

The Multidimensional Identities of Adaptive Sport Student-Athletes

Trevor Bopp, University of Alabama

Joshua Pate, Lees-McRae College

Athlete identity is the way someone thinks and feels about their status as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993), and is often considered through one or the interrelatedness of three dimensions: social identity (e.g., how an individual perceives themselves as an athlete), negative affectivity (e.g., how someone experiences negative emotional reactions from sport outcomes), and exclusivity (e.g., how athletic performance determines self-worth). As it relates to the experiences of collegiate student-athletes, research has focused on the influence of athletic identity on academic engagement (English & Kruger, 2020; Huml et al., 2019), career maturity and transitions (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2009; Bopp et al., 2021; Moiseichik et al., 2019), and mental health (Stokowski et al., 2022). Additionally, previous work has centered on the relationship between athlete and racial identities (Bimper, 2014; Fuller, 2013; Fuller et al., 2017), as well as the navigation between the student and athlete identities (Lu et al., 2018; van Rens et al., 2019). However, investigation of athletic identity among adaptive sport participants is scarce (Ronkainen et al., 2016).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore athletic identity among college student-athletes on adaptive sport teams. Applying the student-athlete merged identity model (Barger & Seward, 2018), we are examining the extent to which college adaptive sport student-athletes identify as athletes vs. students. This exploratory study is guided by the following research questions: (1) are there underlying relationships between athletic identity, academic identity, and sport self-esteem among adaptive sport college student-athletes; (2) what might be the potential influence of gender identity, age, and impairment on athletic identity, academic identity, and sport self-esteem; and (3) how might impairment contribute to latent differences in sport self-esteem and the academic and athletic identities of adaptive sport student-athletes compared to their counterparts without impairments?

Accordingly, questionnaires were developed to curate a holistic understanding of the multidimensional identities and experiences of adaptive collegiate sport student-athletes. Specifically, questions were designed and developed to gain insight into participant self-assessment and navigation of their athlete, student, and student-athlete identities, sport self-esteem, and impairment. This is an ongoing project which currently sits in the infancy stages of data collection. As such, it would be premature to offer conclusions.

However, we believe the results and subsequent implications of our study will be valuable to the sport management literature for several reasons. The most glaring of which is that this work will advance efforts to fill a gap in our current collegiate student-athlete knowledge base. We know the multidimensional identities of collegiate student-athletes, and the influence, exploration, and development of said identities while on campus can have a profound impact on the academic, health and well-being, and career outcomes of students. Yet, this is an under-researched space concerning adapted sport student-athletes. The more we know about participant experiences within this space, the more it can be supported through resources for adapted sport administrators to better recruit, retain, and coach student-athletes with impairments. Additionally, the results of our work can be used to inform and improve inclusive and accessible campus and sport policy.