

Applying Student Involvement Theory to Intercollegiate Athletics: Astin's Model and Its Relationship to Developmental Issues

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Quality of student effort, though a relatively new area of emphasis within higher education, is a concept deserving much attention. Proponents of this idea contend that students' use of facilities and their response to opportunities within the college framework has great influence on personal development (Astin, 1984; Pace, 1979). This development is not only served by involvement in academic functions but also by various social activities.

Though the importance of the student being an active participant in the learning process can be traced back to the writing of the Student Personnel Point of View in 1937, recent attention was focused on this topic in a report published by the National Institute of Education's Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (1984). This group concluded that an outstanding learning environment incorporates three essential conditions: student involvement, high expectations, and assessment and feedback.

Astin (1984) defined involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. This idea served as the first of five basic statements composing a comprehensive involvement theory which has its roots in a longitudinal study of college dropouts (Astin, 1975):

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination).
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum: that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.

3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).

4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.

5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement (1984, 298).

Understanding this involvement concept is especially crucial for student affairs professionals working with intercollegiate athletes. While all campus subgroups face varying pressures, major college athletes are in a unique situation because, as Rhatigan (1984) contended, they serve two masters. Student-athletes are required to contribute considerable energy to both the academic and athletic aspects of their college experience. They must be enrolled in at least 12 hours per semester or quarter and pass at least 24 or 36 hours per year while spending, in many cases, well over 20 hours per week in practice and games.

This presents an inherent conflict in the life of a college athlete. If involvement is of critical importance, it must be realized that the demands on student-athletes may seriously limit their involvement in campus activities outside of the classroom and practice field. If campus involvement is indeed necessary for personal development, questions arise as to the role of intercollegiate athletics in performing in institutions of higher learning.

This analysis represents an overview of the factors deemed important by Astin's research and applies these topics to student-athletes. The critical theme is not whether intercollegiate athletics should exist, but rather a review of the principles currently practiced in college sports and their impact on the personal development of the young men and women who represent universities in athletic endeavors.

Application of Five Basic Statements

The five basic statements presented in Astin's involvement theory have direct application to athletic academic advising and counseling. By under-

standing the relationship between athletic academic advising policy formation and the variables influencing student involvement, one can better assess the outcomes of their programming efforts.

Statement 1 - In general, the student athletes expend extensive physical and psychological energy in their sport and are expected to do the same in academic pursuits. Specifically, the basic fundamental skills in both areas are prerequisites for success. The FAST advising program at Washington State University (Harney, Brigham, and Sanders, 1986) supported research highlighting that successful college students attend class regularly, take understandable notes in some organized manner, turn in assignments on time, and take tests on time. Successful athletic performance could be said to stem from basic skills gained from consistent practice attendance, repetition of skills, and timely feedback.

Kramer (1986) highlighted three areas of concurrence between performance in the classroom and successful athletic performance. These include: 1) Each includes a basic set of skills, procedures, routines, or knowledge that are prerequisite to later, sophisticated performance; 2) Each challenges the performer to apply the basic skills in some creative manner, to generalize specific skills to emerging performance, and to function as a practiced, but developing participant; and 3) The student participates in assessing, critiquing, or grading his/her performance against some standard of achievement.

Statement 2 - As involvement occurs along a continuum, it appears realistic to say that student-athletes invest various degrees of involvement in their sports as well as the classroom and social arenas. Variables impacting on this concept include academic major, status in sport (starter, substitute, bench sitter, or redshirt), won-loss success of sport, year in school, difficulty of classes, and critical periods of semesters such as mid-term exams and finals. The necessity and pressure of passing hours in summer school to remain eligible could be seen as influential on the degree of involvement.

Statement 3 - In terms of quantity of credit hours attempted, student-athletes measure comparably with non-athletes but the quality of involvement within those hours is a legitimate source of concern. Active participation in class activities and frequency of interaction with faculty are two qualitative features of great importance that can often be difficult to assess.

To promote the quality issue, most universities have established tutorial programs to generate a more active learning process. Additionally, classroom progress reports and/or faculty mentor programs have been instituted to aid in the promotion of more consistent student-faculty interaction.

The conflict of quantitative versus qualitative features is also the basis for the argument surrounding structured study hall programs. Do more hours mean better grades? Does sitting in a room with other freshmen and probationary students and looking at textbooks constitute a legitimate effort at study time? Do mandated hours benefit underprepared students? Does the weekly required number of study hours (usually a randomly selected amount ranging from 6-10 hours) become a goal for student-athletes instead of a starting point?

Statement 4 - The reference to educational programs by Astin includes all endeavors the student-athlete may encounter. Student learning and personal development is highly influenced by the degree of involvement in sport, classroom, social aspects, and the university community.

The amount of learning and development is greatly influenced by the internal motivation of a particular individual. Generating a student-athlete's interest in athletic participation is, for all practical purposes, a given, but encouraging them to apply some of the same enthusiasm and effort toward general campus events is highly challenging no matter how influential these opportunities may be on total development.

Statement 5 - Educational policies and practices for student-athletes must stress a self-help philosophy. Because numerous student-athletes tend to be highly dependent on instructions and guidance from coaches and advisors, programming needs to be established to increase personal involvement and ownership in their various activities.

Policies requiring student-athletes to go through "regular" university channels may at first seem bothersome and unnecessary to the athletes but, in the end, may lead to a variety of formal, or informal, learning situations. Because of "special" admissions, orientation, scheduling, housing, meals, and other policies, student-athletes many times become dependent that others will take care of their affairs. Current practices should be geared toward increasing personal ownership in all campus events. The skills acquired in mastering the university bureaucracy can be very beneficial and transferable to a variety of settings.

Variables Influencing Involvement

Time

Astin suggested that the most precious institutional resource may be student time. If this premise is accepted, the amount of time required for participation in intercollegiate athletics (particularly football, basketball, and, due to numerous daytime game conflicts, baseball) should be carefully examined. Proposals to limit the length of playing seasons have been examined by college presidents and athletic directors (NCAA News, 1987) as these concerned professionals evaluate the sometimes overzealous game preparation and travel expectations which may detract from involvement in the general campus community.

Rhatigan (1984) analyzed major college basketball schedules and found that student-athletes could be required to miss as much as 20% of their classes in a semester. These absences are usually bunched toward the first half of the spring semester forcing them to try to catch up in the classroom after the close of the season.

While Astin points out that intercollegiate athletics has an especially pronounced, positive effect on persistence, his research also highlighted the drop in retention if students work off campus at a full time job. With the current trend of extensive time requirements in athletic programs, it could be argued that intercollegiate athletics is approaching status as a full time job. Retention as an athlete might be outstanding but student responsibilities are continually compromised.

Energy

In a related area, the theory of student involvement suggests that the psychic and physical time and energy of students are finite. With the mental and physical expectations of major college athletic programs, it could be true that student-athletes are being pushed beyond a reasonable limit. Physical expectations such as lengthy practices or "two-a days" are commonly recognized but the mental exertion associated with memorizing and applying formations, techniques, and opponent tendencies can create mental exhaustion. Surely, reading textbooks or studying notes could be viewed as drudgery by someone who has spent hours visualizing the figures and explanations of a playbook.

Classroom Participation

This drain on time and energy definitely can be reflected in classroom involvement. Lack of energy is obviously a serious detriment to classroom concentration and performance but an additional obstacle of much importance is disinterest. Astin stated that frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement and this is a serious concern for all people involved with academic development of student-athletes. If a student has no interest in discussing progress or concerns with an instructor, problems can rarely be solved.

The lack of interest and effort on the part of the student can compound problems generated by missed classes and intimidation (a concept which has great influence from faculty to students and from students to faculty). Combined, these concerns could generate a multitude of academic deficiencies documented by failing grades and poor graduation rates.

Environment

Environmental factors also have great influence on involvement and, ultimately, development. While Astin positively related on-campus living and retention because of time available to develop an attachment to the campus and college life, residence hall issues of student-athletes are a burning topic of controversy.

Most of this controversy stems from the existence of athletic ("jock") dorms on many campuses. While these residences obviously address a common theme and allow for grouping of a particular subgroup with common interests, they also are viewed as providing isolation and preferential treatment for athletes. With Astin (1978) and Nowack and Hanson (1985) having shown that academic achievement is affected by living arrangements, it is understandable why student affairs professionals have such concern as to whether these living arrangements are simply extensions of the practice field.

Additional concerns facing this practice are its impact on diversity and interaction. It may very well be true that these athletic living arrangements, while promoting team unity, may drastically limit a student's personal development. The isolation created by this separation is obvious and it may also lend itself to opportunities for nearly complete control of athletes' lives by the coaching staff.

In general, the issue of challenge and support and its relationship to person-environment "fit" (Moos, 1976; Chickering, 1969; and Sanford, 1967) is influenced by the intercollegiate athletic framework. Recruiting, the heartbeat of

college sports, inherently has almost total disregard for "fit" between person and environment. It seems apparent that athletic skills, athletic "fit," and coach-player relationship take precedence in the recruiting process while environmental congruence is a by-product. Unfortunately, this by-product may seriously impact on the personal and social satisfaction of the student-athlete, especially black students at primarily white institutions as documented in research by Fleming (1984) and Styles-Hughes (1986).

Summary

All in all, the student involvement theory places the opportunity for success of all students in their own efforts and motivation. With Pace (1984) reporting that 95% of students nationwide agreed that their initiative is the key ingredient to success in college, it is evident that this is an important concept to explore.

This involvement concept is certainly a vital link to the academic, personal, and social success of student-athletes. Though student-athletes' college experiences often include unique circumstances as documented by issues influencing time, energy, classroom participation, and environment, they must nonetheless make progress toward becoming an active participant in the University learning process in much the same way as the general student population.

Collegiate athletic departments at all levels, under close scrutiny by the press and public, must view this developmental theory as relevant to their missions as assessment and accountability become necessary goals for the future. Study halls, tutorial programs, and money spent on academic support programs are all indicators of institutional commitment and effort, but they in no way approach the importance of providing the time and means for student-athletes to generate consistent and quality involvement in all facets of the campus experience.

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