolle & Eason, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of college coaches on the NCAA Division II Life in the
Balance policy. The target population in this study was the 2,796 head coaches at NCAA Division II institutions. A total of 764 participants completed the study, which yielded a response rate of 27.3 percent. The 28-item instrument was created and evaluated using a panel of experts, followed by a pilot study of 150 Division II head coaches. Utilizing a varimax rotation, five factors (Perceived Positive Outcomes, Summer Break, Contest Reductions, Mid-Year Break, and Financial Savings) had eigenvalues greater than one, accounting for 63.48% of the total variance. Following the results from the factor analysis, the researchers examined group differences. T-tests for gender indicated significant gender differences in Financial Savings, Contest Reductions, and Perceived Positive Outcomes factors, with female coaches exhibiting higher scores. T-tests for institution-type (public/private) indicated significant group differences in Contest Reductions, and Perceived Positive Outcomes, with coaches at private institutions reporting higher scores.

In addition to the quantitative data, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about their perspectives on modifying the LITB program. A number of themes emerged from the data. First, coaches perceived that the changes LITB created with practice and game schedules resulted in increased risk of injuries to athletes, mainly because LITB compressed the time in which practices and contests were held. A second theme revolved around conditioning, as the coaches felt the later start date meant athletes were not in the best condition when they started practice and they had less time to get the athletes into shape for their seasons. A third theme seemed to run counter to the very purpose of LITB as coaches indicated they felt athletes actually missed more classes, primarily because a shorter season meant trying to compress their schedule, resulting in student-athletes missing more classes for weekday contests. Fourth, a large number of coaches felt LITB was instituted not as an academic program, but actually as a cost-cutting program where institutions would somehow save money by having shorter seasons. Fifth, coaches felt the “one size fits all” approach in the model did not truly accommodate for needs of different sports. Soccer coaches in particular expressed this concern. Sixth, coaches also expressed frustration over the fact that the NCAA had implemented the LITB program without sufficient input from coaches or even from athletes. Finally, a large number of coaches simply wanted to eliminate the LITB program altogether, allowing for more practice time and contests, and in some ways, for Division II athletic programs to therefore be treated more like Division I programs.

When examining the results, it is apparent coaches feel that LITB creates more harm for student-athletes than benefits. Coaches seem especially concerned about the negative ramifications of their student-athletes’ athletic performance through increased risk of injury, lack of physical conditioning, and believing LITB unfairly targeted specific sports. These findings highlight the need to increase the involvement of college coaches in legislation impacting the schedule of student-athletes. On the other hand, these findings may reveal a lack of willingness from college coaches to provide more time for student-athletes outside of their athletic obligations.