Athletics and Academics: A Mixed Methods Enquiry on University/College Student Athletes' Experiences

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Abstract : The primary purpose of this study was to examine student-athletes' experiences, particularly an in-depth account of balancing school and sport. The secondary objective was to assess student-athletes' susceptibility to the effects of the "dumb-jock" stereotype threat and also determine the strength of athletic and academic identity as predicated by the extent to which stereotype is perceived by student-athletes. Sub-objectives are (a) examine support structures available for student-athletes in their respective academic institutions, (b) to establish the most effective ways to address student-athletes' learning needs, (c) to establish crucial entourage members who play a pivotal role in student-athletes' academic pursuits, (d) and unique and effective ways lecturers and coaches can contribute to student-athletes' learning experiences. To achieve the above stated objectives, the study used a mixed methods approach. A total of 110 student-athletes from colleges and universities in Botswana completed an online survey that was followed by semi-structured interviews with eight student-athletes, and four coaches. The online survey assessed student-athletes' demographic variables, measured athletic (AIMS), academic (modified from AIMS) identities, and perceived stereotype threat. Student-athletes reported a slightly higher academic identity (M=5.9, SD= .85) compared to athletic identity (M=5.4, SD=1.0). Student-athletes reported a moderate mean (M=3.6, SD=.82) just above the midpoint of the 7-point scale for stereotype threat. A univariate ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was any significant difference between university and college brackets in Botswana with regard to three variables: athletic identity, student identity and stereotype threat. The only significant difference was in the academic identity (Post Hoc-Tukey Student Identity: Bracket A < Bracket B, Bracket C) with Bracket A schools being the least athletically competitive. Bracket C and B are the most athletically competitive brackets in Botswana. Follow-up interviews with student-athletes and coaches were conducted. All interviews lasted an average of 55 minutes. Following all the interviews, all recordings were transcribed which is an obvious first step in qualitative data analysis process. The researcher and an independent academic with experience in qualitative research independently listened to all recordings of the interviews and read the transcripts several times. Qualitative data results indicate that even though student-athletes reported a slightly higher student identity, there are parallels between sports and academic structures on college campuses. Results also provide evidence of lack of academic support for student-athletes. It is therefore crucial for student-athletes to have access to academic support services (e.g., tutoring, flexible study times, and reduced academic loads) to meet their academic needs. Coaches and lecturers play a fundamental role in sporting student-athletes. Coaches and professors' academic efficacy on student-athletes enhances student-athletes' academic confidence. Results are discussed within the stereotype threat theory.

Keywords : athletic identity, colligiate sport, sterotype threat, student athletes