College Sport as a Vehicle for University Identity: An International Student Perspective

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The increasing number of international students on U.S. campuses challenges universities to create an integrative campus culture in order to foster international students’ identification with the university. One strategy useful to develop university identity is through college sport. However, while sport serves as a vehicle to bring different groups together, there is limited understanding on how sport can be used to leverage foreign students’ identification with their university.

The issue of creating identity can be explored using the Multiple In-group Identity Framework (MIIF). The MIIF suggests an individual develops three levels of identity with an object based on group membership: the superordinate group, such as university; the subgroup, such as college sport fans within the university; and relational group, such as a group of students attending games together (Lock & Funk, 2016). The three levels of identity complement one another by providing benefits that would not be met with one single identity. Accordingly, this research asked:

RQ1: How do international students’ experience in subgroups and relational groups contribute to their superordinate university identity?

While the MIIF addresses the dynamic between university identity and college sport, it neglects the role of culture. As many international students are from cultures that are different from the U.S., they need to balance their heritage cultural identity with the American culture, which is heavily promoted in American sports (Berry, 1997). Accordingly, this research asked:

RQ2: What is the role of cultural identity in using college sport to develop international students’ university identity?

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with international students who had attended college football games at an U.S. university. Analysis revealed three themes:

Relational group is based on cultural identity. Interviewees formed relational groups in college football based on their cultural background. Quote: “I prefer to attend a game with my Chinese friends because we can communicate better.”

Subgroup is supported by American students. Despite limited interaction with American students at football games, interviewees became aware of their shared identity with American students through football. Quote: “I became more connected with American students as we celebrated our school spirit together.”

Subgroup identity leads to university identity. The perceived connection with American students made interviewees felt that they were part of the university. Quote: “When I followed the American students and learnt how to cheer for the football players, I felt I was a part of this university.”

To answer RQ1, while international students form exclusive relational groups based on cultural background, it is the subgroup identification with American students that contributes to university identity. This finding supports MIIF’s proposition that relational group itself is not sufficient to leverage identity on the superordinate level (Lock & Funk, 2016). To answer RQ2, culture serves as criteria for defining relational groups. This finding suggests universities should incorporate activities that co-mingle students from different cultural backgrounds to create inclusive relational groups in college sport. Meaningful interactions in relational groups should be designed to further leverage superordinate university identity.