An Examination of Hispanic Intercollegiate Student-Athlete Experience: Managerial Implications and Practical Considerations

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Hispanics account for 17.6% of the United States’ population with a projected annual growth of 2% per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). This growth rate reflects the proliferation of Hispanic National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes. From the 2007-2008 academic year to the 2016-2017 academic year, the representation of Hispanic student-athletes had more than doubled, and this number does not include biracial or non-resident alien/international student-athletes (NCAA, 2017a). With the increasing number of Hispanics in a largely Eurocentric nation comes a need to understand how cultural values shape Hispanics’ experiences in institutions of higher education, and specifically in the commercialized atmosphere of NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics. In higher education, Hispanics are the least successful racial minority in terms of degree completion and retention (Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015; Pérez, 2014; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2008). Intercollegiate student-athletes, as a subset of students within higher education, tend to rely on athletics as their main motivation for academics and be at greater risk of attrition than non-athletes due to conflicting academic and athletic pressures and demands (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). While there has been a significant amount of research devoted to African-American intercollegiate student-athletes (Bimper, 2016; Cooper, 2016; Harper & Newman, 2016; Hawkins, 2010; Steinfeldt, Reed, & Steinfeldt, 2010; Stahura, Brown, & Choi, 2016; Walker & Test, 2011), Hispanic student-athletes largely are understudied. Therefore, the purpose of this presentation is to discuss empirical findings of the lived experiences of Hispanic student-athletes in NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics, as well as deliver managerial implications of the research. Methodologically, the qualitative phenomenological study explored the academic, athletic, and social experiences of Hispanic student-athletes through semi-structured interviews. All participating student-athletes were enrolled at NCAA Division I FBS institutions, were members of intercollegiate sport teams, and were natives of Hispanic countries. Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and Latino Critical Theory (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Garcia, 1995) guided the creation of interview questions and subsequent data analysis. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts led to the emergence of fifteen sub-themes which were organized into a central theme- Language- and four main themes- The Bubble, Imbalance, Newness, and Living the Dream. Results confirmed that the combination of status and identity made the collective Hispanic intercollegiate student-athlete experience extremely challenging, and unique from other student-athlete minority groups. Ultimately, the investigation of this rapidly growing population resulted in several new practical recommendations and theoretical contributions for combating attrition and underperformance of Hispanic student-athletes. For example, results led to the creation of a conceptual model, the imbalance cycle, which demonstrates that heightened athletic identity can decrease social opportunities, subsequently causing imbalance and dependence on a small bubble of athletically-related friends and activities. This cycle, combined with the difficulties of language and culture unique to Hispanic student-athletes, is problematic. Intercollegiate sport administrators can use these results in academic support programming efforts, such as bilingual support personnel and a concentrated effort to increase involvement in activities beyond athletics, tailored to Hispanic student-athlete needs. The presentation will conclude with recommendations for future research.