Role Conflict of International Student-Athletes: The Distinct Challenges They Face and the Implications for Collegiate Administrators

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While research regarding international student-athletes (ISAs) has emphasized recruitment (Foo, Wells, & Walker, 2015), transition (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000), and adjustment issues (Newell, 2015), little attention has been paid to their role taking as both students and athletes. Compared with domestic student-athletes, it is more difficult for ISAs to fulfill athletic and academic roles concurrently due to cultural and linguistic challenges (Wendling, Kellison, & Sagas, 2018). ISAs are therefore more likely to experience role conflict. This should concern athletic departments because over 17,000 ISAs are competing at NCAA schools, making up roughly 4% of the total student-athlete population (NCAA, 2018). NCAA schools spend more money recruiting ISAs in the hope that ISAs help to increase team competitiveness (Fulks, 2013). Thus, managing ISAs’ role conflict is of great importance to university athletic departments. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore ISAs’ role conflict in American universities.

We adopted role theory (Biddle, 1986) to explore ISAs’ role conflict. Role theorists suggest that when there are two or more concurrent incompatible expectations towards people’s behaviors, role conflict will appear (Biddle & Thomas, 1979) and this increases stress (Van de Vliert, 1981). The extant literature has not yet explored role conflict of ISAs. Wendling et al (2018) suggested that conflict between academic and athletic roles remained one of the toughest challenges domestic college athletes encounter. ISAs likely face greater difficulty in performing expected roles because of their international identity and incongruence between different expectations from various stakeholders (e.g., coaches, academic advisors). Thus, two research questions are guiding this study: (1) What factors are related to role conflict of ISAs? (2) How do ISAs manage their role conflict?

Method

We will conduct semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of ISAs’ perceptions about their role conflict. The interviews will be designed to depict the ‘life world’ of ISAs, such that we learn about their perspective of being an ISA (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). ISAs will be recruited from Division I NCAA member institutions in the Midwest region of the US and will be asked about the difficulty in handling multiple expectations and role-conflict resolution (Gross et al., 1958). Interviews will be transcribed verbatim, and data analysis will involve coding a priori themes from role theory (Creswell, 2012), followed by open coding to identify emerging themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Intercoder reliability will be assessed, and to enhance dependability and creditability, member checks will be conducted with participants (Creswell, 2012).

Expected findings

This study is in progress and will be completed by May 2019. We expect ISAs experience role conflict with three different roles: student, athlete, and foreigner. ISAs will have different expectations for each role. Based on role theory, we expect time constraint, stakeholders’ expectations, institutional regulations, and the expectations ISAs have (GPA vs. athletic achievement vs. acculturation) to be reasons why ISAs experience their role conflict. Findings will assist collegiate administrators in designing strategies to assist ISAs’ matriculation and development as student-athletes.