

# Examining The Dimensions Of Athlete Representation In Sport Governance

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## Aim of the research/project

The nature of athlete representation is broad and goes beyond conventional accounts of delegate models and voting rights. The purpose of this study therefore is to understand the dimensions of athlete representation in the context of intercollegiate sport governance. Three research questions guided the study: 1) what are the representative processes in intercollegiate sport governance?; 2) what dimensions are involved in serving as an athlete representative in intercollegiate sport?; and 3) what impact did these kinds of practices have on decision and policy making.

## Theoretical background and literature review

The increased democratization of sport through the institution of various forms of athlete representation across international, national, and local sports' governing bodies has been documented (e.g., Thibault, Kihl, & Babiak, 2010). This research has examined the existence and forms of democratic representation including the implementation of athlete commissions/committees, the election and/or appointment of athletes to these commissions/committees, and athletes' voting rights. Representation is generally understood as "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). However, critics argue that democratic representation goes beyond this traditional understanding, which identifies formal authority to represent (e.g., principal-agent relationships) and its characteristics (e.g., degree of accountability and voting rights; Saward, 2006); democratic representation also involves substantive understandings of the processes of representation, specifically how one represents their constituencies, the nature of the relationships, and the dimensions/aspects involved in serving as a representative in democratic institutions (Castiglione & Warren, 2005). Recently, in the context of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) governance in the United States, athlete representation has experienced a dramatic shift in its formalistic structures to afford athletes voting rights on national level governing council committees and their respective standing committees. The role and expectations of an athlete representative differs depending on the committee and the level of governance (national, conference, and local) and requires different aptitudes and capacities to give voice in decisions and policies. Therefore, the NCAA's governance system and the nature of athlete representation within the national, conference, and institutional levels provides a rich research context to gain greater understanding of athlete representation and the various elements involved in NCAA policy and decision making. Therefore, this presentation aims to build on the existing literature regarding democratic athlete representation in international sport contexts (Kihl, Kikulis & Thibault, 2007; Thibault, et al., 2010).

## Methodology, research design, and data analysis

Data collection is on-going. This research features a qualitative design and multiple forms of data are being collected to examine the dimensions of athlete representation in NCAA governance. Thus far, primary data was collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews with athletes (n = 7), institutional personnel (e.g., administrators and faculty; n = 3), and conference level administrators (n = 4). Approximately fifty archival documents were collected including information from websites, meeting minutes and newsletters. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and all documents were prepared and organized using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program. Initial codes were first inductively generated from the data. Data were then analyzed using open coding to generate broad categories and themes associated with participations' perceptions of athlete representation in NCAA governance. Properties and dimensions were identified during open coding to further define concepts. Axial coding was then used to pinpoint relationships between categories and to connect concepts to existing literature and theoretical constructs.

## Results, discussion, and implications/conclusions

Based on the initial data analysis, the representative processes within NCAA governance included identification and selection of appropriate representatives, providing feedback to administrators to assist with legislative decisions, and soliciting and transferring information between national, conference, and institutional level athlete committees. Dimensions of athlete representation included understanding governance and legislative processes, the role and responsibilities in serving as a representative beyond one's immediate constituencies, and how to put forth legislative agendas. The changing nature of athlete representation in NCAA governance has resulted in athletes' voices being in the forefront where administrators utilize ath-

letes' voices to inform decision and policy making. Given the findings, we argue that representation in sport governance has a "systematic character" that involves multiple processes and dimensions. To promote quality athlete representation, administrators have a responsibility to help educate athletes understanding governance and legislation processes and performing representative tasks, and effectively communicating information among the multiple levels of constituencies. The presentation will conclude with recommendations for future research.

## References

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