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Applying student development theories to intramural sports programming

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine student development as it is currently related to participation in intramural sports. Intramural sports are defined and a brief history discussed. Next, applying student development theories to intramurals will be examined as well as implications for student affairs administrators. Finally, recommendations will be made for administrators to increase the student development potential of intramural sports programs.

APPLYING STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORIES TO INTRAMURAL SPORTS PROGRAMMING

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The ways in which students use their free time is of great importance to student affairs administrators. Intramural sports on college campuses have developed into one of the most popular activities in the extra-curriculum available to students (Edmonson, 1978). In opposition to this growth has been the practice of reduced funding for intramural programs when budgets are tight (Smith, 1991). Intramurals have always been in a state of flux. It is considered an athletic program by some, physical education by others, and student affairs by a few. It often is allowed autonomy because no one is entirely sure where it belongs in the structure of the university. In recent years, intramural sports programs have moved away from the physical education department and into the student affairs division (Smith, 1991; Milton, 1992; Stevenson, 1976; Nesbitt, 1993).

A key for the future of intramural programs within student affairs is to justify their existence through goals that are important to student affairs rather than physical education. One way to provide justification is to show how students develop through the intramural program (Todaro, 1993b; Nesbitt, 1993). It is no longer feasible for programs to survive solely by showing how large a percentage of students participate (Zeigler, 1976). The student development approach involves intentional, theory-based activities designed to foster participant development (Bloland, 1987). Programs that choose not to consider participant development may have a difficult time remaining a prominent member of the student affairs division.

The process of showing how participant development occurs can be difficult for some intramural programs. Programs that have a long tradition run the risk of becoming routine with little desire for change (Mull, Bayless, & Ross, 1987). These programs will be faced with many challenges as their current modes of operation are called into question. A well developed plan for intentionally promoting participant development and a method of determining whether development is actually occurring should become the dominant justification process for intramural programs on college campuses.

The purpose of this paper is to examine student development as it is currently related to participation in intramural sports. Intramural sports are defined and a brief history discussed. Next, applying student development theories to intramurals will be examined as well as implications for student affairs administrators. Finally, recommendations will be made for administrators to increase the student development potential of intramural sports programs.

Definition and History of Intramurals

Intramural programs can take many different forms, but a common definition is recreational sports opportunities through competitive activities (Kleindienst & Weston, 1964). Intramural activities typically involve a schedule over a set time allowing each team to play a number of games against other teams. At the end of a schedule, a champion is named for the activity or sport.

Intramural sports can take the form of weekend tournaments or weeks-long seasons. The key aspect of intramurals, as opposed to recreation in general, is the competition between teams for a final prize.

Intramural sports did not enter university life until the mid-nineteenth century. Until that time, the Puritan ethic which dominated higher education dismissed recreation in favor of hard labor. Most researchers believe the movement for organized athletics can be related to the arrival of German gymnastics (Kleindienst & Weston, 1964). Due to administrators refusal to include physical education in the formal curriculum, students were forced to take control of their own athletic programs. The first intramural activity was a football game at Yale University in 1807, and both Princeton and Yale continued intramural sports in the late 1850s (Smith, 1991). Within decades, programs were formed at many eastern colleges.

Intramural sports saw unprecedented growth in the early 20th century. Most of the changes were brought about because of administrator concerns about students continued control of intramural programs. The first professional control did not come until 1913 when the University of Michigan and The Ohio State University created intramural departments headed by faculty; however, by 1916, at least 140 institutions had formal intramural programs (Kleindienst & Weston, 1964). While early programs were designed for everyone and emphasized the

number of participants, programs quickly moved to emphasize their quality. By the mid 1900s, the quality of intramural programs were partially based on participation rates and partially based on educational value.

Intramural programs began to develop professional standards in the 1950s. The National Intramural Association was formed in 1950 to promote professional development and encourage the growth of intramural programs (Kleindienst & Weston, 1964). During this same period, a large increase in intramural facilities was evident on college campuses. Other organizations, particularly health organizations, began to see the benefits of intramural programs and actively promoted participation. Although facing challenges, such as an emphasis on science at the expense of other areas, intramural programs continued to grow and thrive.

In recent years, many colleges have begun to include intramural sports within the student affairs division (Milton, 1992). One reason is that university administrators have looked at intramural programs and determined that they are more service-oriented than academic-oriented (Stevenson, 1976). Programs have begun to look at the issues being faced, such as a greater diversity of students, and determined that past methods of operation are inadequate for continued growth. A move to put intramural programs within the Student Activities Office is an idea that has been implemented with success (Boston, 1978). The influence of student

affairs on intramural programs has caused a re-evaluation of its goals and outcomes. Research into student development is just beginning and may initiate a new period of growth and improved programming for participants.

Applying Student Development Theories to Intramural Sports Programs

Student development is a key goal of any college or university. Intramural programming is an area where this development can be influenced. Students do not spend the majority of their time in the classroom, thus there is a large portion of the day which students fill as they deem appropriate. The goal of a comprehensive intramural program is to provide opportunities that are structured to provide enjoyable experiences that also influence student development (Todaro, 1993b). Sheehan and Alsop (1972) defined educational sport as structured "so that identifiable behavioral learning are outgrowths of the experience" (p. 41). Educational sport is only achieved when administrators are intentional about incorporating student development theories and practices into their programs. Student development outcomes cannot be left to chance; rather, there must be an intentional structuring of the program to promote these outcomes (Rodgers, 1991).

The question of participant development has been asked for many years, although research of developmental outcomes has not been conducted on a consistent basis until recently. The results of these studies have been

inconsistent. Sperling (1942) was the first to study intramural participant development and found that there were differences between intramural athletes and non-athletes. Groves (1966) found that there was a positive correlation between intramural participation and certain traits. Fletcher (1971) found a significant correlation between participation and certain traits, although there was a negative correlation for some traits. Stevenson (1975) found that there was no evidence that proved development occurred due to participation in intramural sports. The research done in the past has not conclusively shown whether development is hindered, enhanced, or is not affected by participation in intramural sports programs.

There have been many proposed educational outcomes from intramural participation. Bayless, Mull, and Geller (1977) stated that some of these growth experiences include developing cooperative efforts, managing emotions, controlling aggression, and adjusting to winning and losing. Leadership skills, skill development, and achieving competence are additional outcomes of intramural sports participation (Beardsley, 1977). Another set of skills attributed to intramural participation include character development, loyalty, discipline, adjustment to success and failure, and concern for others (Rokosz, 1978). Many of these skills can be seen as similar to the developmental tasks associated with various different developmental theories such as Chickering's vectors of

development, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Gilligan's theory of women's development.

The most inspected theory for use in intramural programs is Chickering's vectors of development. In developmental order, the vectors are: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Chickering proposes that students move along the psychosocial vectors from the first to the last. Students are seen in distinct stages and must complete one stage before moving on to the next. To promote and enhance development, a student must be challenged in order to stimulate new responses which bring about growth.

The educational outcomes previously described for intramural sports can also be seen in the vectors of Chickering's theory (Bloland, 1987). Todaro (1993b) provides the most in depth example to date of applying a student development theory to intramural participation. Todaro analyzes each of Chickering's vectors to discover ways in which student development might be enhanced. For example, the first vector, developing competence, can be impacted by intramural programs through the student's development of interpersonal communication skills. These skills are demonstrated in interaction with

teammates and opponents, developing leadership skills by being a team captain, and exposing the student to the need for cooperation by being on a team. Another example involves the seventh vector, developing integrity. Participation in intramural sports can help influence development along this vector by providing an environment where personal values can be tested and by allowing students to examine the value systems of others in order that they may develop a personal belief system. Todaro's use of developmental theory to analyze intramural participation is a step towards incorporating theory into practice. Programs can make use of the theory by ensuring that processes are in place to enhance the developmental potential of intramural participation.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be applied to intramural participation in a different way. Maslow's theory states that a student's higher-level needs cannot be met until lower-level needs are satisfied. The lowest level needs are physiological, food and sleep, for example. From there, students move to safety and security and end with social needs. Social needs are the most easily identifiable as outcomes of intramural participation but physiological needs can also be met. Intramural sports participation allows the student to exercise and satisfy the movement needs of the body (Smith & Carron, 1992). Social needs can be influenced easily through interaction in intramural programs. Programs offer students a sense of belonging that may not be met elsewhere (Smith, 1993).

Both low and high level needs can be met through participation in an intramural sports program.

According to Smith and Carron (1992), Maslow's hierarchy of needs can also be applied in another way. To promote full participation in an intramural program, students' basic needs must be met before addressing higher-level needs. Physiological needs should be met by providing appropriate playing areas and providing information about conditions. The next step is providing a safe and secure environment. Students must not feel in danger and must feel secure about participating. One way to do this is to use competent and highly trained officials who can monitor and control the playing field. Only after the two lower-level needs are met can the higher level needs of social interaction be obtained through student interaction and student involvement in intramural program design. Thus, Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be applied to intramural programs to see why students participate and also to see why they do not.

A third theory that has been examined with respect to intramurals is Gilligan's (1993) theory of moral development. Gilligan believes there is a difference in the ways that men and women develop that is not fully explored in the traditional theories of development such as Chickering's. Gilligan argues that men's development has a justice or separation orientation. Men look for one answer, one truth that will end future debate about the subject. Women, on the

other hand, have a caring orientation. Women are more likely to view a problem in a particular context and try to determine a solution which will cause the least harm to the most number of people. Neither way of viewing the world is more right than the other; they are just different ways of looking at the world.

Milton (1992) believes that by examining Gilligan's theory, intramural program administrators can make great strides, not just in women's participation, but also in women's development through intramural sports programs. Intramural sports programs have typically been designed from a male perspective. Emphasis is placed on competition between teams or individuals, with a champion named at the end of play. This mode of programming can be seen in direct opposition to the tenets of Gilligan's theory. Many intramural programs have much lower rates of female participation than male participation. Gilligan's theory may explain why this exists. Female students may not feel that their needs are being met through the traditional intramural program. Programs may need to be adjusted to take into account the female voice, thus providing more opportunities for women to become involved. Rather than competitive sports, cooperation could be emphasized in some settings. Leagues that do not keep standings or keep track of points may be more appealing to women. Intramural programs which offer sports that encourage participation and recreation rather than winning would be preferable (Milton, 1992).

Promotion of intramural activities can also be related to Gilligan's theory. Typical promotion involves show casing past winners and emphasizing the quest for a championship. Using Gilligan's theory, promotion directed at women focuses on friendships and interaction. Rather than competition, socialization is the primary goal. Applying Gilligan's theory changes how an intramural program operates. Modifications and additions to the traditional intramural programs are the answers for attracting female students, not eliminating competitive sports. Changes that take into account the caring orientation would create a program that is more desirable for both men and women.

Applying student development theories to the activities of an intramural sports program can lead to greater student development than may already be occurring. Applying Chickering's vectors of development, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Gilligan's theory of development provide different ways of examining the application of student development to intramurals. Intramural programs can become caught in the trap of believing that development will happen as a natural consequence of participation (Greendorfer, 1987). This is not typically the case. Intramural programs that wish to claim student development as an outcome must be intentional in their efforts. Student development will not automatically occur without the intentional application of theory.

Implications for Student Affairs Administrators

There are two primary implications for intramural sports administrators. First, administrators must be intentional in their efforts toward student development. Administrators cannot just assume or hope that development will occur without a concerted effort toward that end.

The development of students cannot just be assumed. Intramural sports administrators who are concerned with student development cannot assume that it will happen without some effort on their part (Nesbitt, 1993). The first step to being intentional about student development is to understand developmental models. An administrator can only be intentional if the theories are understood well enough to be implemented in practice. The next step is to use the knowledge about student development theories to create an environment that is conducive to growth. Rogers (1991) describes this developmental environment as one that provides the proper amounts of challenge and support. If there is too much challenge, then a student will withdraw and no growth will occur. If the environment has too much support, the student will not be sufficiently challenged to cause a need for growth. Only when a proper developmental environment is created can an administrator claim that intentional development is occurring. Without intentional efforts, students' development will be haphazard at best and possibly may be stalled.

The second implication is that multiple forms of development must be considered. Men and women, whites and Hispanics, able-bodied and disabled students, have different developmental needs. Also, students develop in more than one way, such as cognitive and psychosocial.

Student development cannot be viewed through one single lens. The only way to enhance student development for a diverse student body is to examine different developmental theories. Many theories need to be examined to determine how best to meet the developmental needs of students. The use of varied psycho-social theories such as Erickson's or Chickering's can provide different insights into the development of students. Likewise using both Kohlberg and Gilligan allows an administrator to determine what might be best for male and female students respectively. Using the male perspective in a program may stress competition and physical achievement. The female perspective would emphasize friendship and interactions. A comprehensive, developmental program would incorporate both views into the efforts of the program. The more theories that can be incorporated into practice, the more students will be helped. Using a variety of theories will provide the largest possible base for an intramural program.

Conclusion

As intramural sports program continue to come under the guidance of student affairs departments, goals and objectives will need to be modified. The

former goals of recreation and constructive time consumption will be replaced by a desire for enhanced student development. Programs that cannot make the transition to a student development focus may face a lack of support from student affairs administrators.

The application of theory to practice is going to become a part of every intramural sports administrator's standard practice. Theories such as Chickering's vectors of development can be used to determine the best way to structure a program to enhance participant development. The only way to maximize development is active application of theories that consider student development (Todaro, 1993a). Various types of theories need to be examined to ensure that developmental goals are reachable for all students.

More research is needed in this area. The idea of applying student development theories to intramural programming is relatively new. As more research is done, the more intramural programs can provide services to students that will help them meet their developmental needs. Right now it is the responsibility of individual directors to determine how best to apply theory to programming practices. Intramural sports programs can only improve as more research is done and the results applied to programming activities.

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