

Profile of community college athletes in selected sports

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Nearly 60% of all community colleges field athletic teams with over 72,000 students participating in these sports. That represents approximately 11% of all community college male students (5% of female students). Additionally, community colleges invest nearly \$50 million dollars annually in financial aid to student athletes. With such a strong presence on community college campuses, accurate profiles of student athletes and an understanding of how they perceive themselves is crucial. Subsequently, a 22-item survey was developed to profile student athletes in the most common community college sports, and to identify how these student athletes identify themselves and the role of sports in their lives. Through a purposeful distribution of surveys to 15 community colleges in the southern United States, 104 responses were received and used in data analysis.

Introduction

Community colleges play a unique role in American higher education, being particularly noted for their acceptance of diverse, first-generation, and non-traditional students. The result is a system of colleges organized by state to facilitate job training, to re-educate and further and educate, and to foster community development (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). With such an under-girding philosophy, the emergence of intercollegiate athletics in community colleges has been sporadic and uneven across institutions and states, and little is known about these athletic programs or their student athletes (Castaneda, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2006).

College athletic programs at many four year institutions are a source of pride and often constitute a central place in the mindset of the community. At the community college level, athletic team participation has been argued to be perhaps the most common student activity (Castaneda, 2004). Castaneda, drawing on national data sets, estimated that approximately 11% of all full-time community college male students participated in athletics, and 5% of all full-time female students. She also estimated that nearly 25,000 community college students receive financial aid for participating on athletic teams.

Community colleges have organized intercollegiate athletics into a variety of associations, with the largest being the National Junior College Athletic Association (419 members), which sanctions sport competitions and regulates the offering of financial aid to student athletes. Some sanctioning bodies are regionally exclusive, such as the Northwest Athletic Association of Community Colleges that organizes community college athletics for Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Other bodies, such as the California Commission on Athletics, are state-specific for their two-year colleges.

Community colleges that offer athletic opportunities average seven teams per institution, with

a near even distribution for men and women. Athletic teams are, however, more common on rural college campuses by a two-to-one margin, with urban community colleges being the least likely to offer athletic opportunities. Further, of the rural community colleges that do offer athletic teams, as much as 22% of the male student body is involved in athletic team competition (Castaneda, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2006).

As little has been reported about community college athletics, it is particularly important to develop a better understanding of who is participating in these activities and how they see themselves in relation to the institution and the importance of their education. The purpose for conducting the current study was to develop a profile of student athletes in the most common community college sports, and to identify how these student athletes identify themselves and the role of sports in their lives.

From the profile, community college administrators, state legislators, trustees, student athletes and their parents can all place the role of sport in the community college in a better context. The result might be more attention to counseling, career planning, academic support, and even the recruitment process for students.

Understanding student athletes

Miller and Tuttle (2006) report that community college athletics are one of a variety of services institutions provide to help develop a sense of community within their host towns and cities. Particularly true in rural settings, athletics have been seen as a tool to allow high school students to continue participating and to bring parents and friends to campus to create a feeling of enthusiasm for the collegiate experience. In other cases, however, many students move within their states and even cross state lines to participate on athletic teams (Thein, 2001). The motivation for such movement could be to gain a competitive advantage to transfer to a four-year institution, to learn from recognized coaching staffs, and to compete at a higher level.

A great deal has been written about college athletics and its place in higher education (Sperber 2000), with little attention devoted to athletics in the community college (Castaneda, 2004) and the students who participate. For example, college athletic participation has been related to academic failure, negative intellectual stigmatization (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007), and a lack of intellectual motivation (Zingg, 1982; Leach & Connors, 1984). Studies on student athletes also

indicate that they experience high degrees of hostility, tension, loneliness, fear, irritability, depression and anxiety (Brewer, Petitpas, & Van Raalte, 1999). Additionally, alcohol abuse (Hyeman, 1986), eating disorders (Malinauskas, Cucchiara, Aeby, & Bruening, 2007), and gambling (Weiss, 1999) are found among college student athletes.

Recent research demonstrates a clear need to consider the global wellness of college student athletes. A recent study on wellness, for instance, indicates that, overall, student athletes report lower levels of overall wellness than their non-athlete peers (Watson & Kissinger, in press). Awareness and consistent monitoring for emotional and psychological problems are important, especially since such problems could prove detrimental to the student athlete's psychosocial development (Ferrante, Etzel, & Lantz, 1996).

Conversely, student-athletes have also been heralded for successfully managing the extreme time demands of participating in sports and achieving academically (Anyaso, 2007). A fundamental key to success in college for student-athletes is how they see themselves. Simons et al. (2007) noted that for many athletes their physical size can distinguish them from others, and that there is the possibility of stigmatization, result-

ing in a lack of respect by faculty, a duplicitous acceptance, awe, and disgust from fellow students, and at times near-worshipping fans. Increasingly important, then, is how student-athletes perceive who they are. Subsequently, the idea of athletic identity is important because it has a substantial bearing on acceptance, effort, and ultimately, personal drive, commitment, and academic success.

For the descriptive purpose of the current study, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) was used. The AIMS was developed by Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) and has high test-retest reliability ($r=.89$) and internal consistency ($\alpha .81$ to $.93$). The AIMS provides a description of how student athletes see themselves, reflecting both the strength of their identity as student athletes and the exclusivity of the identification. The concept of athletic identity has subsequently been linked to such factors as academic exploration, depression vulnerability, and occupational/academic major choice (Brewer, 1993).

Research methods

As an exploratory study, a largely descriptive survey was developed by the researchers, guided by the work of Pope (1996). The instrument is comprised of 22-items,

including 12 categorical response items related to demographic and athletic information about the respondents. The remaining ten questions are the Athletic Identity Model, a series of statements about how student athletes see themselves, rating their self-perception on a 1-to-7 Likert-type scale. As a domain of self-concept, the athletic-identity model is the “degree of importance, strength, and exclusivity attached to the athlete role that is maintained by athletes and influenced by environment” (Cieslak, 2005, p. 39).

The instrument was developed in the summer and fall of 2006, and distributed to an expert panel of faculty members and community college administrators to establish reliability. In the winter of 2006-2007, the survey instrument was distributed to 10 mostly rural and suburban community colleges in the mid-southern and middle-western United States. These institutions were purposefully chosen based on a willingness to participate and the inclusion of the three most common male team sports in community colleges: football, basketball, and baseball. Contact was made with a senior administrative staff member at each institution, and a packet of 20 surveys was mailed to each institutional contact.

The instruction provided to each institutional representative

indicated that the survey should be distributed randomly only to current, active team members on football, basketball, or baseball teams, with discretion left to the institutional representative for determining distribution ratios. Former team members or those determined ineligible to participate were excluded from data collection. Follow-up email reminders distributed throughout spring 2007, led to 114 surveys ultimately returned and 104 (52% response rate) included in data analysis. Although 200 surveys were distributed, it should be noted that each institution did participate in the study, with a range of 5 to 18 responses from different colleges.

Findings

The 52% usable response rate is acceptable for the current discussion, as the purpose of the study is clearly exploratory. Approximately half of the respondents ($n=51$; 49%) are between 19-20 years of age and are self-classified as freshman ($n=54$; 51.9%); just over two-thirds identify their race as White/Caucasian ($n=67$; 64.4%; see Table 1). Approximately one-fifth of the community college student athletes indicate that their mothers hold a bachelors degree or higher ($n=19$; 18.2%) and one-third indicate that their fathers hold a bachelors degree or higher ($n=37$; 35.6%). Nearly half of the student-

athletes have been raised in a rural environment ($n=51$; 49.5%), and just under half indicate that they have been raised in a traditional home environment with both parents ($n=46$; 44.2%). Also shown in Table 1 are the responses to the self-reported high school grade point average, where nearly two-thirds ($n=76$; 73.2%) indicate that they hold a 3.0 or lower grade point average on a 4.0 scale.

Student-athletes were also asked to identify the primary sport in which they participate, with 46 (44.2%) indicating football, 39 (37.5%) indicating basketball, and 18 (17.3%) indicating baseball (see Table 2). Two-thirds indicate that they do not plan on becoming a professional athlete ($n=79$; 76%), but over half indicate that they plan or hope to transfer to a 4-year college or university to continue participating in athletics. And although these student-athletes do not generally plan on becoming professional athletes, over 90% ($n=92$; 90%) indicate that they would in fact leave college early to become a professional athlete.

The final section of the survey instrument is the 10-item Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). The instrument has a range of scores between 70 and 7 with a mid-point of 38. The 104 respondents have an overall athletic identity score of 57, greater than one standard deviation above the

mid-point of the instrument, indicating a greater identity as an athlete than as a student. As shown in Table 3, the AIMS scores are stratified by the sport in which the students participate. Football players have the highest athletic identity scores, 66, suggesting that they see themselves primarily as

athletes. Baseball players have an average score of 51, and basketball players have the lowest score at 49. Additionally, a factor analysis computed on the collected data sorts demographic variables with overall AIM scores. Results identify that freshman minorities who play football are the most likely to

Table 1. Overview of community college student athlete demographic data (N=104)

Category		n	%		
Age	17-18	40	38.5		
	19-20	51	49.0		
	21-25	9	8.7		
	26+	3	2.9		
Class standing	Freshman	54	51.9		
	Sophomore	49	47.1		
Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	67	64.4		
	African American	32	31.1		
	Hispanic	0	0		
	Multi-ethnic	4	3.8		
Parents' educational level	Mother	Less than high school	8	7.7	
		High School	37	35.6	
		Associates	19	18.3	
		Bachelors	17	16.3	
		Masters or higher	2	1.9	
		Don't know	15	14.4	
	Father	Less than high school	2	1.9	
		High School	34	32.7	
		Associates	14	13.5	
		Bachelors	32	30.8	
		Masters or higher	5	4.8	
		Don't know	16	15.4	
		Home environment	Rural	51	49.5
			Suburban	39	37.5
Urban	12		11.5		
Raised by	Both parents	46	44.2		
	Mother	30	28.8		
	Father	14	13.5		
	Family friend/relative	12	11.5		
High school GPA (self reported)	Under 2.0	6	5.9		
	2.1-2.5	41	39.4		
	2.6-3.0	29	27.9		
	3.1-3.5	16	15.4		
	3.6-4.0	8	7.7		
	Over 4.0	2	1.9		

report high levels of athletic identification (alpha loaded at .8887). Additionally, student-athletes who report that their parents have less than an associates degree are more likely to see themselves primarily as athletes (alpha loaded at .7023). No other factors load at an alpha above .5000.

Discussion

Understanding student-athletes in higher education is important from both institutional and student development perspectives. It is especially true in community colleges, where attention focused on student engagement, participation, and particularly athletic involvement has been minimal. By generating a better understanding of who is participating in community college athletics, along with

why they are choosing to participate, faculty and staff will be better situated to meet their needs, counsel them to more effectively deal with career and academic plans, and provide institutional support mechanisms that can be helpful in facilitating academic progress.

Findings from the current study compliment Castaneda's (2004) work that explores athletic offerings by profiling student athletes on today's community college campuses. The community college student athletes who participated in this study are primarily in the 19-20 age range, hold a sophomore enrollment status, are White/Caucasian, have finished high school with under a 3.0 grade point average and originate from rural areas where one or both parents are high school graduates. Respon-

Table 2. Overview of community college student athlete athletic data (N=104)

Category		n	%
Primary sport	Football	46	44.2
	Basketball	39	37.5
	Baseball	18	17.3
Plan to be an athlete at 4-year institution	Yes	45	43.2
	No	40	38.5
	Hope to	15	14.4
	Uncertain	4	3.8
Plan on becoming professional athlete	Yes	22	21.2
	No	79	76.0
Would leave college early to become a professional athlete	Yes	92	90.2
	No	10	9.6

Table 3. Stratification of athletic identity by sport

Athletic identity	Football (n=46)	Basketball (n=39)	Baseball (n=18)	All (n=103)
AIMS Score	66	49	51	57

dents are mostly from football and basketball teams, although there is some representation from baseball players. Although two-thirds of the participants indicate they are not planning a career as a professional athlete, 90% indicated they would leave college early to become a professional athlete. This paradox is reflected to some extent in the responses to the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale. Overall, participants generally have a more-athletically oriented identification, but basketball players have a much lower level of athlete-orientation than football players.

Conclusion

As an exploratory study, this one should be replicated with additional student-athlete participants, especially making an effort to involve those from urban settings. Although Castaneda indicates that urban community colleges are less likely to offer athletic programs, they remain an important segment of community colleges. College administrators and faculty will be able to use the findings immediately in several ways. First, they will find it helpful to develop profiles of their own student athletes and at least nominally to compare them to these findings. The results will give them an initial measure of the degree to

which student athletes self identify as athletes. Such results provide a better contextual understanding of the internal motivation of students and can be helpful in generating athletic programs that encourage a healthy balance between academics and athletics.

Second, findings reveal somewhat non-traditional, first-generation college students, those at risk within the higher education landscape. Participation in athletics by these students should signal colleges to implement their early-warning and at-risk safeguards to help ensure their success. And third, findings clearly articulate that professional athlete status is something that desired, even if not possible or realistic. Such a finding also suggests the notion of athletic identity is high among community college athletes, a finding with considerable implications for student athletes and those who work to facilitate their academic and athletic success. In sum, community college athletics are an important element of institutional life, particularly in rural settings. Research needs to continue exploring, reporting, and clarifying the student athlete's role in college.

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