Changing Rules: A Stakeholder Perspective of College Coaches on NCAA Policy

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In 2009, the NCAA Division II governing arm, its President's Council, commissioned a study to examine how much time their student-athletes were dedicating to their sport. The results from the 2009 Division II study found student-athletes spent more than 20 hours a week on their sport, and in some cases even exceeded the time commitments of Division I student-athletes (NCAA, 2010a). Results also showed Division II had slowly increased the maximum number of allowable contests in most sports (NCAA, 2010a). The Division II Management Council therefore began crafting an initiative aimed at decreasing the athletics time commitment for student-athletes. This initiative, Life in the Balance (LITB), was approved at the 2010 NCAA Convention (NCAA, 2010b). The LITB initiative established the following changes: later reporting dates for Fall sports, a mandatory seven-day period of no team activities during Winter break, and a reduction in the maximum number of contests for all sports except football (NCAA, 2010b). After implementing LITB, the NCAA polled Division II personnel to assess their perception of the policy (Hendrickson, 2013). Results showed almost unanimous satisfaction with the initiative, except by coaches (Hendrickson, 2013).

Multiple studies have highlighted concerns about the time commitment necessary to compete in intercollegiate athletics (Adler & Adler, 1991; Hardin & Pate, 2013; Miller & Kerr, 2002, 2003; Valentine & Taub, 1999). The time commitment required of college athletes has been compared to full-time employment (Hood, Craig, & Ferguson, 1992; Wolverton, 2008). One student-athlete in the Paule and Gilson (2010) study said, “You don’t always have time for what you want to do because you have a commitment to the team…and it is a large commitment” (p. 344). Additionally, researchers identified the negative affects of athletic obligations on academic outcomes of student-athletes (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013). Limited research has examined the relationship between coaches and student-athletes related to balancing academics and athletics. Coaches believe they have the potential to greatly impact student-athlete development (Giacobbi, Roper, Whitney, & Butryn, 2002). Athletic academic support personnel have mentioned coaches are willing to communicate with them regarding academic issues with athletes, but they wished coaches were held responsible if their athletes performed poorly in the classroom (Comeaux, 2015). Harrison and Bukstein (2015) described the difficulties student-athletes encounter balancing academics and athletics if others (such as coaches) perceive one of the two as less important. The Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (2005) recommended coaches prioritize supporting their student-athletes’ academic behaviors. A recent quote from Alabama football coach Nick Saban highlights this concern, “I hope they all want to go to school, but I know they all want to play” (Wolverton, 2014, p. 1).

To frame this study, the researchers utilized stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) to examine responses from head coaches regarding the LITB initiative. Stakeholder theory is often used to identify stakeholders and their influence within the organization (Rowley, 1997). Hendrickson (2013) reported the NCAA admitted not having coaches involved enough when creating the LITB initiative, implying critical stakeholders were left out of the policy making process. Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) believed management prioritizes stakeholders by their power, legitimacy, and urgency attributes. According to Parent and Deephouse (2007), (a) Power is the stakeholder’s ability to influence the organization, (b) legitimacy includes decisions that are perceived desirable, or “right”, from the perspective of society, and (c) urgency is the time sensitive nature of an issue being addressed.

The purpose of this study was to assess the opinions of Division II head coaches regarding the Life in the Balance initiative. The target population in this study was head coaches at NCAA Division II institutions (n= 2,796). A total of 722 participants completed the study, for a response rate of 25.8 percent. The 28-item instrument was created and evaluated using a panel of experts, followed by a pilot study to ensure item readability and relevancy. Specifically, the researchers examined responses from coaches on whether they would keep, alter, or eliminate the LITB initiative.
Following their choice of one of these three options, coaches were given an opportunity to provide detailed reasoning for their responses.

Given these three options to indicate how LITB should move forward, 436 (60.4%) of the coaches wanted to “make changes to the model”, 212 (29.4%) said to “eliminate the model”, and 74 (10.2%) wished to “keep the model in its current state.” Coaches were then asked to indicate the rationale for their choice via open-ended questions. The researchers analyzed the open-ended responses until saturation of the data was evident. The responses were coded and placed into appropriate categories (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). A number of themes emerged from the responses. The emerging themes for “make changes to the model” were (a) increased injuries, (b) concerns about conditioning, (c) effect of missing more classes, (d) costs/financial/money, and (e) one size does not fit all. The emerging themes for “eliminate the model” were (a) increased injury risk, and (b) cost/financial/money. For coaches who chose to “keep the model”, the emerging themes were (a) provides balance for student-athletes, (b) initiative seems to be working, (c) good for the holiday break, and (d) good for families.

The common theme of perceived increased potential for injury was present in the responses of those wanting to eliminate or change the model. One surprising finding was that coaches indicated student-athletes were actually missing more class time due to compressed competition scheduling. The one size does not fit all was mainly expressed by soccer coaches who represented the largest sport opposition to LITB. A number of coaches also perceived LITB as not being about student-athletes at all, but rather a strategy for athletic administrators to save money. The overall coach dissatisfaction expressed in the open-ended responses was consistent with Hendrickson’s (2013) finding that coaches indicated low levels of satisfaction with LITB. The results of this study suggest that coaches want the NCAA to reconsider LITB as written in its current form.

When examining the findings through the lens of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), the strong response of either wanting to change or eliminate the policy highlights frustration about their lack of “voice” when the governing body created the policy. Freeman (1984) believes stakeholders will respond in an effort to defend or further their interests. The reaction from the coaches led the authors to believe coaches felt the policy was starting to infringe on their ability to maximize their sport’s, and consequently their professional, success. The reaction was not surprising, as the LITB initiative reduces the allowable time coaches spend with their student-athletes in training and competitions. As a push-back, coaches emphasized the potential dangers of this policy change (injuries, lack of conditioning, etc.). Even with literature showing student-athletes need more time to spend on their schoolwork, stakeholders such as coaches will still defend their actions even in the face of rational opposition (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003).