Interscholastic Sport Research: What Do We Know and Where Can We Go?

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Interscholastic sport at high schools across the United States include nearly eight million sport participants annually managed by more than 300,000 sport administrators (National Federation of High School Schools, 2020). It is the largest segment of the competitive sport industry that involves billions of dollars in marketing, management, and personnel considerations. Robinson et al. (2001) has identified interscholastic sport as the “single most significant dimension” in sport (p. 21). Despite the undeniable influence on local communities and educational programming (Sage & Eitzen, 2016), empirically designed research examining interscholastic sport lags far behind the more commercialized college and professional sport dimensions. For example, Johnson et al. (2019) noted that only .05% of research papers published in sport management journals in the last 30 years investigated interscholastic sport. The disproportionate amount of published research relative to the size and scope of the interscholastic sport landscape is striking.

Given the lack of research within interscholastic sport, particularly by sport management professionals, the purpose of this presentation is twofold. First, the presentation will summarize the work of interscholastic sport so that trends can be identified. Fortunately, much of the existing research has been conducted in the past five years. The work of Forsyth et al. (2020a, 2020b) offers a meta approach whereby national samples of athletic administrators have identified areas that impact the high school sport experience. These large studies with mixed-method designs provide a host of potential research topics through the direct identification of policy needs. In contrast, the work of Johnson et al. (2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) has offered a more targeted micro approach on specific topics. Most notably, the investigation of competitive balance issues relative to public and private high schools has yielded important insights for post-season tournament policy. It is critical to discuss both the macro and micro approaches to current interscholastic research because they offer examples of how interscholastic sport has been conducted, and where the gaps in the literature offer research opportunities.

The second purpose of this presentation is to offer research recommendations rooted in the existing interscholastic sport research and relative theoretical perspectives. This point is particularly salient as a conceptual presentation for the NASSM conference because it can generate new streams of research and partnerships in an environment that desperately needs empirically-driven sport management research (Johnson et al., 2018). For example, the continued examination of public/private institutions will become necessary as the secondary educational system continues to create more private/charter schools (NCES, 2016). Analysis of these concepts through a theoretical lens of distributive justice (Beauchamp, 1991) ensures that future research and policy is generated in an ethical manner. Furthermore, “understanding each state’s historical, economic, political, and social contexts could call for case studies specific to each state” (Johnson, 2019, p. 45). It is these considerations, combined with the national recommendations of critical topics identified by Forsyth et al. (2020a, 2020b), that should guide interscholastic research into the next decade.