Stereotypes of Student-Athletes in the Classroom: Views of Sport Management Students

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Many researchers have found that collegiate student-athletes experience a disconnect between the role of being a student and the role of being an athlete (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). There are many issues that may make it hard for student-athletes to be successful academically, which is something research has shown most want to be (Parsons, 2013). Beyond the well-documented time and energy demands of intercollegiate athletics (Ayers, Pazmino-Cevallos, and Dobose, 2012), student-athletes may be treated differently in the classroom based on their athletic identity (Simons et al., 2007; Wininger & White, 2015). This study was grounded in the conceptual framework of stereotype threat, in which individuals who know there is a stereotype about themselves may have a more challenging time succeeding in the area(s) related to that stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995). There is a known existence of a “dumb jock” stereotype that may have an impact on student-athletes, and this stereotype is shown to exist across NCAA divisions and sport types (Feltz, Schneider, Hwang, & Skogsberg, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to explore what stereotypes exist in the classroom in regards to student-athletes. This was through the surveying of students in Sport Management courses. Specifically, we explored what terms students would use to describe student-athletes and non-athlete students.

A survey was conducted at five universities. There were 450 participants, which included students enrolled in Sport Management courses. The majority of students were majoring in Sport Management. Both student-athletes and non-athlete students were included in the study. These students were asked to “Choose 5 adjectives that describe the classroom behaviors of most students that participate in intercollegiate athletics, participate in recreational sport, and do not participate in sport. Students were given a list of 21 adjectives to choose from (e.g. intelligent, entitled, athletically focused, competent, etc.).

Results from chi-square test of independence found a significant association between students’ sport participation and terms used to describe student-athletes and non-student-athletes classroom behavior. Specifically, athletes were described as intelligent, friendly, and helpful and recreational sport athletes were described as intelligent. Surprisingly, and differing from the dumb jock stereotype, these results suggest that students regard athletes (both collegiate and recreational) positively.

These findings have great implications for countering the belief student-athletes may hold in the dumb-jock stereotype. If student-athletes believe that this stereotype is not held by most, it may assist them with countering the possible effects of stereotype threat in regards to classroom expectations. There are also implications for those who work with and/or study student-athletes in regard to assisting student-athletes with academics.