An Exploratory Study on the Environment of Development and Identity of Student-Athletes

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The topic of student-athlete development and identity advancement has been studied on a limited basis. (e.g., Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993), Marx, Huffmon, and Doyle (2008), Heird and Steinfeldt (2013)) Further, studies on the environment in which student-athletes develop and advance their identities is lacking. The purpose of this study is to explore the environment of athletics academic advising departments and the role they play in student-athlete development and identity formation. Examining these departments of student-athlete support is a meaningful undertaking because outside of the time involved with their sport, athletes often spend a large quantity of time at these academic centers interacting with academic advisors and other staff members. The results of the NCAA GOALS survey (2015) showed time devoted to athletics and academics have both increased since 2010. And research in the significance of the particular academic atmosphere of support centers is lacking. This study will focus on the environment at large NCAA Division I institutions.

Few studies have specifically addressed the relationship between student-athlete and academic advisor, as well as the overall effects of an academic support department on the development and identity advancement of student-athletes. For example, Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) developed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) as a tool to quantify the degree to which an athlete identifies as such. Marx, Huffmon, and Doyle (2008) studied athlete identity by how the student-athletes believed they were perceived by others. Heird and Steinfeldt (2013) explored student-athletes’ multidimensional self-concept (student and athlete) and identified events which could create difficulties in that person’s life if the self-concept is not nurtured and developed.

Several theories of student development can be utilized to develop a conceptual framework in this study. Lewin (1936) developed a model of student development that stated that the desired behavior or learning outcome is a function of the intersection of the person and the environment. In this study the intersection occurs with student athletes in the support services departments. Similarly, Brofenbrenner (1979) developed the Ecological Systems Theory which focused on the interaction between individual and environment. Finally, Astin (1993) produced the Inputs-Environment-Outputs (IEO) Model. This model helps control for input differences and more accurately measures the effects of the environment. The author has chosen to employ Lewin (1936) as the conceptual framework for this study.

Numerous research questions pertaining to this topic exist. For the purposes of this study, the following questions were included: What influence do academic support departments have on student athletes’ academic development? What influence do these departments have on student athletes’ advancement of identity? What influence do academic advisors have on student athletes’ overall development?

In order to address these research questions, the author will conduct a qualitative research study. An interview process will be utilized to gather information pertaining to this topic. The proposed study will be submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon IRB approval, interviews will be conducted with a sample of both student-athletes and athletics academic advisors. The sample will be representative of a large NCAA Division I environment. This presentation will (1) Review several theories of student development (2) share a proposed framework for a future study (3) introduce the proposed future study.

In conclusion, the findings of this study will provide practical recommendations for academic advisors and other staff members in support services departments for student-athletes that can be implemented. It is the author’s desire that the findings and subsequent recommendations will assist athletics academic advisors to better develop an environment within their departments that will allow student-athletes to develop during their time in college. The
recommendations will also provide student-athletes more information on how to better interact with the academic support environment.