Student-Athlete Activism and High Impact Learning Practices: An Examination of a Division III Institution

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Traditionally aged college students are at a stage of their development that offers important indications of future activist and, more broadly, civic behaviors (Arnett, 2004, 2007; Beachy, Brewer, Van Raalte, & Cornelius, 2018). For this reason, understanding the relationship collegians have with activism is of particular importance and given the new wave of athlete activism, additional attention has been paid to the intersection of college athletes and activism. The literature purports student-athletes are less engaged in activism than their nonathlete counterparts (Morgan, Zilvinskis, & Dugan, 2019) for reasons including potential negative repercussions (Kaufman, 2008) and an emphasis on volunteerism through the NCAA LifeSkills programming (Hoffman, Kihl, & Browning, 2015). Despite this, there is evidence and examination of increased activism at the Division I level, including student-athletes fighting for unionization (Epstein & Kisska-Schulze, 2016) and responding to racial inequities (Epstein & Kisska-Schulze, 2016; Frederick, Sanderson, & Schlereth, 2017). While the academic literature on this topic continues to expand, little work has explored student-athlete activism at the Division III level.

The Division III Philosophy Statement indicates its institutions should “assure student-athletes are supported in their efforts to meaningfully participate in nonathletic pursuits to enhance their overall educational experience” (2019, para. 10). Examples of these pursuits include opportunities such as service learning, engagement in faculty research, and study abroad. These activities are among the high impact learning practices (HIPs) that have been linked to increased activism (Morgan et al., 2019). HIPs relationship to student learning and growth builds on Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement which asserts students learn through spending physical and psychological energy on their broad academic experience. Therefore, a student heavily engaged in campus life is likely to learn more from the experience.

Building on the literature, this study looks to explore the relationship between HIPs and activism among Division III student-athletes, resulting in the following hypothesis:

H1: The number of HIPs in which a student-athlete is engaged will impact their activist behaviors

In addition to the primary hypothesis, the moderating influence of demographic variables will be examined. There is evidence that race and a student-athlete’s major impact activist behaviors (Morgan et al., 2019), but further exploration is warranted.

Data will be collected from student-athletes at a medium-sized Division III institution in conjunction with a more extensive, course-based project. Student-athletes will be asked to respond via a 69-item web-based questionnaire. The items addressing activism were derived from Corning and Myers (2002) conventional activism subscale of the Activism Orientation Scale, while the HIPs examined align with the offerings of the specific institution. Correlations and regression analysis will be used to address the hypothesis and potential demographic moderators.

The results of this study will address the dearth of information on Division III in the broader discourse surrounding athlete activism and offer a specific examination as to how engagement in HIPs impacts student-athletes. Practically, the results offer insights as to the institutional offerings that impact activist behaviors in student-athletes as institutions look to develop engaged citizens.