Athlete Identity, Does it Matter?

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**Introduction**

On college and university campuses throughout the country, students identify with and can be examined through a variety of identities. Although some are more salient then others at various times, each possess the potential to impact a student in a unique and distinctive manner. As a result, there is an extensive body of literature on college student identity focusing on identities regarding race, gender, religion and sexual orientation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although equally important, the existing research neglects focus on a wide range of alternate college student identities. One such identity that is less frequent in discussion and research is that of student-athlete. In this project I will examine Division I premier sport (men’s football and basketball) student athletes to determine if student athlete identity influences student development.

I believe that this research will not only add to the current body of research about student athletes, but will benefit student affairs practitioners who work with student athletes. Due to the high status that intercollegiate athletics has on many college and university campuses, having a better understanding of this student population is vital when providing intentional and direct support. More specifically, the research will potentially provide practitioners a better understanding as to how athlete identity impacts student development. Additionally, this research can assist student athletes in understanding their own development and how that can translate into other arenas, impact their institution and inevitably their career. This is important because as stated by Pascarella and Terenzini in *How College Effects Students*, “Intercollegiate athletics is one
of the salient filters through which the public views American postsecondary education.” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.126).

In order to address the question of whether or not student athlete identity influences student development I will review the literature pertaining to student development, student athlete identity, and the connections between these theories. To accomplish this, I will begin by discussing Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development with specific concentration on Chickering’s seven vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Through this discussion I will explore the possible impacts that student athlete identity has on Chickering’s seven vectors. More specifically I will discuss how student athlete identity can possibly sharpen or stifle each specific vector and the overall impact this has on a student athlete’s psychosocial development. Following this I will highlight the research surrounding student identity development. Next, I will review the research regarding student athlete identity with specific focus on the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer, et al., 1993). I will then discuss the proposed research design with specific focus on the projected participants, the research methods being used, and finally the data analysis procedures. Finally, I will elaborate on the focus of my research and discuss the proposed outcomes and benefits that this research will provide as well as its limitations.

**Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development:**

Arthur Chickering outlined his Theory of Identity Development in 1969, and “proposed seven vectors of development that contribute to the formation of identity.” (Evans et al. 1998, p. 37). Several years later in 1993, Chickering reviewed his theory with Linda Reisser, incorporating new research which included a broader population,
making the theory applicable to more students. Through both pieces of work, the idea and model of seven vectors remained. In both studies, the basic concept of the seven vectors is that students move through each of the seven vectors at different rates, vectors can interact with each others, all seven vectors are non-sequential, and that a vector previously worked thought can be reexamined when a student is faced with a new issue.

When examining student athlete identity through the lens of Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development, I believe there is a clear correlation. Although not simultaneous and equal in nature, I believe that each of the seven vectors are impacted in some fashion by student athlete identity.

Student athlete identity impacts Chickering’s first vector, Developing Competence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In this vector a student often builds their intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competences. Depending on the interaction that a student athlete may have, I believe that this vector has the potential to be impacted in a positive or negative manner. One example of a negative impact is the interactions student athletes have reported having in the classroom that impact their intellectual competence. In one study, “62.1% reported a faculty member had made a negative remark about athletes in class” (Simon et al. 2007). Conversely, this vector can also be positively impacted with growth in a student athlete’s physical competence through a training regiment and the competitive nature of the sport.

Chickering’s second vector, Managing Emotions, is continually tested and reexamined during a student athlete’s identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In nearly every aspect of a student athlete’s life they deal with emotions. Be it on the field, in a team meeting, or in their room, student athletes are constantly confronted
with emotions. More often than not when we see student athletes confronted with emotion they are grappling with how to appropriately express and manage their emotions. How the student athlete deals with these emotions constitutes whether or not this vector is positively or negatively impacted.

Chickering’s third vector, Moving through Autonomy toward Interdependence, is one vector that is dependant on a student athletes environment and team (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). For many student athletes, competing on a team sport can be the factor to influence this vector. Some players want to be viewed as an individual, capable of making the best plays during the game while also maintaining a positive relationship with their teammates. This creates a struggle for individuals to make a choice between doing what will benefit them as an individual or to do what will benefit the team

Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, Chickering’s fourth vector, is one vector that the identity of student athlete has a varied impact or effect on (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Due to the nature of the team dynamic and the already diverse background of many players I propose predisposed progression in this area. Additionally, growth comes with building close relationships with other teammates through interaction and competition. Finally growth of intercultural or interpersonal tolerance can happen through personal interaction where teammates learn about each other and their competitors.

In Chickering’s fifth vector, Establishing Identity, student athlete identity may be transformed (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As noted with other vectors, I do believe this vector is again very dependant on the environment that a student athlete is in, and that the outcomes can be classified as positive or negative depending on the situation. In this
vector “identity includes comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, a sense of one’s social and cultural heritage, a clear self-concept and comfort with one’s roles and lifestyles, a secure sense of self in light of feedback from significant others, self–acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration.” (Evans et al. 1998, p. 39). For students with the identity of student athlete the aforementioned are all things they may be confronted with during their athletic career. One example of this would be a student athlete rejecting the identity given to them by their piers or the media while struggling to define who they are as an individual.

Developing Purpose, Chickering’s sixth vector may not be influenced by student athlete identity until later in a student athlete’s career (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). For many student athletes the thought of developing a clear vocational goal can be defined as continuing on with their athletic career to play past the collegiate level. Not until the realization that this career aspiration may not come to fruition is there a dissonance causing a reevaluation of goals and commitment to what may be of importance in developing ones purpose.

In Chickering’s final and seventh vector, Developing Integrity, I believe student athletes are continually working on and within this vector (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Continually, members of a team are called to concentrate on and perform as part of a team. These constant team focused conversations helps student athletes continually reexamine their focus from self to the focus of self as it relates to others. In addition, this continually assists the student athlete develop an individualized sense of their own values, moving them to become less reliant on others values for definition of who they are or why they take specific actions.
As illustrated in the examples above, each vector can be sharpened or stifled due to the identity of student athlete. Although not always positive or negative, the outcome is very dependant on ones environment and cues from the environment. In addition, due to the complexity of student athlete identity, many of these vectors are confronted simultaneously; further complicating and influencing a student athlete’s student development.

**Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS):**

When looking at college students today, there is a current body of research and literature that includes and focuses on areas such as sexual, religious, and gender identity. Through a review of the current literature, I have found that student athlete identity is one area that is consistently missed in the research. Of the research pertaining to student athletes, its focus is often very specific and does not deal with student athlete identity and its effects on psychosocial development. The specific research that focuses on student athlete identity includes discussion surrounding the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer, et al., 1993).

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) is the tool commonly used to measure athletic identity and “is the most widely accepted instrument for measuring athlete identity” (Groff, et al., 2006). Prior to the development of the AIMS, there was no “extant instrument with item content reflecting both strength and exclusivity of identification with the athlete role” (Brewer, et al., 1993, p. 242). In validation of this scale, athlete identity has been applied to elite athletes, recreational athletes, and non-athlete samples (Brewer, et al., 1993).
The AIMS is an instrument comprised of ten items which measure athlete identity using the four sub categories of exclusivity, social identity, self identity, and negative affectivity. (Groff, et al., 2006). Questions on the AIMS include: (Brewer, et al., 1993, p. 243).

1. I consider myself an athlete
2. I have many goals related to sport
3. Most of my friends are athletes
4. Sport is the most important part of my life
5. I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else
6. I need to participate in sport to feel good about myself
7. Other people see me mainly as an athlete
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport
9. Sport is the only important thing in my life
10. I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport

Respondents answer through a seven point Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. AIMS scores can range from 7 – 70 “with higher scores demonstrating strength and exclusivity of identification with the athletic role” (Groff, et al., 2006, p.132).

When examining the AIMS, and the application of the instruments that Britton Brewer has done with his colleagues in the article *Athletic Identity: Hercules’ Muscles or Achilles Heel?*, I believe there is something missing (Brewer, et al., 1993). Although AIMS is a reliable tool to measure athlete identity, it does not explain nor was it intended to identify a correlation between student athlete identity and its influence on student development. As a result of AIMS ability to measure athlete identity, I believe that my proposed research can ascertain a correlation between AIMS and several points within Chickering’s seven vectors.

**Research Design**
In order to empirically examine the possible impact student athlete identity has on student psychosocial development I plan to examine Division I premier sport (men’s football and basketball) student athletes. The following section will discuss the proposed method I plan to use to accomplish this research. Through this section I will discuss the proposed participants, procedures, and data analysis methods.

Participants

In this research, the projected participants I will study are Division I premier sport student athletes to determine if student athlete identity influences student psychosocial development. More specifically I will be examining Division I male student athletes that participate in football and basketball programs. I intend to obtain access to this population of student athletes by seeking support from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). This support will be obtained through the application of a research grant from the NCAA to provide both financial and research support. Additionally, I will work through the athletic departments at the Pennsylvania State University to both gain access as well as recruit participants in their Division I football and basketball programs.

Procedure

In hopes to gain the most useful and applicable data from the sample I plan to conduct a three section online survey using quantitative analysis. Participants in this study will begin by completing a questionnaire indicating their age, class, sport, and years spent playing that sport (see Appendix A). Next, participants will complete the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) which will begin priming them into considering their identity as a student athlete (see Appendix) (Brewer, et al., 1993). Participants will
then answer a series of questions about their identity framed through Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Finally, participants will be able to provide responses to a series of questions related to their student athlete identity and its perceived impact on their student psychosocial development.

I have chosen to conduct an online survey using quantitative analysis because I find that this method will provide the best chance to examine “trends, attitudes, or opinions” between student athlete identity and their student psychosocial development (Creswell, 2008, p. 145). Additionally, the open-ended questions will provide insight into student athlete identity and possibly the role that it has played in their student development.

**Data Analysis**

Once the raw data is collected and reviewed, the data analysis procedure I suggest is that a Chi-Square test is performed to compare the responses between football and basketball student athlete responses. Additionally, I believe that I need to examine the correlation between the identification as a student athlete and the impact that it has on the life and perceptions of that student. Additionally I believe that T-tests and ANOVA’s could be used to analyze the data to find a relationship between athlete identity and student development.

**Conclusion**

It is my hope that as an outcome of my research on student athlete identity, student affairs practitioners with have a better understanding into student athlete student identity development. As I believe this to be essential in helping move practitioners from
current perceptions that athletes are just ordinary students to an inclusive understanding that student athletes are a unique population.

Additionally, it is my hope that my research can provide groundwork in helping design a student athlete student development model. Although this outcome may be far beyond the parameters of this research project, I believe that establishing a connection between student athlete identity and student development is the foundation of a possible model. The creation of a model such as this would be of great importance to the higher education community. Having a specific model or lens to apply to student athlete will provide a method to better understand and provide services to an often marginalized, yet highly publicized population.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations in this project. The focus on Division I male football and basketball players is a notable limitation to this study. Consideration needs to be given to results that may come from the data in that it is very specific to that group of students and may not be applicable to other groups of student athletes such as female or non premier sport athletes. Additionally, the sample is based on voluntary response allowing some groups of student athletes to be missed due to their self selection not to complete the survey.
Appendix A

Dear Participant,

Thanks you for taking the time participate in this project. Please complete the following survey to help us better understand your identity as a student athlete.

The survey asks questions regarding your perceptions and beliefs about yourself and your identity as a student athlete. The answers may be used to assess and influence current or future programs and services offered to student athletes.

Your participation is voluntary. All the information gathered is strictly confidential.

Thank you for your help.

Age: ______

Class Level:  
Freshman _____ Sophomore_____ Junior_____ Senior_____ Graduate Student_____  

Residence: On Campus _____ Off Campus _____

What sport do you play:  Football _____ Basketball_____  

Years spent playing that sport in college: ________

(Likert Scale for Questions 1-10) 1. Strongly Disagree to 7. Strongly Agree
1. I consider myself an athlete
2. I have many goals related to sport
3. Most of my friends are athletes
4. Sport is the most important part of my life
5. I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else
6. I need to participate in sport to feel good about myself
7. Other people see me mainly as an athlete
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport
9. Sport is the only important thing in my life
10. I would be very depressed in I were injured and could not compete in sport.
Please rate yourself on the scale as you see fit.

1: Not at all  2: Occasionally  3: Sometimes  4: Often  5: Always

11. As a student athlete I feel competent when challenged intellectually

12. As a student athlete I have good interpersonal skills

13. As a student athlete I am confident in my intellectual abilities

14. As a student athlete I am confident in my physical and manual abilities

15. As a student athlete I am aware of my emotions and accept the emotion I am feeling at the time

16. As a student athlete, the way I express my emotions does not affect others

17. As a student athlete I can control my emotions

18. As a student athlete I do not allow my emotions to affect others

19. As a student athlete I am able to work on my own, without others telling me what I need to do

20. As a student athlete, when a problem arises, I can solve it

21. As a student athlete I accept that I need relationships with other people

22. As a student athlete I will not stop working until a project is finished

23. As a student athlete I appreciate people for who they are, not what they look like

24. As a student athlete I accept others no matter their race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability

25. As a student athlete I maintain relationships over a long period of time

26. As a student athlete I can share my intimate thoughts and emotions with my friends and they can share their intimate thoughts and emotions with me

27. As a student athlete I am comfortable with my body

28. As a student athlete I accept who I am and have a high self-esteem

29. As a student athlete I am comfortable with my cultural heritage
30. As a student athlete I understand who I am and I am comfortable with how I live my life

31. As a student athlete I know my purpose in life

32. As a student athlete I am committed to what I believe in, and I engage in activities that pertain to my beliefs

33. As a student athlete I make strong interpersonal commitments and do not break those commitments

34. As a student athlete I set clear goals based on my beliefs

35. As a student athlete I have a clear understanding of my values

36. As a student athlete I value and respect the beliefs of others

37. As a student athlete I act based on my values

38. As a student athlete if someone challenged my values, I would accept and respect their beliefs

39. Do you believe that your identity as student athlete has had an impact on you while at college? Why or why not?

40. How, if at all, are you impacted by being a student athlete?

41. If you would like to make any additional comments about being a student athlete, please make them below.

Survey questions adapted from:
-Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) - (Brewer, et al., 1993).
-Chickering and Reisser's 7 Vectors of Development - (Chickering & Reisser, 1993)
-www.studentaffairs.com/vcs/2008entries/UniversityofStThomas_hall.ppt
Reference


