The Role of Alma Mater Sport in International Students' School Adaptation and Life Satisfaction

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The United States has been the number one choice in the world for international students seeking higher education (Institute of International Education, 2014). Since international students need to adjust to new environments (e.g., new friends and faculty) and a new culture (e.g., language and customs), they are more likely to encounter more severe challenges compared to domestic students as they attempt to adapt to the university setting (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Specifically, international students face three types of challenges: academic, socio-cultural and psychological (e.g., Brown, 2008; Pedersen, 1991; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Moreover, these challenges can be linked to negative consequences such as emotional distress (Zhou et al., 2008) and dropout (Westwood & Barker, 1990). Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider ways to assist international students’ school adaptation.

Theoretical Framework

Astin (1984, 1999) introduced student involvement theory and claimed that a student who devotes considerable effort and energy to school activities is more likely to adapt to school and be satisfied with life. Student involvement in school activities varies widely, from academic to extracurricular activities. Fan engagement in university sport (i.e., alma mater sport) can potentially assist in adaptation. Particularly in the U.S., college sport involvement plays a significant part in school life. Despite the decrease in college student attendance due to economic downturns, the average student attendance at college sports competitions is 5,000 (The Wall Street Journal, 2014). Moreover, approximately 60 million people attend college sport games every year (Statista, 2015). The popularity of college athletics often contributes to both the quantity and quality of school applications (Pope & Pope, 2009). Campus recreational sport participation is another way that students get involved in sport at their alma mater. This is important because participation in sports anchored by campus areas may offer students more chances to interact with classmates, professors, and new friends (Astin, 1984). In addition, physical activity and sport can reduce the likelihood of emotional distress that international students may face, due to potential physiological and psychological benefits (Ains-worth, 2000).

However, international students tend not to be very involved in these alma mater sport activities, because they often prioritize academic success over other activities (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). In fact, very few studies have explored the relationship between college sport involvement and positive consequences for school life among international students. Therefore, this study examines the relationship that may exist for international students between two types of alma mater sport involvement (fanship and participation) and school adaptation and life satisfaction. Specifically, this research has six hypotheses: a) college sport involvement is positively associated with school adaptation; b) college sport involvement is positively associated with life satisfaction; c) school adaptation is positively associated with life satisfaction; d) campus recreational sport participation is positively associated with school adaptation; e) campus recreational sport participation is positively associated with life satisfaction; and f) college sport involvement is correlated with campus recreational sport involvement.

Method

An online survey was distributed to international students currently attending a large, midwestern state university. Participants were asked to respond measures of college sport spectator involvement (Bahk, 2000), campus recreational sport participation involvement (Pace, 1990), student adaptation to college (Baker & Siryk, 1999), satisfaction with life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985), and standard demographic questions. It is important to note that the student adaptation to college scale comprises dimensions of academic, social adjustment, emotional adjustment and institutional attachment. A preliminary dataset of 102 international students was established with 52% male and 51% graduate students. Students reported home countries as follows: 60 South
Koreans, 23 Chinese, 17 Taiwanese, and 2 Japanese. In this study, a Pearson correlation matrix was used to identify relationships among two types of alma mater sport involvement (participation and fanship), the four dimensions of school adaptation, and life satisfaction.

Results

Preliminary results showed that international students’ college sport involvement was not associated with overall school adaptation or life satisfaction, thus hypotheses (a) and (b) were rejected. Hypothesis (c) was accepted; overall school adaptation was associated with life satisfaction ($r=.543, p=0.01$). Participation in campus recreational sport participation was moderately correlated with two dimensions of adjustment: academic ($r =.265, p<.01$) and social adjustment ($r =.341, p<.01$). Finally, we observed that campus recreational sport participation was correlated with college sport involvement ($r =.341, p<.01$). Data collection is ongoing and multivariate tests will be forthcoming.

Discussion

This preliminary research examined the relationship between two types of alma mater sport involvement and school adaptation and life satisfaction among international students at an American university. We did not find the association between college sport involvement and school adaptation or life satisfaction. The college sport involvement scale is comprised of items asking how much time and energy you devote to your college sports games both psychologically and behaviorally. In completing that scale, most survey participants reported very low levels of college sport involvement with little variance; the mean value was 2.79, well below the neutral point of 4, thus indicating a lack of involvement in college sport. One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that international students still spend much time and energy on academic work (cf. Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). Interestingly, we found that recreational sport participation was positively associated with academic and social adjustment of school adaptation, although not with the overall school adaptation. While participation also requires time away from studies, there may be a sense that, unlike fan involvement, participation contributes to one’s overall wellbeing. These initial findings help lay the foundation for our future work that will use a structural equation modeling to test the relationships and mediating effects among the variables. Data collection is ongoing, and a full structural equation model is expected to be completed for the conference presentation.