

Alienation as a Pervasive Factor in the College Athlete Experience

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Abstract

In the past five years, intercollegiate athletics at the Power 5 level has undergone multiple seismic shifts, including the implementation of name, image, and likeness opportunities (NCAA, 2021) and the transfer portal (NCAA, 2023), and ongoing conference realignment. These moves continue to shift the balance of power and expand the focus on commercialization and gaining competitive advantages. Within this shifting landscape, athletes are increasingly commodified, experiencing greater demands on their time, increased travel expectations, and intensified competition (Fridley et al., 2023; Smith, 2014; Smith & Hattery, 2015). These shifts also produce greater conflict between athletes' academic and athletic roles and responsibilities, mental health issues, and transition challenges (Brewer et al., 2017; Fridley et al., 2023). Athletic departments often over-provide support services or micromanage their athletes to address these issues (Hatteberg, 2018; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2017).

We contend that this approach does more harm than good, potentially alienating athletes during and after their time in college athletics. Accordingly, we suggest the Intercollegiate Athletic Alienation Continuum (IAAC) as a novel framework centered around sociological and ontological alienation. This conceptualization combines various sociological and philosophical approaches to alienation, including Marx (1844), Hegel (1807), Lukács (1923), and Marcuse (2002). The IAAC examines athletes' pre-college socialization and transition into college sport, sociological alienation during college athletic participation, and transition out of college sport leading to ontological alienation. We focus specifically on college athletics because, in the American context, alienation is often more pronounced at this level compared to the youth or professional levels, where athletes likely have safeguards from a guardian or an agent and professional contract, respectively. Additionally, athletic identity foreclosure is most prominent during the college years (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017), as while that time is traditionally formative for identity development, athletes face structural barriers to and reduced opportunities for identity exploration.

We conceptualize alienation in a college athletic context as a twofold process. This process begins during athletes' transition into and through their sport participation. Building from Marx's (1884) economic forms of alienation (i.e., the product of labor, the process of labor, others, the self), we theorize that athletes may experience broader sociological estrangement from activities (e.g., training, education, performance), the outcomes of their activities (e.g., recognition, economic benefits), their peers (e.g., non-athletes, teammates), and their broader potential (e.g., student).

The second part of the process occurs as athletes transition out of their sport. During this transition, alienation shifts to an ontological estrangement where athletes grapple with questions

about identity, purpose, and meaning beyond their athletic participation. This builds from the definition of ontological alienation as one's estrangement from what one perceives as their preferable, authentic self (Rae, 2010). In other words, individuals are alienated and objectified through various forms of control (e.g., social, political, economic) and reduced from complex human beings to objects (Musto, 2013). Thus, athletes who over-invest in their athletic self may subsequently struggle when transitioning out of their sport. For these individuals, being an athlete is part of their authentic self, and separation from sport participation would constitute potential alienation.

In this presentation, we will discuss the development and details of the IAAC, providing insight into how it can be used in future research and athlete development practice. Theoretically, the IAAC offers a novel approach to conceptualizing intercollegiate athletics' modern landscape by applying alienation to college sport and advancing understandings of alienation in sport to include ontological alienation in the transition out of sport. Additionally, the IAAC could support athletic administrators' methods of addressing athletes' needs by shifting the focus from triaging the effects of alienation through support services to reexamining the structural causes of alienation.