Academic and Athletic Investment: The Effect on Perceived Stress

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The combination of challenges faced by student-athletes when trying to balance their athletic and academic responsibilities (Gaston-Gayles, 2005), coupled with the lack of free time, has created a perilous environment for student-athletes’ mental health. Previous scholars have examined how investment into academics/athletics changes as the student-athletes continue through their higher education experience (Lally & Kerr, 2005), but there is a need to examine how investment into academics and athletics impacts mental health antecedents, such as stress. There also has been a call for increased research within engagement concepts, with student investment prominently mentioned as an area of need, as a way to better inform administrators on the needs of specific student populations (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

We used structural equation modeling to examine the relationship between athletic/academic investment, sense of belonging, and perceived stress within the context of intercollegiate athletics. To test the model, a diverse sample of active student-athletes at NCAA Division I, II, and III institutions were employed (N = 238). The following hypotheses were tested: (1) There will be a negative, significant relationship between academic investment and perceived stress; (2) there will be a negative, significant relationship between athletic investment and perceived stress; (3) Transfer student-athletes will report lower scores for both academic and athletic investment, but higher perceived stress than non-transfer student-athletes; (4) female student-athletes will report higher scores of academic investment, lower scores of athletic investment, and higher perceived stress than male student-athletes. Results indicated a negative relationship between both academic investment ($\beta = -.21, p <.05$) and athletic investment ($\beta = .25, p <.01$) related to perceived stress. Transfer status was not statistically significant with academic investment, athletic investment, nor perceived stress. For gender, females reported higher academic investment ($\beta = .26, p <.001$) and perceived stress ($\beta = .20, p <.01$), but no significant difference on athletic investment ($\beta = -.02, p =.78$).

While previous studies have mentioned negative consequences from student-athletes being over-committed to athletics (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Rettig & Hu, 2016), the negative relationship found in this study between academic/athletic investment and perceived stress finds student-athletes will reap decreased stress by being invested in either their academic or athletic activities. Overall, findings implicate a need for athletic administrators to provide mechanisms, such as mental health support, for student-athletes’ feeling overwhelmed by their academic and athletic activities, particularly for women student-athletes.

The lack of a statistical relationship between transfer status and each latent concept was surprising. Results may mean that, unlike previous studies on the academic preparedness of students attending community college (Osborne, 1997), student-athletes attending a two-year institution are primarily attending their school of choice as a means to extend their playing career, and not related to their academic ability. Further research on transfer student-athletes, both two-year and four-year transfers, is needed. Results on gender reinforce previous studies on women and academic investment in college (Rankin et al., 2016), but provided insightful findings on women having higher perceived stress and no differences related to athletic investment.