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Leadership & Learning: A Qualitative Community Service Policy Analysis for Student Athletes in College

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Leadership & Learning: A Qualitative Community Service Policy Analysis for Student-Athletes in College

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2024
MERRIMACK COLLEGE

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University athletic departments often have mission statements that align with the missions of the college they are associated with. In these statements, community service is often prominent in the goals of collegiate athletics and the schools themselves. This capstone examines the existing community service policies for student-athletes at schools in the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) to identify strengths and patterns for future schools to establish or modify their own policies. The policy analysis utilized qualitative methods to grade individual aspects of the legislation, rooted in Critical Service Learning, Student Involvement Theory, and Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation. While all university policies selected for the study had mentions of service in their mission and had digital publications of their student-athletes conducting community service, the retrieved policies generally did not establish requirements for community service nor define it, leaving interpretation for what is acceptable. Recommendations for university policies regarding community service and student-athletes moving forward should have clear outlines or examples of service events to establish best practice when it comes to creating positive outcomes for all parties involved.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... 3

Abstract.......................................................................................................................................... 4

Literature Review ....................................................................................................................... 10

Methodology ................................................................................................................................ 18

Policies ...................................................................................................................................... 18

Analysis Criteria ....................................................................................................................... 20

Materials ................................................................................................................................... 21

Procedure .................................................................................................................................. 23

Results .......................................................................................................................................... 23

Discussion..................................................................................................................................... 28

Recommendations ..................................................................................................................... 34

Limitations of the Project.......................................................................................................... 36

Implications for Future Projects.............................................................................................. 37

References .................................................................................................................................... 39
Leadership & Learning: A Qualitative Community Service Policy Analysis for Student-Athletes in College

Volunteerism and community service has historically been work performed by individuals of their own accord. More recently, organizations have utilized their personnel to participate in community service at a group level, including university athletic departments, which frequently have their teams volunteer as representatives of the school and program. While there is a general understanding of what a community is, a precise definition has changed over time, and from source to source. In 1907, community was described as a group of individuals who are together in a single locality with common interests and governed by the same laws (Dunn, 1907). While this definition is accurate for many communities, it also fails to include those who do not fall into the same physical space, such as online communities that have come to exist with the advancement of technology and the invention of the internet after Dunn wrote this critical text. Duncan and Brooks (2015) share the majority of the same definition, but note the difference of common interests or proximity, rather than both as a requirement. Regardless of specifics, communities exist globally in a variety of ways, and some are underserved or oppressed based on the people that make up those communities, which in turn brings a desire for change through community service.

Community service is also a generally understood concept, but often overlooked when attempted to define. The Future Farmers of America (FFA) note that community service can be broadly described as an organized engagement of people to contribute to a community, whether that be local, national or international (FFA, 2024). The service is usually focused on a single task or group of tasks to accomplish a single goal, emphasizing a commitment to meet a particular topic. In addition, the Events Industry Council (n.d.) outlines five (5) key areas of
focus to create an effective community service event: (1) make the service meaningful so that it will have a long-term positive impact towards the cause; (2) align the service with the mission and values of the organization; (3) utilize the unique skills and access of the organization to provide service in ways that others are unable to; (4) make the service specific to the culture and projects of the destination; (5) making it an engaging experience for both those participating in the service and those on the receiving end. Many simple acts can be considered community service, like picking up litter in a park, but a well-planned service project will create a more significant impact for all parties involved. Incorporating the strengths of the individual or team to select a cause that others may not be able to address in the same manner adds an additional layer of intentionality to the process. Although it can take many shapes and forms, community service is generally a practice of helping others through an organized effort.

Service learning is a similar concept often employed by schools at all levels of education, from K-12 to universities. It can be described as a hands-on approach to education that addresses a community issue using the skills learned in the classroom (FFA, 2024). Service learning usually has the connotation of a longer timeframe to it and will occur over an entire semester or academic year, rather than a single day or short term action. Duncan and Brooks (2015) distinguish this concept in service learning, referencing projects as short term works that are still considered service learning through the academic component that is incorporated throughout. Placements with a specific organization or agency may be short term or long term, repeatedly establishing the intended ideals. The academic factors included through an educational institution often differentiate service learning from community service alone.

Although both community service and service learning are concepts that are based around providing some form of aid to others, there are still differences between the two. While
community service can be performed by anyone, service learning has ties to the learning goals of the associated educational institution or course that the people providing the service represent (Rhoads, 1998). The service is an extension of the coursework and assignments, rather than service alone, utilizing some form of discussion or reflection. Community service without an educational component can also sometimes transform to fit the definitions of service learning if it meets learning goals, such as when students at a university participate in community service through a service center at the school (Rhoads, 1997). Additionally, academic service learning can be used to define service that occurs directly with coursework. Howard (1998) indicates four components to distinguish academic service learning, which are: (1) the understanding that it is a teaching methodology; (2) the service is intentional; (3) the experiential learning integrates with the academic; (4) it is relevant to the associated course. Incorporating a service learning element into a course should meet all four components to effectively achieve the intended pedagogy, but sometimes it may not meet all factors and can still be considered service learning. Both community service and service learning can be differentiated with three categories, which are direct, indirect and advocacy (FFA, 2024). Direct service is performed when the impacted community is physically present to receive the service, such as distributing food from a food bank. Indirect service is an act that does not directly engage with the community that will be on the receiving end of the service, such as organizing food donations to a food bank. Advocacy is the organized act of bringing awareness to an issue, which usually tends to target a large audience or specific people in power, such as lawmakers or senior officials of an entity. While there are some differences between community service and service learning, the concepts share many similarities and the terms can sometimes be referenced interchangeably, despite their specific distinctions.
Volunteering is often stated in conjunction with community service as it has a near interchangeable definition. Volunteering is a broadly used term to generally describe people who perform work without any payment for themselves to aid others (Cnaan et. al., 1996; Duncan & Brooks, 2015; FFA, 2024). This can change depending on the circumstances in which the service is performed, and people tend to believe a service is less likely to be considered volunteering if there is little to no perceived cost, including time and effort, to the person providing the service (Cnaan et. al., 1996). Duncan and Brooks (2015) also note that volunteering can be a monetary action and other services can be offered outside of time and physical labor to still meet the criteria for volunteering, as long as someone is not coerced into doing so via an external positive or negative reinforcement. Although there is normally no physical or social benefit to the person or group volunteering on the surface, people often feel gratification and learn valuable life lessons from performing volunteer work. While the general terms can vary from person to person and over time, all of these concepts (community service, service learning, volunteering) share the themes of social interaction and performing selfless acts to help others.

As community service has become a regular, structured practice of organizations, policies and other internal legislation around service have been incorporated to define requirements or goals, such as what meets the definition of community service for the organization, or how much time within a given timeframe (i.e. one day per year, once a month, etc.) is mandatory or suggested at a minimum. While some organizations have robust service policies that outline exactly what community service is with a clear definition and how much time should be committed to it, others have very generalized policies, or even none at all. Although having a policy on community service is by no means mandatory for any organization, it has become a normalized practice to have a policy in place that requires community service for members and
what is considered appropriate to perform for service. Having official documentation establishes shared knowledge and clear expectations for members of the organization to reference.

The purpose of this study is to review the community service policies in place across several comparable university athletic departments to identify trends in phrasing, verbiage, and measurables to suggest a standard template for schools or other organizations to adopt and modify to meet their individual needs for student-athletes. This will occur by obtaining and reviewing the policies of five universities in the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) to establish what themes occur frequently for schools that fall into many of the same categories across the overall landscape of American universities, with additional policies from schools that meet some of the same characteristics to identify potential outcomes. The goal of this research is to improve the overall landscape of organized community service in higher education through suggestions to policy improvements that seek to positively impact all parties involved, including the volunteering students, the receiving organizations or causes, and the people or other entities benefiting from the service being performed.

**Literature Review**

The scholarly research of community service dates back to the 1960s, but similar ideas occur in literature well before then. The philosopher John Dewey (1916) instituted the beliefs of community service through the ideas that education and service should be combined to create real experiences for students, prior to service learning being a frequent concept in education. As the first ever chair for the American Association of University Professors, Dewey did not approve of professors simply lecturing to students for them to memorize information without any idea of how to use it, known as the banking concept described by Paulo Freire (Duncan & Brooks, 2015). He believed that better lessons could be learned from real experiences, rather
than never leaving the walls of a classroom during the educational process. Some early American youth movements that share the ideals of service learning but also predate the term include the YMCA, YWCA, Boy and Girl scouts, college fraternities and sororities, and campus ministries (Duncan & Brooks, 2015). While there was no key term or definition to back it through scholarly research, the ideals for positive social change and empowerment were still present at the time.

Scholars began to take a research interest in community service in the 1960s and 1970s. Service learning was first used to describe community service in academia in 1967 in reference to an internship program from the Southern Regional Education Board, which gave college credit and scholarships to students who participated in community service (Duncan & Brooks, 2015; Kenny & Gallagher, 2002). Limited in numbers, service learning opportunities did not increase in frequency until the 1990s.

President George Bush signed the National and Community Service Acts of 1990 and of 1993 (Markus et. al., 1993). These acts focused on providing government funding to organizations focused on community service for students and schools, including at the university level. The 1990 act directly or indirectly led to the formation of the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) to engage college students with organizations across more than 600 American universities (Markus et al., 1993; Rhoads, 1998). At the same time, students in public K-12 schools also began to see community service as a requirement to supplement their learning in certain states, including Michigan and Maryland (Markus et al., 1993). While there is little debate that community service is inherently good, there was backlash during this time over school systems forcing students to participate in a minimum amount of time as a requirement to graduate, with the idea that “mandatory voluntarism” is an oxymoron (p. 411). There was also the belief that community service was diverting attention away from the educational goals of the
school, despite the previous research determining that service learning was an effective pedagogy for student learning goals while also positively impacting the local community.

Service Learning in Higher Education

Although service learning is a relatively new term, it has always been a key part of higher education in the United States. American universities prior to the 20th century were almost exclusively dedicated to giving what is now known as a liberal arts education, preparing scholars to be “agents of society” (Altman, 1996, p. 371). Although the overall direction of higher education has shifted over time to meet the needs of the country, service learning remains an important part of many schools today, especially those based on religious principles. Looking at Merrimack College, a private Catholic university, as an example, the mission statement of the school is “Truth Through Inquiry,” with the expanded version stating the school exists “to enlighten minds, engage hearts and empower lives” (Merrimack College, 2024). Specific points in the mission statement details also include “[cultivating the] awareness needed to make wise choices for life, career and service,” along with “[engaging in] social change in collaborative efforts fostering a just, peaceful and sustainable world” (Merrimack College, 2024). With service being a central tenet of a particular school, students engaging in service learning should be a common occurrence, rather than an occasional activity. Another example of a mission statement based in service is at Quinnipiac University, where two of their four pillars are to “create an inclusive, excellence-driven community” and to “nurture and positively impact internal, local and global communities” (Quinnipiac University, 2024). With frequent mention of service for higher education institutions, it is important for them to actively engage with these ideals through service learning.
Service Learning and Student-Athletes

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Life Skills program, formerly known as the NCAA CHAMPS/Life Skills, provides assistance to the over 1,200 member institutions to prepare student-athletes with the learning tools necessary for life on campus and after graduation (NCAA, 2014). Service learning and community service are principles that are core to the program, directly outlined as ideals in the program description online. The governing organization for student-athletes across the nation may emphasize service as a priority, but the execution of these programs is also dependent on universities themselves taking these ideals into serious consideration. Without cooperation from universities, the full benefits of service learning will not be accomplished.

University athletic programs often have a mission statement that is separate from the school itself, often building upon the statement from the university administration. Just like the mission statement of a university, athletic programs often identify service as a priority. Andrassy and Bruening (2011) found that 42 out of 70 NCAA Division I athletic programs had a mission statement that explicitly mentioned service or similar ideals while also noting that those who do not mention service may still be engaging in community service and service learning without public availability of the information due to lack of personnel and resources. This study used a diverse group of schools from all over Division I in size, geographic location, conference and religious affiliation, meaning that service is emphasized by all types of universities across the nation. Although it is not a priority for all athletic programs, mentioning service in the mission statement of an athletic program emphasizes it as a priority at the core. Even if it is not mentioned in the mission, that does not exclude those schools from still performing service as well, according to previous studies.
Although both community service and service learning are generally utilized for the positive outcomes, they inherently bring for both those performing and receiving service, this is not always the case. Duncan and Brooks (2015) note the negative connotation that community service can have, especially in the instances of it commonly being used as a punitive measure of the American judicial system, unlike service learning that is almost exclusively applied by educational institutions. Athletic administrations, while not official legal systems, deliver punishments to student-athletes for a variety of reasons, such as academic performance or NCAA violations. It is possible that athletic departments can incorporate community service into their punishment system as well, especially when fines are not a reasonable punishment for unpaid students like they are for professional athletes.

**Critical Service Learning**

Although service learning is commonly accepted as an effective means to increase the quality of learning, there is an argument that it can be further improved. Tania D. Mitchell (2008) contrasts the traditional themes of service learning to the idea of critical service learning. Traditional service learning provides reflections of the two components, being the community and the classroom, combining the themes of “learning to serve” and “serving to learn” to keep a cycle (p. 53). The idea of critical service learning removes the learning and serving mirror, replacing it with the combination of “a social change orientation,” “working to redistribute power,” and “developing authentic relationships” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 53). Critical service learning makes participants thoughtfully consider what types of service they choose to participate in. The emphasis placed on social change prioritizes meaningful work that alters systems, rather than simply helping people that will need help again because nothing has been
changed. While there are still benefits to providing charitable deeds, critical changes through a social justice lens outweigh simple acts of kindness over time.

**Student Involvement Theory**

Student Involvement Theory is the idea that students will be more successful in school, especially at the university level, with a greater commitment to various activities inside and outside of class (Astin, 1984). The original theory makes five main points about student involvement, the first of which explains involvement, describing it as a summary of the student’s mental and physical investment in their time at school, outside of the required class time and assignments. The second is that involvement varies from student to student and not everyone will participate in every extracurricular activity available. Some students may participate in athletics, the main focus of this capstone, while others may run for student government or some combination of activities. Students frequently choose to participate in more than one extracurricular activity, but their time and energy is finite, meaning that not everyone can do everything available to the student body. The third point is that the school has an important role in involvement, placing an emphasis on the need for the university to provide the necessary opportunities for students to participate. The fourth point is that the quality and quantity of involvement are both important. Spending a significant amount of time on one activity is not necessarily better or worse than spending a small amount of time on many different activities in this theory. Lastly is that there is a direct, positive correlation between a student’s academic grades and how involved they are, meaning students that participate in more extracurricular activities tend to perform better academically as well. While it may seem counterintuitive to academic performance to focus on other activities, productivity correlates positively with higher involvement levels.
People who are mandated to volunteer tend to take a higher perceived value and lower perceived costs to participation if they receive higher levels of support from their organization (Won et. al., 2022). While this study was focused on sporting events, the context for this capstone with the scenario of student-athletes as volunteers would differ as the administration would be the ones providing support to the student-athletes as volunteers. However, if student-athletes are required to participate in community service, they tend to have more emotional involvement and a positive outlook about the experience if they are involved in the planning of the service, rather than simply following directions (Czekanski & Brown, 2015). This allows those actually performing the service a choice in what type of activity is being performed and what cause is being contributed to, giving students a voice, which contributes to positive attitudes towards the situation. Whether it is for community service or service learning, students with high involvement, including student-athletes, will tend to have greater outcomes from school as a whole by participating in service activities, based on the research.

**Ladder of Citizen Participation**

Individuals or groups of citizens have varying interactions with those in power based on how much input the citizens are given when it comes to decision making. Arnstein (1969) models the degrees of citizen participation as a ladder, with each rung indicating more involvement as someone moves up the ladder. The bottom rung is manipulation, along with therapy just above it, where the citizens have extremely little to no power or choice in their interactions. Moving upwards in the model are informing, consultation, and placation, which are varying degrees of tokenism. In these levels, citizens are given the opportunity to provide input as a means to make them feel heard, but nothing ultimately needs to come from what they indicate if the people in power decide against them. The top rungs, once again moving upwards,
are partnership, delegated power, and citizen control, which are the true levels of citizen power. These tiers give meaning to the input that citizens provide and can often override individual leaders, especially with citizen control when the citizens hold their own power in a pure democracy.

In the case of voluntary community service, students often have higher levels of citizen power as they are given input in decision making. They may have to follow instructions from the service organization but are often given more freedom and input as they are true volunteers and are not required to participate. With service learning, especially when mandatory, students may find themselves on lower rungs of the ladder as they have little say in the participation. This lack of input can be partially alleviated by allowing students to plan the service themselves (Czekanski & Brown, 2015). Service learning often does not give full citizen control but can create beneficial outcomes through higher levels of citizen participation for student-athletes, which is why it is sometimes enforced through a requirement. While the degrees of power will vary, it is important to consider the interactions between student-athletes and administration to understand the motivations behind the service being performed, which provides insight into the quality of service.

**Capstone Focus**

The focus of this capstone will be to critically analyze community service and service learning policies from five athletic programs in the MAAC, comparing these policies across schools with similar characteristics to identify the potential that future service policies could meet through a strengths-based approach. Using Critical Service Learning, Student Involvement Theory, and the Ladder of Citizen Participation as a guide, policies will be examined to determine relative strength compared to similar ones in place. The result of this analysis will be
to craft a set of recommendations to strengthen such policies and create more meaningful community service and service learning opportunities for student-athletes, mainly at the NCAA Division I level, but should translate to other areas.

**Methodology**

This study aimed to analyze the current community service policies for student-athletes outlined by their respective athletic departments, which looked at similar schools to identify trends and assessed the effectiveness of the policies based on qualitative and quantitative analysis. Five policies, obtained from the student-athlete handbooks of their respective schools, were used to examine the amount and quality of community service that these specific universities from the MAAC require their students to perform. Additionally, all policies were drawn from private schools in the northeastern United States with comparable undergraduate populations to establish some level of commonality across the universities to minimize possible relevant factors, such as significant budget variation. Each school had similar athletics websites, with the majority hosted by the same software. University administrators from the schools analyzed were contacted for additional details through an email inquiry. This research was conducted with the intent to outline recommendations for what a beneficial community service policy could look like, accounting for understood behaviors based on Critical Service Learning, Student Involvement Theory, and the Ladder of Citizen Participation.

**Policies**

Community service policies for college athletic departments are most likely to be present in the student-athlete handbook, code of conduct, or similar legislative document that defines the bylaws for athletes at the school. This document is usually publicly available and published on the athletics website for the school, which is separate from the school’s website with athletics
information such as team rosters and competition schedules. While similar to the student handbook that most universities use to provide guidelines for students, these documents will only apply to the student-athletes who are a member of a team that represents the school. These student-athletes normally must adhere to all other university policies as well, including those in the university student handbook, meaning basic rules that apply to the rest of the student body are often omitted from the student-athlete handbook as it would be a redundant inclusion.

In general, the expected policy in the student-athlete handbook will outline community service for athletes when they participate in it as part of the athletic department as a whole, with their respective team, or as an individual representing the school. It will describe the scenarios in which student-athletes will perform service, whether that be voluntary or mandatory. The document will also likely state who is responsible for the organization of community service, such as selecting the cause, coordinating the date and time of the event, and the execution of it, whether that be the university administrators, the student-athletes themselves, or someone else.

All schools in the MAAC were considered and researched, but five were selected for this capstone based on the amount of available information in their student-athlete handbooks and the uniformity of each school’s demographic factors, such as undergraduate population and physical location to eliminate additional factors.

The policies from the following schools were examined:

- Merrimack College
- Niagara University
- Rider University
- Siena College
- Quinnipiac University
Analysis Criteria

Factors to consider for each policy were based on Critical Service Learning, Student Involvement Theory, and Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, which were utilized to determine the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the community service being performed. Emotional connection was assessed using Student Involvement Theory and the Ladder of Citizen Participation, considering the idea that students will have greater enthusiasm and make more positive contributions at a service activity that they truly want to be at. If students do not want to participate in something, think it is a waste of time, or have little to no input on the selection process of the cause they are contributing to, they will not want to contribute as much and not learn as much from the experience as if they meet more of the criteria, based on the theories. Similarly, learning and growth potential was also examined using Student Involvement Theory, but also with the incorporation of Critical Service Learning. This aspect focused more on the service itself, rather than the emotional connection factor that examined the student-athletes’ interest in the perceived service. The learning and growth factor analyzed the possibility for the actual service experiences being outlined in the policies to create real, meaningful lessons for student-athletes, rather than basic, mindless activities to create short term relief. Participation status, adapted directly from Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, examines which of the three basic levels of the ladder that each type of service falls into. This aspect determines the citizen power in each community service action. In some instances, the student-athletes may have full control over the selection of activities, while others may have service projects forced upon them. Lastly, both Student Involvement Theory and the Ladder of Citizen Participation were used to examine if the policy constituted a privilege or punishment for the student-athlete. Whether the context is positive or negative is usually obvious in how the
community service is being implemented, but it is important to consider how the university treats service to assess how student-athletes are expected to react to assigned service, whether that be positively or negatively. Usually, a punishment of community service will be outlined following some form of misconduct or judicial process. All four of these criteria determined the relative strength of the policies outlined by each school in a qualitative manner.

**Materials**

Policies were obtained directly from the athletics websites of each university. Information publicly available on the schools’ athletics websites was presumed to be accurate as of the 2023-2024 academic year, even with noted publication dates that were sometimes several years old, as it was assumed that the published information would only be modified if significant change to the webpage was made. Navigating to the student-athlete handbook first, the documents were read for mentions of “service” as the key term, keeping in mind the possibility of the program using any terms outside of community service to describe volunteering, such as service learning. The most up-to-date publication of the document was always selected in the event that more than one version was available. “Community Service” was then used as a search term on the website to determine if there was any additional relevant data on the site, such as in-house news articles that referenced community service or other policy documents, but this yielded no additional information for any of the selected schools’ policies. The first policy was from Merrimack College, who is joining the MAAC as of the fall of 2024, while all of the remaining four policies were from current members of the conference in the 2023-2024 academic year. The four other schools selected, based on relevant policies and available information, were Siena College, Rider University, Niagara University, and Quinnipiac University. All five schools are private universities in the northeastern United States and range from just under 3,000 to slightly more
than 6,000 undergraduate students. Merrimack, Siena, and Niagara are all religiously affiliated with different variations of Catholicism as the guiding religion. Rider and Quinnipiac are not motivated by any religious ideals but have similar characteristics to the prior three universities otherwise. All schools generally compete in Division I NCAA athletics being from the same conference with the current exception of Merrimack, who is joining in 2024. Other exceptions occur for specific situations, such as the existence of the Hockey East conference that features a more competitive level of ice hockey for schools like Merrimack, but all schools fit under the NCAA umbrella and are considered to be in the MAAC as a primary conference in the current landscape of college sports.

Additional demographic information and mission statements from the respective schools were obtained from the schools’ “.edu” academic websites. Also, the National Center for Educational Statistics, a government agency under the U.S. Department of Education, was used for demographic statistics on the schools, including undergraduate population for schools that did not disclose exact numbers on their websites.

Schools with limited public information regarding their community service initiatives were contacted for clarification and additional comment. An email was sent to the athletic department administrator deemed most appropriate for the subject, such as an external communications role, with the request to be redirected to the person that could provide the information being sought if they were unable to do so. The inquiry asked how community service is implemented by athletic teams at the respective school and what policies and initiatives are currently in place regarding community service. The responses were considered as part of the process, but emphasis was placed on the published information as it pertained to the overall communications put forth by the department.
Procedure

Policy evaluation was conducted by identifying the trends through the lens of the relevant pedagogy. Key factors from each policy, along with measurables and theoretical assessment, were placed into a Google Sheet to compare each school’s publicly available information. This would be used to determine the impact that the written policy would have at its respective institution. The name of each school was listed with the demographic factors of it being a public or private university, undergraduate population size, the mission statement of the school, and the religious affiliation that the school adheres to, including no religion as a possibility. The measurables of the policy were then determined, examining the frequency of which community service was required to be performed at minimum, what organizing community service typically resembled for the student-athletes, such as who was in charge of determining it, and what definitions or criteria were provided for acceptable community service events, such as types of causes or approved nonprofits to partner with. It was also noted whether the service more closely aligns with the presented definitions of community service or service learning. Critical service learning was also an available option, but deemed unlikely to be discovered in any policy from the outset. Factors of quality were then assessed based on scales from the theories, examining each policy for how well it supported positive outcomes for both the community and the student-athlete. These scales were not universal and could only be used relatively to assess against the other policies examined.

Results

Merrimack College’s current policy stated that community service would be utilized in two ways. The first was to be organized by student-athletes, which was left up to the discretion of the Student Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), a common form of student leadership for
university athletic departments created by the NCAA (2015). This section indicated that the SAAC would be responsible for organizing community service events for teams. The second mention of service was that it could be administered at the discretion of the athletic director as a response to misbehavior, explicitly stating it to be a punishment for the positive result of a drug test at the first offense or later as an example. The information presented aligned more closely with community service over service learning. The service was not defined with factors or examples, and the minimum frequency was not stated.

Siena College yielded similar results to those of Merrimack. The athletics website did not contain any explicit mention of a community service policy for student-athletes nor outline any potential opportunities for them to participate in social causes. The only mention of community service was under the outline of the SAAC in the student-athlete handbook, listing one of their responsibilities to be the organization of community service as a broad definition. This note did not go into further detail about the scope or frequency of service, along with any other description. Community service was also listed as a possible punishment that could be determined by administrators. The information presented aligned more closely with community service over service learning. The service was not defined with factors or examples, and the minimum frequency was not stated.

Rider University was also vague on their official athletics website regarding community service. The SAAC was listed as having community service as one of their responsibilities to organize in the student-athlete handbook. There was no additional information regarding what service meant. Community service was not a listed punishment anywhere in the student-athlete handbook. The information presented aligned more closely with community service over service learning, based on the prior definitions. The service was not defined with factors or examples,
and the minimum frequency was not stated explicitly, only that community service would be performed throughout the year.

Niagara University had little mention of community service in their student-athlete handbook. It was not mentioned in regard to their SAAC, which was an existing organization for the athletic department. The only reference to service was as a punishment that the athletic director could utilize at their sole discretion, among other types of punishments. The disciplinary process did not outline what community service would look like if selected as an appropriate punishment for student-athletes. The information presented aligned more closely with community service over service learning by definition. The service was not defined with factors or examples, and the minimum frequency was not stated anywhere in the publication.

Quinnipiac University also had a policy that utilizes community service for student-athletes in two different ways, but both were for positive uses. Like many of the other schools, Quinnipiac has an official SAAC that has the responsibility of organizing community service for teams. However, the department also has a separate program called “Q-mmunity Service” that presents community service opportunities to student-athletes that they can register for via a proprietary phone application. The information presented aligned more closely with the definition of community service over service learning. The service was not defined with factors or examples, and the minimum frequency was not stated, but administration did emphasize the importance of doing it in their publication, something that was not present in any other policy. This program appears to be highly encouraged, but ultimately voluntary, incentivizing participants with resume building opportunities and other personal benefits to participating.

The responses to email inquiries from the schools that did reply to the inquiry were all similar in nature. Each school representative stated that athletic teams will actively seek out their
own causes that they are interested in participating in, along with a small amount of department-wide service projects for all teams to coordinate across individual sports. Incoming requests from external nonprofits and other organizations to the administration to request participation in service events are generally sent to all teams, along with offers from the department to assist in the coordination of these service events if needed, such as transportation and schedule alignment. The examples provided of past organizations that teams worked with were a mix of athletics-specific initiatives and more generalized causes.

**Emotional Connection**

Based on the outline of community service requirements at each school, an assessment of the emotional connection that students would likely attach to the service was given using the lens of Student Involvement Theory and the Ladder of Citizen Participation. The terms assigned were direct, indirect, or no connection to the community service that the policy had outlined. Merrimack College, Siena College, Rider University and Quinnipiac University were all given indirect emotional connection for the SAAC component, under the idea that some students may have a connection to the service as it was selected by a student leader who had a personal connection or knew of interest across the athletes, but many of them may be participating for a cause that someone else at the school cares about, rather than one they do themselves. The possible reprimands used at Merrimack, Siena, and also Niagara University were assessed to have no emotional connection for students, as they likely received an assigned task to complete with no opinion in the matter and would likely not be drawn to the service. Quinnipiac’s service opportunities from the athletics administration was marked as indirect as it likely was selected with the students in mind, but ultimately left out the direct input of all athletes.
Learning and Growth

An assessment of the potential for student-athletes to learn and grow from their participation in community service activities, modeled from Critical Service Learning and Student Involvement Theory, was given to the schools for their potential opportunities outlined in their policies. Universities were graded using the terms of high potential, low potential or no potential, considering the opportunities that a student has for participation and the quality of the service regarding making an impact over the long term through a social justice lens. Merrimack College, Siena College, Rider University and Niagara University were all assessed low potential as it is unclear about the quality and frequency of the service, but it appears that some form of service is likely occurring, even if it is smaller acts that do not fight root causes. Quinnipiac University’s policy was labeled as high potential due to the apparent high frequency and emphasis placed on intentional community service, likely presenting initiatives that address social justice due to their demonstrated understanding of the importance of service.

Participation Level

Analyzing the policies through Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, levels of power were assigned for student-athletes for how much control they were given in a typical community service situation for each assignment at each school. The three labels, extrapolated from the theory, are therapy, partnership, and leadership, in order from lowest to highest. The official SAACs at four of the schools (Merrimack, Siena, Rider, and Quinnipiac) were assessed as leadership, since it appears the students are given the citizen power to determine what community service they want to conduct without overriding authority from the administration. On the contrary, the reprimands used by administrators were labeled as therapy, as students were likely being instructed on what to do with no input on the situation. The administrative
community service calendar from Quinnipiac University was deemed to be a partnership, as it is still a voluntary participation for student-athletes who are likely given a choice but work together with the administrators who hold the higher level of power and are still able to make decisions in this scenario.

**Privilege vs. Punishment**

Utilizing elements from both Student Involvement Theory and the Ladder of Citizen Participation, each university policy was examined for privilege or punishment when it came to assigning community service to student-athletes. Merrimack College and Siena College used service as both a privilege and punishment in different ways in their athletics policies, utilizing service as both a benefit through their SAACs and as a punishment for misconduct, with no distinction as to how these were different. Rider University and Quinnipiac University only utilized community service as a privilege in their policies through SAACs for both. Quinnipiac also had only positive service outlooks through administration organized events. Niagara University only noted service to be a punishment in their official publications as a measure to remedy forms of misconduct.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study looked to analyze the community service policies of five MAAC schools to examine how strongly the criteria set forth, based in Critical Service Learning, Student Involvement Theory, and Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation. The four aspects of the policies that were measured were: (1) The frequency in which community service was expected to be performed at a minimum; (2) The type of service in how it was implemented, such as via a student committee; (3) The definition of service as stated in the policy, or lack of in the case that it was not described at all; (4) The type of learning, whether that be community
service, service learning, or critical service learning. The type was not expected to be outwardly stated, but the service was categorized based on the presented criteria and which definition it aligned with most closely. Additionally, the four factors for theoretical analysis were: (1) The emotional connection that students feel toward the community service being performed, usually from having an intrinsic passion or relationship to someone involved in the cause; (2) The service providing learning and growth potential for students to develop experiential skills, such as leadership, in a service learning experience, rather than performing acts of service that create short term outcomes for all involved; (3) The participation status of student-athletes, directly extrapolated from the categories of Arnstein’s Ladder; (4) Determining whether the school implemented community service for student-athletes as a privilege or punishment.

Each of the schools did not establish a clear frequency when it came to how often student-athletes were required to complete service at a minimum, with only one (Quinnipiac) actively establishing a calendar of events. Although the calendar was not mandatory, this was the only relevant mention within any of the policies to some resemblance of a requirement. Despite the lack of requirement seemingly leading to the possibility of less community service being performed, the positive is that it avoids the paradox of mandatory voluntarism, which has shown to be detrimental (Markus et al., 1993). It is normally ideal to maintain a voluntary status for community service, but students and student-athletes often stray away from service as they are unaware of the positive experiences that they can gain themselves, especially in the definitions of involvement from Astin (1984), stating that students will benefit academically from other activities, including community service. Even without the correlation to academic success through higher levels of involvement, student-athletes can take the mutual benefits of community
service to gain valuable experience and add to their resumes, as suggested in the Quinnipiac service policy.

The type of service was frequently delegated to student-athletes from the school. All schools with the exception of Niagara had mentions of an official SAAC, who had organizing service in some form as part of their responsibilities. Additionally, Merrimack, Siena, and Niagara had community service as a form of punishment mentioned in their policies. Quinnipiac was the only school of the group that had administrative organization that was not a punishment, in reference to their service calendar. Student organized service gives power to the student-athletes in decision making, moving them up the ladder when it comes to citizen power and participation (Arnstein, 1969). Other practices provide less citizen power, but still bring positives as they alleviate an additional step for student-athletes who may not have experience with the organization of community service events or are not aware of all the local causes they could support.

No school provided a definition of service in their policies. Although college students should comprehend the concept of community service, it is still important to establish definitions in university legislation, along with creating a shared understanding. It is also important for the selection of service events to ensure that the selected events are effective, as defined by the Events Industry Council (n.d.). Stating in text what community service, service learning, or even critical service learning means creates important distinctions that those involved will be able to consider when organizing service events.

The type of service was deemed to be community service for all universities. No school incorporated service learning or critical service learning into their legislation. Community service still has a myriad of benefits for those on both sides and is effective in short term
situations that consume little time (Duncan & Brooks, 2015). The annual repetition of the same service events further adds to the efficiency of performing service with little additional planning, which are frequently utilized in these scenarios of community service in university athletics. While it may be ideal for everyone to practice long-term critical service events, time is a finite resource and other activities still take priority over service for student-athletes and in the eyes of administrators, mainly academic and athletic performance. The shorter repetition can also create mutual benefit by increasing relationships with the same organizations and causes over time.

Moving from the policy factors to theoretical analysis, four of the five schools were assessed an indirect emotional connection to parts of the community service as presented in the policies. This was in regard to the SAACs’ organization of service, allowing student leadership to select the initiatives that student-athletes will participate in. Only the students in leadership are contributing to this selection, so not every student-athlete has the opportunity to directly contribute. However, those acting as representatives in an electoral system should be selecting the causes in a manner to choose something that a majority of people care about, even if it is not the primary choice for everyone. In contrast, a direct connection in this analysis would be one where all students had an immediate voice in the selection of the cause, voting for which one they prefer the most. The strength of making this indirect choice is that it allows some of those who are actually participating in the service to have a voice in what causes they are contributing to while also limiting the time that the selection process takes, as opposed to if it were to be sourced by every student-athlete. Indirect involvement still gives participants something to care about as there is still perceived meaning behind it for some, partially fitting the mold of Student Involvement Theory by having some form of attachment to the service (Astin, 1984). Even if these attachments are only through someone else, there is still some motivation, albeit not as
much as a direct connection while the process remains streamlined. In contrast, the punishments defined in the policies of Merrimack, Siena, and Niagara were assessed to have no connection as it was unlikely that student-athletes would have a choice in what service they would be required to perform. Even if they were given complete freedom or a set of options, they would still likely be reluctant to be doing community service as a punishment. This reluctance would not meet the definition of involvement that Astin (1984) presents. Additionally, little connection via a punishment would match the definitions of tokenism in the Ladder of Citizen Participation, achieving weakened learning experiences for participants ( Arnstein, 1969). The utilization of community service as a punishment removes many of the benefits of service for the party performing it, but the positive is that the receiving party still receives the same benefits as they would from volunteers, so there is still a partial benefit, albeit not to the same level as a service event portrayed in a positive manner. Even indirect connections can still generate positive outcomes for student-athletes participating in community service, but having no draw to the service limits the outcomes, even if the punishment is intended to be avoided through good behavior and following bylaws.

The learning and growth potential was low for all universities with the exception of Quinnipiac, who had a high potential. Despite little detail being available for most schools, the available context outlines service that closely fits the definition of community service (FFA, 2024). Although there are still positives to community service, the benefits to the student-athletes would be increased through service learning or critical service learning, which is not achieved by most of the public policies (Mitchell, 2008). Quinnipiac had a more detailed calendar of service, which differentiated them from other schools and exposed them closer to blurring the definitions of community service and service learning. Although these individualized service events are
charitable and helpful, the longer term impact can be further considered to address these causes at a greater level, especially for the student-athletes themselves when planning future service.

The individual instances of service policies had varying levels of **participation status**. Schools that had a SAAC (Merrimack, Siena, Rider, and Quinnipiac) provided opportunities for students to have choice when it came to the organization of service events. This closely aligns with leadership, the highest levels in Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969). Giving students full control over what causes are selected, these policy aspects are favorable as they aid in the relational development between administration and student-athlete, a positive outcome in this scenario (Czekanski & Brown, 2015). On the opposite end, the punishment factors would match the therapy levels in Arnstein’s Ladder, giving those actively participating little say in what they are required to do (Arnstein, 1969). By forcing student-athletes into administrative punishment to perform community service, the relationship with the administration is negatively impacted (Czekanski & Brown, 2015). Administrators may want to force student-athletes into mandatory community service as it may be the only way to get them to participate, but allowing them to discover the benefits on their own or educating them about why they should voluntarily participate will allow them to fully receive the mutual benefits of community service. The recipients will still benefit from the service in the same manner regardless, but volunteers will not have the same positive experiences through mandatory volunteerism as they would of their own determination.

**Privilege and punishment** were each present across the schools, including both for the same universities in the case of Merrimack and Siena. Rider and Quinnipiac both used it only as a privilege while Niagara only used it as a punishment. Colleges that treat it as a privilege send the message that it is a beneficial practice that has positive learning outcomes for the
participating student-athletes along with tangible outcomes for those on the receiving end of the service (Rhoads, 1998). Taking this strengths-based approach generates positive feelings towards service, unlike when it is utilized as a punishment. Schools that use community service to remedy poor behaviors bring a negative connotation that creates a poor association for student-athletes (Duncan & Brooks, 2015). This cycle of negativity has the potential to draw away future participation in community service, along with preventing many of the positive effects that come from treating it as a privilege. Perhaps the most confusing for participants are when schools treat community service as both a privilege and a punishment. Despite the usage in different ways being located in separate places in the policies, the mixed messaging that is created using community service as both positive and negative makes it difficult for student-athletes to treat it as the privilege that it is intended to be.

**Recommendations**

Although it is by no means mandatory for university athletic departments to establish community service policies for their student-athletes, doing so creates a system that positively impacts all parties involved. Rhoads (1997) explains the mutual benefit of service by those receiving the service being rewarded and those performing it receiving the personal satisfaction. Those on the receiving end of the service receive something tangible or intangible that they would normally lack access to through various oppressions or system failures, while those providing the service are able to learn valuable life skills and experiences, bringing them a greater understanding of the local community and global infrastructure. This research sought to discover additional ways to improve community service policy in order to benefit both sides in a greater way. With this mutual benefit, the improvement of community service policies for
student-athletes brings consistency and reliability to a widely utilized source of organized community service.

A primary recommendation for future community service policy creation is to clearly define what community service means to the organization from the outset. This may seem redundant in the context of university athletics, as college students should have a general understanding of what community service is, but new students arrive each year and come from diverse populations who may not have any previous experience with community service. Establishing a baseline of shared knowledge is critical, especially when students are given the opportunity to select their own causes and service events, letting them know what is deemed to be appropriate or not by the university to further the stated mission. This could come in the form of a complete, scholarly definition from a source, or even be as simple as a basic list of examples. Whatever the method, letting the student-athletes know what the expectations are around community service in the legislation sets a common understanding by defining it.

As an additional recommendation, university athletic departments may want to consider staying away from utilizing community service as a form of punishment. Although it has been historically difficult to punish student-athletes as they are not professionals who can be monetarily fined for misbehavior, there are still other ways to enforce the legislation around student-athletes. The most frequent and simple way is to suspend players from athletic activities, which is already used at most universities, if not all. The intention by utilizing service as a punishment likely stems from the idea that the person being punished is performing a selfless act and therefore are helping someone else while sacrificing themselves, but the demonstrated mutual benefit takes away from this notion and presents the strengths for both parties during service, making it an unfit punishment.
Lastly, publicizing the positive contributions to the community from the university through acts of service is an inherent positive while simultaneously contributing to the public image of the school for their own gain. Athletics are often a major marketing tool for colleges, increasing awareness of the school. While conducting this research, community service was often hidden on many university athletics websites, even when actively searching for it. Across university websites, athletics sites, and social media, presenting the community service that student-athletes are conducting in a more frequent manner aids in increasing the public image of the school while simultaneously using it as advertising content. It does not need to be hidden in the back pages of the athletics site, only to be found by people actively seeking it out. Based on the responses from some schools for this study, there is likely a lot of undocumented community service being conducted by student-athletes outside of the published policies. Documenting this and coordinating it would bring additional benefits to the university, even with the drawback of additional work on administrators.

**Limitations of the Project**

Although universities publicize information through their websites, along with separate sites for their athletics, some relevant data may have been kept private. While some schools responded to requests for information, not all colleges replied in the several months between inquiry and publication. There is always the possibility of other regulations being in place that are in private documents or go completely unwritten. Information is not always shared in its entirety, and what is written may not always accurately reflect the emphasis that is placed on a policy. This can go both ways, as a school may have a robust policy that is rarely followed, or unwritten rules that are strictly enforced. The landscape of community service for student-
athletes in this study is depicted based on the available knowledge, but other practices may be in place that go unaccounted for, even internally by the schools themselves.

Additionally, the available data may not always be perfectly up to date. University athletic websites frequently have information that is no longer accurate, often with copyright and publication dates that can go back several years. This is especially relevant for relatively smaller schools (to the rest of NCAA Division I), which includes the colleges included in this study, usually due to personnel having multiple roles in a smaller size department and no one being solely dedicated to reviewing and modifying the athletics website. These sites are frequently updated, but more attention is paid to pages that see the most traffic and have constantly changing information, such as schedules and rosters. Pages containing copy that generally stays the same from year to year do not receive the same attention, including the student-athlete handbooks where community service policies are normally stated. While there may be inaccuracies due to information being out of date, the more relevant implication for the purposes of this study is missing information that has yet to be published. A school may have created an improved community service policy in the years since the relevant web pages were last updated.

**Implications for Future Projects**

The findings of this study indicate that more explicit definitions can be outlined for community service requirements within university athletics. Although there is community service being conducted at most universities, including for student-athletes, the current policies do not outline the work being done, nor establish clear standards for frequency or definition when it comes to determining appropriate service events. Most policies indicate student-led organization, which is a positive according to the theories, but additional support from
administration would create a more structured environment to meet the service ideals outlined via the mission statements of the respective universities.

Future research may want to analyze universities of a larger size to measure similar outcomes at schools that have employees dedicated purely to service with student-athletes, or at least roles that involve service in athletics as a responsibility. Findings in a replicated study with different variables for the universities analyzed may induce dramatically different results. Other characteristics for consideration include replication for public university systems or in a non-athletics setting. Examining policies for the colleges themselves, rather than the associated athletic departments, may yield differing outcomes for the general student body of a university, such as through courses with a service learning element. Additionally, a qualitative study directly focused on student-athletes across the same universities through interviews would further contribute to the findings in this research through their perspective instead of the publications of the schools. Colleges may implement ideal policies, but pushback from students would prevent intended outcomes based on the theories provided.
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