Perceptions of Equity: The Perspective of the Intercollegiate Student-Athlete

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Equity Theory is centered on the idea that if a person believes that their input to output ratio is different when compared to others dissatisfaction will exist (Adams, 1965). In the setting of intercollegiate athletics, outcomes could include scholarship level and perceived benefits. Input could be time and effort put into being a member of the team through various requirements. If inequity exists, an athlete may alter their output or leave the team. While it is true that most research on equity has centered on pay, there have been studies that did analyze equity among athletes (Harder, 1991) and coaches/administrators (Hums & Chelladuri, 1994). However, there has been a dearth of research related to the perceptions of equity from the viewpoint of the intercollegiate student-athlete. In fact, Schneider (2011) provided initial insight into student-athletes perceptions of equity. However, he also concluded that without further research into the perception of the students-athlete any conclusions must be made with caution.

Perceptions of equity has become increasingly important in college athletics over the past few years. As television contracts, coaches’ salaries, and revenue from licensed products continue to rise, it is anticipated that the student-athlete may begin to become increasingly aware of equity imbalances. The issue of equity among the college athletes is debated with compelling arguments both for and against increasing the allowable compensation to student-athletes. Journalists and scholars alike have discussed reasons why intercollegiate student-athletes should be paid, in addition to an athletic scholarship. The fact that an athletic scholarship does not cover the total cost of attending college (Fish, 1997; Taylor, 2013), potential reduction of illegal payments (Adams, 1996; Peteric; 2014), and changes in revenue generated (Welp, 2010; Buckley, 2013) are the most often forwarded reasons for increasing pay to college athletes. Opponents of increasing payment beyond an athletic scholarship argue a scholarship is adequate pay (Richards, 1996; Smyly, 2013), lack of funds prohibit additional payment (Bradley, 1995; Schneider, 2011), and paying college athletes would jeopardize the non-profit status enjoyed by the NCAA (Byers, 1995).

Despite the popularity of the debate as to whether college student-athletes should receive additional compensation, there has been a void of research that determines the perceptions of those directly impacted by this issue. Both student-athletes and coaches have been relatively silent on this issue. Smith (2014) stated that the lack of accessibility to college athletes makes it virtually impossible to garner their perceptions. Although difficult, there has been limited research related to college athletes’ perceptions of equity. Further, the findings indicate that their perceptions tend to change as the social climate changes. Sack (1988) reported that a majority of Division I student-athletes surveyed believed that they were adequately rewarded for their participation in intercollegiate athletics. Conversely, sixteen years later, Schneider (2004) found that intercollegiate athletes disagreed when asked if they were adequately rewarded for the time and effort they put into competing in a Division I sport. Schneider (2011) noted that as student-athletes progress through their college career perceptions of equity are reduced.

The purpose of this study was to determine intercollegiate student-athletes perceptions of equity. Specifically, do student-athletes perceive that they are rewarded fairly for the time and effort they put into competing in a Division I sport? Results from this study are compared to the findings of both Sack (1988) and Schneider (2004, 2011).

Method

In order to facilitate inquiry into the perceptions of equity among college student-athletes at the Division I level, an instrument was developed and administered to college athletes competing in typical revenue generating sports (football, women’s basketball, men’s basketball). All athletes competed in a major athletic conference representing universities throughout the Eastern and Midwest United States.

Data Analysis

A total of 195 student-athletes participated in this study. The data analysis completed included descriptive statistics (for gender, grade level, sport, and scholarship level) as well as using a t-test to examine differences between gender
(male/female), scholarship level (full/none). An analysis of variance was used to determine differences between sport (football, women’s basketball, men’s basketball) and grade level (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th year).

The results indicated that college student-athletes very strongly disagree that they are adequately rewarded for the time and effort they put into college athletics participation. Further, the results mirror the finding from Schneider (2011) that determined as athletes progress through their career, their perceptions of equity decrease. Despite the fact that studies to access the perceptions of student-athletes are relatively low in numbers, this study shows that those participating in intercollegiate athletics are increasingly perceiving inequity exists. This presentation will incorporate the findings of this study compared to those of Sack (1988) and Schneider (2004, 2011) and will include implications that student-athletes, administrators, and the NCAA will face.