Connecting the Rhetoric of Sport with Institutional Missions in Higher Education

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Colleges and universities continuously and passionately deliberate the educational impact of sport at American institutions of higher education (Sack, 2009). There is a great deal of positive rhetoric as coaches and administrators alike champion the personal growth students can achieve through athletics. Former University of Michigan President James Duderstadt (2000) explained that “college sports provide an opportunity for teaching people about character, motivation, endurance, loyalty, and the attainment of one’s personal best” (p. 70). Others have referenced the development of skills in student-athletes, such as strategic and tactical thinking, self-awareness, and an improved understanding of interpersonal relationships (Chu, 1989; Kahle & Riley, 2004). However, according to Emerson, Brooks, and McKenzie (2009), “there exists little systematic evidence about the extent to which the realities mirror the ideals” (p. 65).

Most attempts to quantify the impact of sport on collegiate student-athletes have examined grade point average, retention rates, average starting salary of graduates, etc. (e.g., Saur, Desmond, & Heintzelman, 2012; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). I propose to examine student development from participation in sport in a new manner, through the lens of Emotional Intelligence (EI).

Goleman (1995) popularized the construct of EI in his attempt to answer the question of why some people do well in life and others do not, irrespective of their cognitive intelligence. Bar-On (2000) described EI as “an array of emotional, personal, and social abilities that effect one’s overall ability to effectively cope with daily demands and pressures” (p. 373). While different conceptualizations of the construct exist, instruments to measure EI have focused on many of the competencies that are typically voiced in the rhetoric surrounding sport.

Scholars have only recently been making the connection between sport and EI. This scant research has focused primarily on studying EI to ascertain if athlete’s abilities to effectively manage both their emotions and those of their teammates can enhance their overall performance (e.g., Crombie, Lombard, & Noakes, 2009; Meyer & Fletcher, 2007; Pensgaard & Duda, 2003; Perlini & Halverson, 2006; Zizzi et al., 2003). It is in management and workplace literature where multiple scholars have exhibited the manner in which people can be educated to be emotionally intelligent through experiential learning theory and reflective practices (Bar-On, 2007; Boyatzis, 2007).

The rhetoric surrounding sport is present because of its potential to develop participants in the manner discussed above. However, Jarvis’ model of experiential learning (1987) explicitly depicted pathways of non-learning through experience. The proposed conceptual model therefore links the experience of sport to institutional missions of higher education through experiential learning practices and assessments of EI. Because significant commonalities exist between what proponents of sport claims it develops and what measurements of EI assess, the model has the potential to improve sports’ ability to educate and develop participating student-athletes.

It is through this particular linkage that coaches and administrators can create a pathway between the rhetoric and the missions of colleges and universities.

Through analyzing the patterns of student-athletes’ natural EI development from participation, and implementing experiential learning theory and reflective practices within athletic departments, sport can better be used as part of the curriculum to foster the holistic development of an institution’s student-athletes, preparing them for success in life.

The presentation will contain a detailed look at the conceptual model and fully expound upon each pathway.
Additionally, each connection between the rhetoric of sport, experiential learning theory, EI assessment, and missions of institutions of higher education will be supported with a detailed review of literature.