Student-Athlete Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A DIII Perspective

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Recently, the NCAA conducted a survey focusing on the physical and mental well-being of student-athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic (NCAA, 2020). The survey indicated that many student-athletes were experiencing high levels of mental distress and struggling to keep up with coursework. The survey also indicated that a majority of student-athletes were maintaining connections to teammates and coaches and felt positive about the support they were receiving through their programs. However, DIII student-athletes made up the smallest percentage of participants for the NCAA study, making up 28% of the total respondents and representing only 6% of the DIII population. Previous research has demonstrated that DIII student-athletes make up the largest percentage of student-athletes participating in NCAA college athletics; however, their experiences tend to be different than student-athletes at Division I and Division II schools (Gayles & Hu, 2009; Rettig & Hu, 2016). Therefore, it is important to further investigate the experiences of DIII student-athletes during this pandemic to identify the unique experiences that the smaller colleges and universities have supported.

Specifically, we were interested in understanding DIII student-athletes’ sense of relatedness with their coaches and teammates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has connected relatedness to important factors such as well-being and performance (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Nassrelgawi, 2012). Therefore, we believed relatedness would be a meaningful lens with which to understand the impacts of the pandemic on the student-athlete population. Similar to the aforementioned NCAA study, we were also interested in how student-athletes described their academic experience during this time.

To address our research questions, we administered an online survey that included a Need for Relatedness scale (NRS-10) (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2008; 2012), open-ended, and demographic questions. The survey was sent to 517 student-athletes at a small liberal arts college in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., yielding a 37% response rate. The majority of participants were 20 years of age who lived on-campus prior to the pandemic and represented 18 different sports.

Initial quantitative analyses of NRS-10 items indicated Cronbach’s alphas of .95 for coaches and .96 for teammates. Means for both scales were relatively high, with means for both teammate and coaches relationships at 4.4 on a 5 point Likert-type scale. These findings suggest that student-athletes in this study remained connected to their coaches and teammates even when schools were closed due to the pandemic. A MANOVA was run with coaches and teammates NRS-10 items as the dependent variables and the demographic variables as factors. The results showed differences among majors for both teammates and coaches. Qualitative responses provide further insight into feelings of relatedness, academic experiences, and general perceptions of the athlete experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research gives important insight into student-athlete experiences and a sense of relatedness during the COVID-19 pandemic for a DIII college. Understanding student-athlete experiences and perceptions during this time can help colleges and universities to plan for appropriate support when athletes transition back into normal play and to plan for future emergency situations.