The Structural Relationship between Community Service and University/Athlete Characteristics

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Abstract 2017-160

Athletic departments face ever-increasing pressure from the NCAA and the public to increase the academic success of their athletes. The challenge between balancing athletics and academics for college athletes is affected by a number of variables. Factors related to the college athlete, such as athletic identity and athlete’s gender, have been shown to affect their involvement in academic activities. Universities also have advantages/disadvantages based on their institutional designation (public/private). The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between these factors (gender, athletic identity, institutional designation) and an activity that has previous shown success in improving academic characteristics for students, community service.

The theoretical construct used to assess this study is Astin’s (1984) Student Involvement Theory. Student Involvement Theory supports the notion that student involvement is vital to student development (Astin, 1985). Student Involvement Theory refers to the physical and psychological energy students apply to their academic experience (Astin, 1984). It’s built on the premise that universities should provide only supplementary support to their students, with the expectation that students should be in the “driver’s seat” of their educational experience (Astin, 1984). This study will further extend Astin’s (1984) theory with an examination of college athletes, who have shown to often be dependent on athletics to connect them to academic-related activities (Hardin & Pate, 2013; Huml, Bergman, & Hums, 2013; Ridpath, 2010), such as community service. There is a recent increase in college athlete research from a student involvement theoretical lens (Andrassy, Bruening, Svensson, Huml, & Chung, 2014; Huml, Svensson, & Hancock, 2014; Weight, Navarro, Huffman, & Smith-Ryan, 2014), but is limited in scope and does not provide an examination of the relationship between college athletes and educational activities.

One of the educational activities most frequently performed by students outside of the classroom is community service (Sullivan, Ludden, & Singleton, 2013). Community service provides substantial educational benefits to their volunteers, such as improved cultural understanding, increased academic self-concept, enhanced interpersonal skills, and many others (Astin & Sax, 1998; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Research on college athletes performing community service is limited, but has shown consistencies with non-athlete students on motivations to perform and benefits from performing community service (Griffith, 2010; Boettger, 2007). College athletes also reported additional benefits from their community service experiences, such as improved relationship with their coaches and teammates, importance of supporting their local community, and others (Jarvie & Paule-Koba, 2013).

For college athletes, previous studies have shown the college athlete’s athletic identity having a significant impact on their involvement in activities outside of their sport. Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) defined athletic identity as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role” (p. 237). College athletes with a strong athletic identity are at risk of stunting their academic and social development (Bimper, 2014; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). Beyond athletic identity, the gender of the college athlete has also previously shown to influence their involvement in community service. Female college athletes and non-athlete students have frequently shown to be more willing to participate in community service and focused on intrinsic motivations when deciding to volunteer (Chesbrough, 2011). For universities, previous research has found students from public universities are more likely to perform community service than students from private universities (Einfield & Collins, 2008). These results have been connected with the Land Grant Act of 1862, which provided funding for public institutions with expectations the universities would create civically-incline graduates (Jacoby, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between college athlete (athletic identity, gender) and university (institutional designation) factors within the structure of community service. The participants in this study included 7,098 student-athletes from 17 different National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institutions across all divisional platforms (I-II-III). A total of 546 surveys were completed by participants, for an overall
response rate of 7.7%. While this response rate is traditionally lower than acceptable, the high number of total responses provides an accurate depiction of the total population (Bartlett, Kortlik, & Higgins, 2001). To address the study’s purpose, the author used structural equation modeling (SEM) to “examine patterns of interrelationships among several latent constructs” (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2006, p. 4). SEM is ideal with models often including constructs difficult to measure directly. Scales utilized in this study for latent factors include Athlete Identity Measurement Scales (AIMS) (Brewer et al., 1993), Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992), and Inventory of Service Experience (ISE) (Taylor & Pancer, 2007).

Results from this study found a non-significant relationship between college athlete athletic identity and community service motivations (Standardized Direct Effect = .079, p = .145) and benefits (Standardized Direct Effect = -.043, p = .229). For gender, a significant relationship was recorded between community service motivations (Standardized Direct Effect = .214, p < .001), but not with community service benefits (Standardized Direct Effect = .025, p = .415). This means female college athletes were more likely to report higher levels of motivations to perform community service than male college athletes. Lastly, examination of institutional designation was not statistically significant for either community service motivations (Standardized Direct Effect = .009, p = .846) or benefits (Standardized Direct Effect = -.010, p = .745).

The findings related to college athlete athletic identity are surprising, and conflict with previous studies conceptually linking athletic identity with academic activities similar to community service (Albion & Fogarty, 2005; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Murphy et al., 1996; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). It also provides promising theoretical contributions from the perspective of Astin’s (1984) Student Involvement Theory. With this study supporting the notion of athletic identity not compromising a college athlete’s motivations and benefits from performing community service, athletic departments may be better suited participating in a supplementary role in their athlete’s academic development. This also provides support for athletic departments lessening the dependency of their student-athletes on their department for academic support (Ridpath, 2010). The presentation will also provide further details on the findings pertaining to theoretical and practical implications, future recommendations, and conclusions.