

The Academy in Conflict: A New Wave of Faculty Perceptions of Intercollegiate Athletics

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Abstract

Ever since intercollegiate athletics emerged in the mid-19th century, the academy and sport have been inextricably linked. However, this linkage has also sparked a host of conflicts between the two sides, particularly concerning finances, resource distribution, the concept of the student-athlete, and power dynamics that increasingly favor sport over education. Faculty are often some of the most vocal critics of intercollegiate athletics, but much of the research on faculty's sport perceptions was completed in the early 2000s and 2010s, leaving much to be explored given some of the recent shifts in college sport (e.g., NIL, the Alston decision, conference realignment, ballooning coaches' salaries, etc.).

This presentation explores recent faculty (n = 111) perceptions of intercollegiate athletics at a midwestern Power Five institution. Faculty's open-ended responses to a mixed-method survey were deductively coded using conflict theory. Conflict theory is a sociological framework rooted in the idea that society is in perpetual conflict due to competition for limited resources. Sport and education offer two microcosms for broader society that inherently embody this conflict. This dynamic is further complicated in an American context where sport and higher education are distinctly intertwined. Sport does not simply serve as an extracurricular activity in this context, rather this intersection results in tensions with funding, societal values, or politics. Thus, conflict theory provides a useful lens to examine strain between the academic and athletics arms of the university through faculty perceptions.

The following themes appeared throughout faculty responses: (1) resource competition, (2) ideological conflicts, (3) power dynamics, and (4) faculty identity and morale. Resource competition emerged through responses that included disparities between coach and faculty salaries, contingent stability given the athletic department's self-sustaining revenue generation, and perceived financial prioritization of athletics over academics. Ideological conflict centered around concerns about athletes' identity, development, and treatment, as well as athletics' growing commercialization, competing values (i.e., educational vs. athletic), and faculty's perceptions of athletics' role and purpose as more of a marketing tool than an educational endeavor. The third theme, power dynamics, dealt with concerns over the perceived control athletic departments possess concerning what universities value, athletics' cultural influence on daily campus activities, and prioritization of athletic concerns regarding governance and administration. Finally, faculty identity and morale emerged with a focus on academic integrity, differences between faculty and coaches, conflicts between academic and athletic goals, and feelings that faculty contributions were often undervalued compared to athletics. Implications of these findings include theoretical expansion through the use of conflict theory and faculty's

potentially growing interest in or understanding of athletics. Direct quotes and additional implications will be explored in the presentation.