Examining the Effect of Status and Organizational Context on the Salience of College Student-Athletes' Identities

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The Problem

There is increasing attention and commitment to college athletics, particularly at larger colleges and universities. The resulting demands on student-athletes are significant, with extensive time and energy required for both competition and coursework (Adler & Adler, 1987; Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Through our own pilot study, we found that student-athletes struggle with how to balance academics and athletics. Prior work on student-athletes has explored issues of identity and role conflicts (Yukhymenko–Lescroart, 2014; Adler & Adler, 1987; Gaston-Gayles, 2004), but neglected the important connection between status, organizational context, and student-athletes’ identities. In particular, there is a lack of knowledge about the influence of an athlete’s status (e.g., based on type of sport played and standing on the team) on the salience of student athletes’ identities as athletes, students, and members of other social groups. For instance, members of revenue-generating teams, such as football in some universities, enjoy high status as local celebrities. The question is: does this status affect whether student athletes view themselves more as “students” or “athletes”? Further, the relationship between athlete status and identity salience likely depends, in part, on the organizational context. For example, in schools with stronger athletic than academic programs, there may be a stronger relationship between athlete status and the salience of the athlete identity.

Objectives of the Research

In this study, we investigate the effect of athlete status on the salience of student-athletes’ identities, and the moderating role of the organizational context. Our independent variables related to athlete status span levels and include whether an athlete plays on a revenue generating team, is a leader on his or her team, and is a scholarship athlete. We examine the effect of these athlete status variables on the salience of student-athletes’ identities related to academics (e.g., student), athletics (e.g., athlete), and social life (e.g., sorority sister). We also examine the moderating role of the organizational context; specifically, the influence of the size of the university or college, financial profile, academic and athletic standing, and athletic department structure. The overall questions the proposed research addresses are: how does athlete status influence the salience of, and conflict between, student-athletes’ identities related to academics, athletics, and social life? And, what is the effect of organizational context on this relationship? We will also consider the moderating role of other social identity variables, including race, gender and socio-economic status. To examine our core questions, we designed a survey that captures both quantitative and qualitative data on student-athletes. In addition, we are collecting archival, organizational data.

Theoretical Background

The concept of identity is complex. It is shaped by politics, historical contexts, and social norms. Further, identities are multi-dimensional and often overlap (Rivera, Soderstrom, and Uzzi, 2010). Identity salience refers to the likelihood of one identity surfacing in a variety of situations that require role commitment and behavioral responses (Stryker, 1968). Previous studies on student-athletes have shown how different tasks, behaviors, and experiences can influence the salience of student-athletes’ competing identities (e.g., Yopyk & Prentice, 2005; Adler & Adler 1987). We know less about the influence of status on student-athlete identity salience and identity conflict; yet, the meaning we attribute to ourselves depends, in part, upon how others view us (Tatum, 1997). A student-athlete’s status, conferred by others, likely affects how a student-athlete views him or herself. Further, the organizational context is often neglected in studies of athlete identity, yet broader work indicates that identity salience is shaped the organizational environment (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Finally, previous research tends to examine two dimensions of
student-athlete identity: student identity and athlete identity. Our study will consider another dimension: identity related to social life (e.g. Greek life, clubs, friendship groups).

Data and Method

We are conducting a survey of student-athletes across 23 universities in the U.S. These universities were selected to include representation across the five main collegiate athletic conferences (i.e. Big Ten, Big Twelve, ACC, SEC, Pac Twelve), and within each of those, variation in enrollment and athletic department budget. The survey includes both Likert-type questions, as well as open-ended questions. These will allow us to conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses of student-athlete experiences and identities. We will also collect archival data on each of the universities, including financial data (e.g. endowment and athletic budget), athletic and academic standing, size (i.e. enrollment), and athletic department structure.

The first part of the survey focuses on assessing student-athletes’ identity salience in terms of athletics, academics, and social life. We use 27 Likert-style questions that were adapted from existing scales, including the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) and the Public-Private Athletic Identity Scale (PPAIS) (Nasco & Webb, 2006). For example, items include: “Being a capable athlete [student] is central to who I am” and “My social life is the most important part of my life.” The second section of the survey includes open-ended questions on identity salience and conflict (e.g. please provide examples of times when they felt conflict between your role as a student and as an athlete). The final section includes questions related to athlete status, including sport played (to identify whether the student is on a revenue generating team), leadership role(s) on the team, and whether the student is a full or partial scholarship athlete. We also ask additional demographic questions, to include as possible mediators or controls, such as gender, race, socio-economic status, year in school, academic major, graduation plans, whether they are a scholarship athlete, and GPA.

We will use Qualtrics to distribute the survey to all current student-athletes at each target university through email (using publically-available email addresses). The quantitative data gathered from the survey will be analyzed through statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics, and structural equation modeling. Qualitative data gathered from the open-ended questions on the survey will be coded and analyzed systematically using qualitative analytic techniques and software (e.g. NVivo). The analytic approach we will use is iteration between empirical data and theoretical constructs, or analytic abduction (Peirce, 1955).

Discussion and Implications

The bifurcated identity of student-athletes as “students” and “athletes” has been the subject of prior work. Building on this literature, within the broader sport management discipline, our study furthers understanding of the effect of athlete status and organizational context on whether student-athletes view themselves more as athletes, students, or members of other social groups. The findings of this study have the potential to inform policies regarding collegiate athletics, including which groups are more vulnerable to issues of identity conflict and who to target for greater inclusiveness in the student experience.