

PLAYING BEYOND COMPETITION: SPORTS CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND MEANING-MAKING AMONG STUDENT-ATHLETES

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Abstract

This study explored how student-athletes in a Philippine state college construct sports culture, identity, and meaning-making as they navigate collegiate sport within public higher education. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, purposive sampling recruited ten officially recognized varsity student-athletes ($n = 10$) who had represented their institution in sanctioned intercollegiate competitions, specifically the Mindanao Association of State Tertiary Schools (MASTS) Games and/or the State Colleges and Universities Athletic Association (SCUAA) Games. Data were generated through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted in private campus venues and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings indicate that sport is experienced not as leisure but as an institutionalized practice embedded in academic and administrative systems. Across accounts, four integrative patterns were evident: (1) sport as structured institutional responsibility, characterized by obligatory training, attendance, and role expectations comparable to academic requirements; (2) academic–athletic management as continuous negotiation under time constraints, self-initiated coping, and recurring physical and mental fatigue; (3) institutional rules and administrative structures as shaping discipline through monitoring and compliance while amplifying pressure via performance-driven expectations; and (4) representation as a public institutional role, where athletes frame participation as carrying the college's name, sharing collective responsibility for outcomes, and contributing to institutional pride and visibility. Overall, the study positions collegiate sport in state colleges as a regulated cultural space where student-athletes learn accountability, negotiate competing demands, and enact institutional identity, underscoring the need for clearer academic support mechanisms and governance practices that balance discipline with student well-being.

Keywords: student-athletes; sports culture; institutional practice; public higher education; Philippine state colleges; identity; meaning-making

Introduction

Sport has increasingly been recognized in higher education literature as a culturally embedded institutional practice rather than a peripheral or purely recreational activity. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that university sport functions as a social system through which values such as discipline, achievement, and collective identity are reproduced and regulated (Arey & Levental, 2024; Mason & Hardwicke, 2024; Li et al., 2025). Within educational institutions, athletics operates alongside academic structures, shaping student experiences through formal rules, performance expectations, and symbolic representation. Recent studies highlight that sport in universities is deeply intertwined with governance, institutional priorities, and broader sociocultural forces, positioning athletics as a meaningful site of cultural production within higher education (Lindsey et al., 2024; Jackson & Sam, 2025)

In public and state-funded higher education institutions, sport assumes a particularly complex role due to mandates of access, equity, and accountability. State colleges are not only academic spaces but also public institutions expected to demonstrate social relevance and responsible governance (Lindsey et al., 2024; Jackson & Sam, 2025; Moleski et al., 2023; Chatzigianni & Mallen, 2023). Within this context, athletics is often framed as a mechanism for student development and institutional visibility rather than commercial gain. Research suggests that student-athletes in public institutions must continuously negotiate academic demands with athletic commitments under stricter regulatory oversight and limited resources (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2024; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022). These conditions distinguish state college sport from private or elite university athletics and warrant focused scholarly attention.

From a sport sociology and educational governance perspective, athletic participation is increasingly understood as shaped by institutional power, regulation, and surveillance. Drawing on contemporary analyses, scholars argue that training regimes, eligibility rules, attendance monitoring, and performance evaluation function as disciplinary mechanisms that structure student-athlete behavior (Greene et al., 2023; Gang et al., 2025). These institutional processes influence how athletes experience autonomy, pressure, and responsibility, particularly in public institutions where compliance with academic and administrative standards is closely monitored. Sport, therefore, becomes a regulated institutional space where students learn to navigate authority, accountability, and institutional expectations (Roberts et al., 2025; Han & Ha, 2025).

Within the Philippine context, sport in higher education is closely linked to national development, public service, and youth formation. Philippine state colleges and universities (SUCs) operate under government oversight, with athletics commonly justified as a tool for holistic education, regional representation, and nation-building (Aquino, 2023; Rabuya, 2024). Intercollegiate competitions organized through regional and national associations serve as public platforms where institutions demonstrate discipline, competence, and collective identity (A. Peralta et al., 2024; Robles et al., 2025). Empirical studies on Filipino student-athletes have documented persistent challenges related to academic–athletic balance, limited institutional

support, and resource constraints, particularly in public higher education settings (Aquino & Reyes, 2022; Gerald et al., 2024; Mateo & Tajonera, 2020).

Despite the growing body of Philippine and international scholarship on sport and education, existing studies have predominantly focused on outcomes such as motivation, academic performance, physical fitness, and psychological well-being (Singh et al., 2018; Biddle et al., 2019). Less attention has been given to how student-athletes themselves experience sport as an institutional practice shaped by academic negotiation, administrative control, resource limitations, and public accountability (Rudd et al., 2021). Particularly in Philippine state colleges, there remains a lack of qualitative research that foregrounds athlete voices in understanding how sport is embedded within institutional culture and governance structures.

In response to this gap, the present study explores how student-athletes in a Philippine state college experience sport as an institutional practice within public higher education. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study examines the meanings student-athletes attribute to their participation in athletics as they navigate academic demands, institutional regulation, resource conditions, and expectations of public representation. By situating sport within the lived realities of state college students, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of sports culture and governance in public higher education and offers contextually grounded insights relevant to educators, administrators, and policymakers.

Research Questions

This study aims to examine how student-athletes in a Philippine state college experience sport as part of institutional and academic life within public higher education. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do student-athletes in a Philippine state college experience sport as an institutional practice within public higher education?
2. How do student-athletes manage academic responsibilities alongside the demands of collegiate sport participation?
3. How do institutional rules and administrative structures influence student-athletes' experiences in collegiate sport?
4. How do student-athletes perceive their role in representing the state college in intercollegiate and public sporting contexts?

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of student-athletes and the meanings they attribute to sport as an institutional practice within public higher education. Phenomenology was appropriate because it enables the exploration of first-person accounts of experiences that are socially structured and culturally embedded, particularly as student-athletes navigate athletic participation alongside academic demands, institutional regulation, resource conditions, and expectations of public representation. The approach allowed the study to focus on participants' descriptions of their experiences, capturing both individual depth and shared patterns of meaning across cases (Clarke & Braun, 2013). By

foregrounding lived experience, the design facilitated a contextualized understanding of sport as an institutional and cultural practice within state colleges, illuminating how student-athletes negotiate the intersection of athletics, academics, and public accountability (Sefiha, 2019).

Research Setting

The study was conducted in a Philippine state college that is an active member of the Mindanao Association of State Tertiary Schools (MASTS) and regularly fields varsity teams in officially sanctioned intercollegiate competitions. As a public higher education institution, the college operates within established institutional policies and resource constraints that shape athletic programming, including eligibility regulations, structured training schedules, academic monitoring mechanisms, and administrative coordination for regional competitions such as the MASTS Games. The institutional setting provides a relevant context for examining sport as an organized and regulated practice within public higher education. Data collection activities were carried out in locations within the campus that ensured privacy and confidentiality while minimizing disruption to academic and athletic operations, including designated offices and quiet classroom spaces agreed upon in advance.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were currently enrolled varsity student-athletes who had officially represented the institution in intercollegiate athletic competitions. Purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants capable of providing in-depth accounts of collegiate sport experiences within a public higher education context. Inclusion criteria required that participants be officially recognized varsity athletes of the institution, have completed at least one academic year of active participation in collegiate sport, and have represented the college in sanctioned competitions, specifically the Mindanao Association of State Tertiary Schools (MASTS) Games and/or the State Colleges and Universities Athletic Association (SCUAA) Games. Student-athletes who were not officially recognized as varsity members, who had not participated in the MASTS or SCUAA Games, or who were inactive during the data collection period were excluded from the study. To ensure variation in perspectives, participants were drawn from different sports disciplines, year levels, and competitive exposure, with recruitment continuing until meaning saturation was reached, as indicated by the absence of substantially new insights in subsequent interviews. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Participant Code	Sex	Year Level	Sport	Type of Sport	Competition Represented
P1	Male	2nd Year	Basketball	Team	MASTS
P2	Female	3rd Year	Volleyball	Team	SCUAA
P3	Male	4th Year	Athletics (Track)	Individual	MASTS

Participant Code	Sex	Year Level	Sport	Type of Sport	Competition Represented
P4	Female	1st Year	Badminton	Individual	SCUAA
P5	Male	3rd Year	Football	Team	MASTS
P6	Female	2nd Year	Table Tennis	Individual	MASTS
P7	Male	4th Year	Sepak Takraw	Team	SCUAA
P8	Female	3rd Year	Softball	Team	MASTS
P9	Male	2nd Year	Chess	Individual	SCUAA
P10	Female	4th Year	Volleyball	Team	MASTS

Note. Participants were officially recognized varsity student-athletes who had competed in either the Mindanao Association of State Tertiary Schools (MASTS) Games or the State Colleges and Universities Athletic Association (SCUAA) Games. Codes were used to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed to elicit rich, in-depth narratives while allowing participants the flexibility to introduce issues they considered personally meaningful and contextually relevant. The interview guide was reviewed for clarity, coherence, and cultural appropriateness within the Philippine higher education setting and was refined following preliminary interviews to ensure alignment with the study objectives. The guide covered key domains, including participants' entry into varsity sport and institutional expectations, experiences in balancing training and competition with academic responsibilities, encounters with institutional rules, monitoring, and support mechanisms, perceptions of resource conditions such as equipment, allowances, facilities, and logistical support, experiences of publicly representing the college in intercollegiate competitions, and the perceived benefits, pressures, and meanings associated with sport participation. Probing questions were systematically employed to deepen responses, encourage reflection on specific experiences, and clarify interpretations, thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of the data generated.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection procedures commenced after securing the necessary institutional permissions and clearances. Participants were invited through official channels, such as varsity coordinators or team representatives, as well as through direct referral, while ensuring that participation remained entirely voluntary. Prior to data collection, participants were oriented on the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, potential risks and benefits, measures for confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence, after which written informed consent was obtained. Individual interviews were then conducted in private and agreed-upon settings at times convenient for the participants, with interviews typically lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate data capture, and the researcher maintained brief field notes to document contextual details such

as nonverbal cues, pauses, and immediate analytic reflections. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, checked against the original audio for accuracy, and anonymized using participant codes; where necessary, participants were given the opportunity to clarify or elaborate on their responses during follow-up communication.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following a systematic six-phase approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analysis began with familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts and review of field notes to gain an overall understanding of the data. Initial coding was then conducted to identify meaning units relevant to the research questions, such as experiences of academic negotiation, institutional monitoring and compliance, resource constraints, and public representation. Related codes were subsequently clustered to generate broader candidate themes that captured patterned meanings across participants. These themes were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and clear distinctions between themes, with overlapping or weakly supported concepts refined or merged as necessary. Final themes were then clearly defined and named by articulating their central organizing ideas and identifying relevant subthemes. The analytic process concluded with the selection of representative excerpts and the integration of thematic interpretations with the study objectives and relevant literature. Throughout the analysis, coding and theme development followed an iterative process of constant comparison, moving between data segments and emerging interpretations, while maintaining a transparent record of analytic decisions through codebook drafts, thematic maps, and analytic memos.

Results

The Experiences of Student-Athletes in a Philippine State College as an Institutional Practice within Public Higher Education

Examined how student-athletes experience sport as an institutional practice within public higher education. Findings indicate that student-athletes perceive sport not as a leisure activity but as a structured, regulated, and institutionalized responsibility embedded in the academic and administrative systems of the state college. Three major themes emerged: (1) Sport as Structured Institutional Responsibility, (2) Institutional Accountability and Regulation, and (3) Sport as an Extension of Campus Life and Identity.

Table 2. Emerging Themes on Student-Athletes' Experiences of Sport as an Institutional Practice

Major Theme	Description
Structured Institutional Responsibility	Sport is treated as a formal obligation comparable to academic requirements
Institutional Accountability and Regulation	Participation is governed by rules, monitoring, and compliance mechanisms

Major Theme	Description
Campus Life and Identity	Being an athlete shapes visibility, identity, and expectations on campus

Sport as Structured Institutional Responsibility

Student-athletes described sport as a formal obligation that carries expectations similar to academic responsibilities. Training, competitions, and official duties were viewed as institutional requirements rather than optional activities.

“Sa una abi nako lingaw-lingaw ra ang varsity, pero pag-apil na gyud nimo, murag obligasyon na siya sa school.”

(At first, I thought being a varsity athlete was just for fun, but once you really join, it already feels like an obligation to the school.) (P2)

“Kung varsity ka, dili pwede nga mo-absent basta-basta. Parehas gyud siya ka-importante sa klase.”

(If you are a varsity athlete, you cannot just be absent anytime. It is just as important as attending classes.) (P6)

These statements show that student-athletes internalize sport as part of their institutional role, reinforcing its formal status within public higher education.

Institutional Accountability and Regulation

Participants consistently emphasized the presence of strict rules, monitoring systems, and administrative oversight governing athletic participation. Attendance, punctuality, and compliance were closely monitored, reinforcing discipline and accountability.

“Strikto gyud ang sistema. Naay attendance, naay oras sa training, ug tan-awon gyud kung musunod ka.”

(The system is really strict. There is attendance, training schedules, and they really check if you comply.) (P1)

“Kung naa kay violation, dali ra ka ma-record. Murag naa gyud kay responsibilidad nga sundon tanan rules.”

(If you have a violation, it is easily recorded. It really feels like you have the responsibility to follow all the rules.) (P8)

These regulatory mechanisms underscore sport as a governed institutional space rather than an informal student activity.

Sport as an Extension of Campus Life and Identity

Student-athletes also experienced sport as shaping their identity and social role within the campus community. Being recognized as an athlete carried expectations regarding conduct, discipline, and representation.

“Mailhan ka sa campus nga athlete ka, so murag naa gyud expectation unsaon nimo pagdala sa imong kaugalingon.”

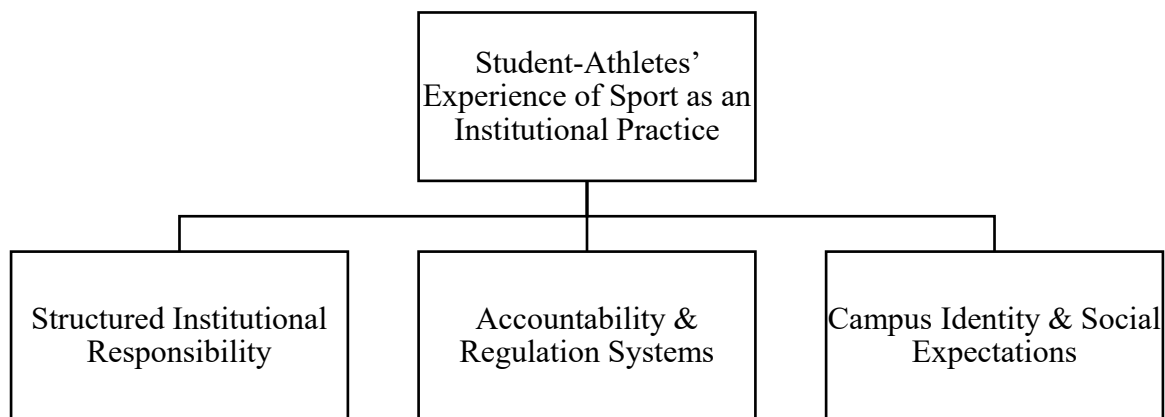
(You are known on campus as an athlete, so there are expectations about how you should carry yourself.) (P4)

“Bisan wala mi dula, murag naa gihapon mi responsibility kay athlete man ka sa state college.”

(Even when there is no competition, it still feels like we have responsibilities because you are an athlete of the state college.) (P9)

These accounts indicate that athletic participation extends beyond competition and becomes a visible institutional identity within campus life.

Figure 1. Student-Athletes’ Experience of Sport as an Institutional Practice



Managing Academic Responsibilities alongside the Demands of Collegiate Sport Participation

This objective examined how student-athletes manage academic responsibilities alongside the demands of collegiate sport participation. Findings reveal that student-athletes continuously negotiate academic and athletic roles through personal adjustment, time prioritization, and self-directed strategies. Rather than experiencing a clear separation between academics and sport, participants described an overlapping and demanding routine that required constant decision-making and sacrifice. From the analysis of interview transcripts, three major themes emerged: (1) Time Constraints and Competing Demands, (2) Academic Adjustment and Self-Initiated Coping, and (3) Physical and Mental Fatigue.

Table 3. Emerging Themes on Academic–Athletic Management among Student-Athletes

Major Theme	Description
Time Constraints and Competing Demands	Academic tasks and sport schedules often overlap, creating pressure and limited time
Academic Adjustment and Self-Initiated Coping	Student-athletes rely on personal strategies to cope with missed classes and requirements

Major Theme	Description
Physical and Mental Fatigue	Sustained academic–athletic engagement leads to exhaustion affecting performance

Time Constraints and Competing Demands

Student-athletes consistently identified time constraints as a primary challenge in managing academic responsibilities alongside collegiate sport. Participants reported that training sessions, competitions, and travel frequently coincided with quizzes, examinations, and deadlines, forcing them to prioritize tasks under pressure.

One participant shared:

“Usahay naa mi training unya naa pud quiz. Lisod gyud kaayo i-apas tanan.”
(Sometimes we have training and then a quiz at the same time. It is really difficult to keep up with everything.) (P5)

Another participant explained:

“Kung duol na ang competition, murag halos tanan oras naa na sa training.”
(When competition is near, almost all of our time is already for training.) (P7)

These experiences indicate that student-athletes operate within compressed schedules, where academic and athletic demands compete for limited time, requiring constant prioritization.

Academic Adjustment and Self-Initiated Coping

Participants described relying largely on self-initiated strategies to manage academic responsibilities affected by sport participation. Rather than receiving consistent institutional academic accommodations, student-athletes emphasized personal effort in catching up with missed lessons and requirements.

As one participant stated:

“Kung naa mi dula, kami ra gyud mangita paagi unsaon pag-apas sa lessons.”
(When we have a game, we are the ones who look for ways to catch up with the lessons.) (P2)

Another participant added:

“Magpuyat ko para lang mahuman ang assignments nga nabilin.”
(I stay up late just to finish the assignments I missed.) (P6)

These narratives suggest that academic management is largely individualized, placing the burden of adjustment on student-athletes rather than on structured academic support systems.

Physical and Mental Fatigue

Sustained engagement in both academics and sport resulted in physical and mental fatigue, which participants described as affecting concentration, motivation, and overall well-being. Fatigue was especially pronounced during competition seasons.

One participant explained:

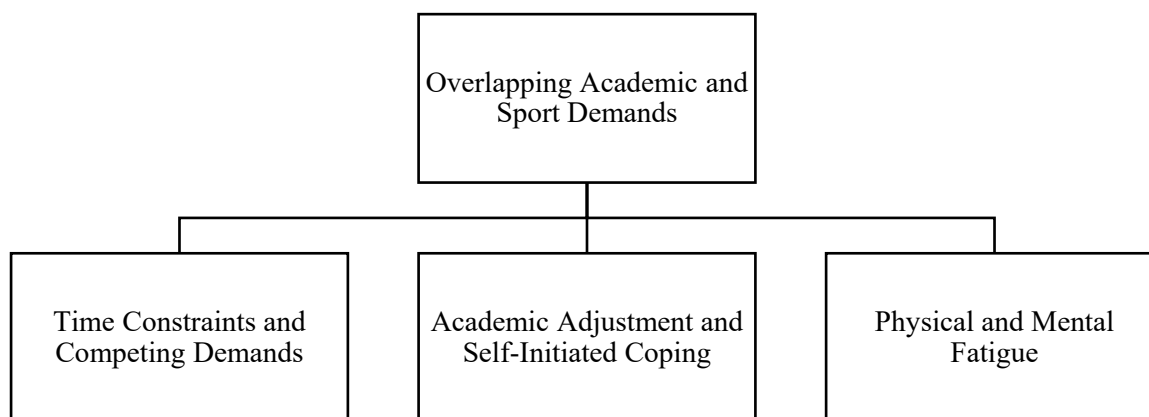
“Kapoy na kaayo ang lawas ug utok, pero kinahanglan gihapon mo-padayon.”
(The body and mind are already very tired, but you still have to keep going.) (P6)

Another participant shared:

“Usahay dili na kaayo ko ka-focus sa klase tungod sa kakapoy.”
(Sometimes I can no longer focus in class because of exhaustion.) (P9)

Despite these challenges, student-athletes often persisted, demonstrating resilience while acknowledging the toll of balancing dual roles.

Figure 2. Managing Academic and Athletic Demands among Student-Athletes



Influence of Institutional Rules and Administrative Structures on Student-Athletes' Experiences in Collegiate Sport

This objective examined how institutional rules and administrative structures influence student-athletes' experiences in collegiate sport. Findings indicate that institutional policies, monitoring systems, and administrative expectations play a central role in shaping student-athletes' daily routines, behavior, and perceptions of responsibility. Student-athletes experienced these structures as mechanisms that promote discipline and order, while simultaneously generating pressure and limiting flexibility. From the analysis of interview transcripts, three major themes emerged: (1) Rule Compliance and Discipline, (2) Administrative Monitoring and Control, and (3) Performance-Driven Institutional Expectations.

Table 4. Emerging Themes on the Influence of Institutional Rules and Administrative Structures

Major Theme	Description
Rule Compliance and Discipline	Student-athletes are expected to strictly follow institutional and team rules
Administrative Monitoring and Control	Coaches and administrators closely supervise attendance, conduct, and performance

Major Theme	Description
Performance-Driven Institutional Expectations	Athletic performance is linked to institutional reputation and recognition

Rule Compliance and Discipline

Student-athletes consistently described institutional rules as central to their sport participation. Rules governing attendance, punctuality, training participation, and behavior were experienced as non-negotiable requirements that shaped their daily conduct as athletes and students. Participants acknowledged that these rules fostered discipline but also emphasized the pressure associated with strict compliance.

One participant shared:

“Strikto gyud ang rules. Dili pwede nga mo-late o mo-absent basta-basta kay naay consequence.”

(The rules are really strict. You cannot be late or absent anytime because there are consequences.) (P3)

Another participant added:

“Kung varsity ka, kinahanglan sundon gyud tanan balaod sa team ug sa school.”

(If you are a varsity athlete, you really need to follow all the rules of the team and the school.) (P7)

These accounts suggest that institutional rules function as formal mechanisms that regulate participation and reinforce sport as a disciplined institutional practice rather than a flexible student activity.

Administrative Monitoring and Control

Participants emphasized the role of coaches and administrators in monitoring their compliance with institutional requirements. Attendance sheets, training logs, and performance evaluations were described as routine practices that reinforced accountability. Student-athletes perceived this constant supervision as both supportive and restrictive.

As expressed by one participant:

“Bisan wala mi dula, bantayan gihapon mi sa attendance ug training.”

(Even when we have no competition, we are still monitored for attendance and training.) (P1)

Another participant stated:

“Murag tanang lihok namo naa’y mata sa admin ug coach.”

(It feels like every move we make is watched by the administrators and coaches.) (P9)

These monitoring practices shaped how student-athletes managed their time, behavior, and commitments, reinforcing the structured nature of collegiate sport within the institution.

Performance-Driven Institutional Expectations

Student-athletes also experienced institutional rules and administrative structures as closely tied to performance expectations. Participants reported that winning, ranking, and medal outcomes were often associated with institutional recognition, support, and evaluation of teams and athletes.

One participant explained:

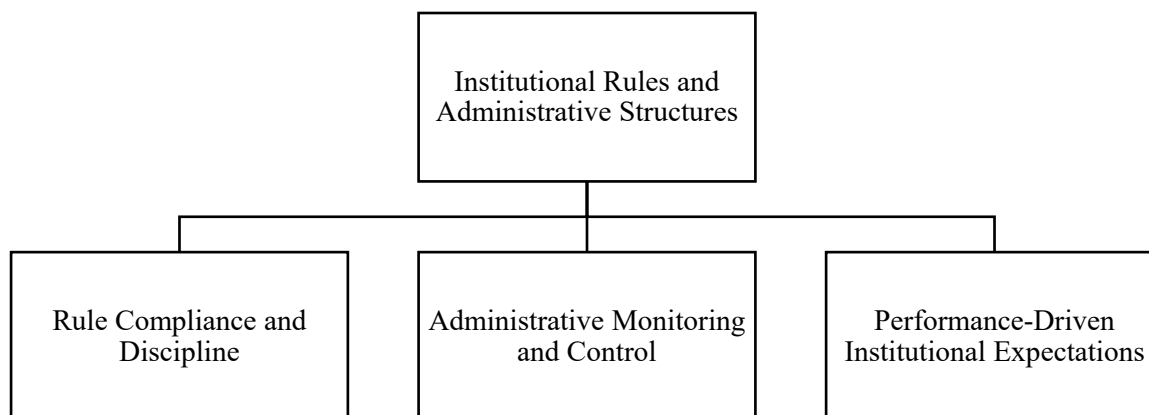
“Kung duwa na, murag dako kaayo ang pressure kay performance namo makaimpluwensya sa tan-aw sa school.”
(When it's game time, the pressure is really big because our performance influences how the school is viewed.) (P10)

Another participant added:

“Dili lang personal ang daog o pildi, murag dala nimo ang pangalan sa state college.”
(Winning or losing is not just personal; you carry the name of the state college.) (P5)

These narratives indicate that institutional expectations extend beyond participation, positioning student-athletes as representatives whose performance contributes to the institution's public image.

Figure 3. Influence of Institutional Rules and Administrative Structures on Student-Athletes



Student-Athletes' Perceptions of Their Role in Representing the State College in Intercollegiate and Public Sporting Contexts

This objective examined how student-athletes perceive their role in representing the state college in intercollegiate and public sporting contexts. Findings reveal that student-athletes strongly associate their participation in competitions with institutional representation, collective responsibility, and service to the college community. Competing in events such as intercollegiate tournaments was not viewed as a purely personal endeavor but as a public and institutional role that carried expectations of discipline, conduct, and performance. From the analysis of interview transcripts, three major themes **emerged**: (1) Carrying the Institution's Name, (2) Collective Responsibility Beyond the Self, and (3) Sport as Service and Institutional Pride.

Table 6. Emerging Themes on Student-Athletes' Perceptions of Institutional Representation

Major Theme	Description
Carrying the Institution's Name	Athletes perceive competition as representing the college's identity and reputation
Collective Responsibility Beyond the Self	Winning and losing are viewed as shared institutional outcomes
Sport as Service and Institutional Pride	Participation is framed as contributing to school pride and public visibility

Carrying the Institution's Name

Student-athletes consistently described their participation in intercollegiate competitions as carrying the name and identity of the state college. Wearing the school uniform and competing under the institution's banner symbolized responsibility beyond individual achievement. Participants emphasized that their actions on and off the playing field reflected directly on the college.

One participant shared:

"Kung mo-duwa mi, dili na lang para sa among kaugalingon. Pangalan gyud sa school among gidala."
(When we compete, it is no longer just for ourselves. We are really carrying the name of the school.) (P4)

Another participant stated:

"Bisan unsaon nimo og lihok sa tournament, tan-awon gihapon ka isip representante sa state college."
(No matter how you act in the tournament, you are still seen as a representative of the state college.) (P7)

accounts indicate that student-athletes internalize representation as an institutional role, shaping their sense of accountability and conduct during competitions.

Collective Responsibility Beyond the Self

The second theme highlights how student-athletes perceive competition outcomes as collective responsibilities rather than individual successes or failures. Participants described both victories and defeats as shared experiences that reflected on the entire institution, including teammates, coaches, and administrators.

One participant explained:

"Kung madaog mi, murag kalipay sa tanan. Kung mapildi, murag tanan pud maapektuhan."
(If we win, it feels like everyone is happy. If we lose, it feels like everyone is affected.) (P1)

Another participant added:

“Dili ra personal ang pildi. Murag dala nimo ang responsibilidad sa team ug sa school.”
(Losing is not just personal. You carry the responsibility of the team and the school.) (P9)

These narratives suggest that representation fosters a strong sense of collective accountability, reinforcing the institutional nature of collegiate sport participation.

Sport as Service and Institutional Pride

Student-athletes also framed their participation in sport as a form of service to the institution, contributing to school pride, recognition, and morale. Competing in public sporting events was perceived as a way of giving back to the state college and showcasing its presence in regional and national arenas.

As one participant stated:

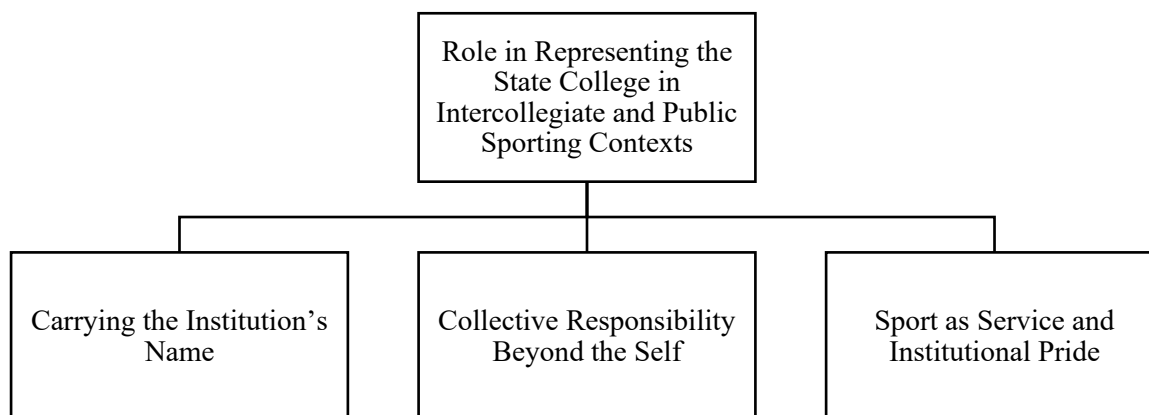
“Bisan kapoy, mo-duwa gihapon mi kay kabalo mi nga para ni sa kahimayaan sa school.”
(Even if it is tiring, we still compete because we know this is for the honor of the school.)
 (P6)

Another participant shared:

“Malipay gyud mi kung makadaog kay murag among gi-angat ang dungog sa state college.”
(We are really happy when we win because it feels like we uplift the dignity of the state college.) (P3)

These accounts reflect how student-athletes view sport participation as extending beyond personal goals, positioning athletics as a means of institutional service and public recognition.

Figure 4. Student-Athletes’ Perception of Institutional Representation



Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that student-athletes in a Philippine state college experience sport as a highly institutionalized practice, embedded within academic and administrative systems rather than as a purely recreational activity. This aligns with contemporary scholarship that conceptualizes collegiate sport as a regulated social institution shaped by organizational rules, governance structures, and cultural expectations (Calvin et al., 2019; Parent

& Hoye, 2018; Cho et al., 2023; Giulianotti et al., 2016). In public higher education contexts, sport often operates as an extension of institutional mandate, reinforcing discipline, accountability, and collective identity (Buchholz & Lopatta, 2017; Enke, 2018; Schulenkorf et al., 2016). The present findings affirm that athletic participation in state colleges is closely tied to institutional obligations comparable to academic responsibilities.

The theme of structured institutional responsibility reflects how student-athletes internalize sport as part of their formal role within the college. Similar studies have noted that collegiate athletes often experience sport as “institutional labor,” governed by schedules, performance demands, and compliance requirements (Lewis et al., 2015; Weisburst et al., 2016). This is particularly evident in public institutions, where sport is framed as service-oriented rather than commercially driven (Buchholz & Lopatta, 2017; Dowling et al., 2018). The perception of sport as obligation rather than choice underscores how institutional expectations shape student-athletes’ engagement and sense of duty within state colleges.

Findings related to institutional accountability and regulation highlight the influence of rules, monitoring, and administrative oversight on student-athletes’ experiences. Consistent with Foucauldian interpretations of sport governance, monitoring systems such as attendance checks and performance evaluations function as disciplinary mechanisms that regulate behavior and normalize compliance (Rubin & Moses, 2017; Leonardo Filho, 2016). Research in higher education sport contexts suggests that such regulatory structures promote discipline while simultaneously intensifying pressure and surveillance among athletes (Rubin & Moses, 2017; Weisburst et al., 2016). The present study reinforces the view that institutional control is central to the organization of collegiate sport in public settings.

The finding that sport serves as an extension of campus life and identity supports literature emphasizing the symbolic role of athletes within educational institutions. Student-athletes often occupy visible positions that carry expectations of role modeling and institutional representation (Bouchet et al., 2017; Enke, 2018). In state colleges, where institutional reputation is closely tied to public perception, athletes become embodied symbols of discipline, competence, and collective pride (Kerr et al., 2016; Rubin & Moses, 2017). The results suggest that athletic identity in public higher education extends beyond sport performance to encompass social conduct and institutional belonging.

Regarding academic–athletic management, the findings reveal that student-athletes navigate overlapping demands through constant prioritization and self-directed adjustment. This is consistent with studies indicating that collegiate athletes often rely on individual coping strategies rather than formal academic accommodations, particularly in resource-constrained institutions (Lopes Dos Santos, 2020; Steele et al., 2020). Time scarcity and competing demands are well-documented challenges in student-athlete research, often leading to academic strain and fatigue (Liu & Sahar Tareh, 2024). The present findings extend this literature by highlighting how these challenges are intensified in public higher education contexts.

The theme of physical and mental fatigue underscores the cumulative impact of sustained academic and athletic engagement. Research consistently shows that dual-role participation can lead to exhaustion, reduced concentration, and diminished well-being among student-athletes (Madigan et al., 2015; Capranica et al., 2022). In public institutions, limited support services and compressed schedules further exacerbate these effects (Whitehead, 2022; Sayvon et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, the persistence demonstrated by participants reflects adaptive resilience, a trait frequently observed among student-athletes navigating structurally demanding environments (Raudsepp & Vink, 2019).

Findings on the influence of institutional rules and performance-driven expectations reveal that athletic outcomes are closely linked to institutional recognition and public image. This supports research suggesting that public colleges often frame sport success as a measure of institutional legitimacy and visibility (Thige et al., 2019). Performance pressure, therefore, extends beyond personal achievement to encompass collective accountability to the institution (Parker & Manley, 2017). Such dynamics reinforce the role of sport as a public-facing institutional practice rather than an individual pursuit.

Finally, student-athletes' perceptions of representation, service, and institutional pride highlight the civic dimension of collegiate sport in public higher education. Participation in intercollegiate competitions was framed as carrying the institution's name and contributing to collective honor, echoing studies that position sport as a vehicle for public engagement and symbolic service (Giulianotti et al., 2016). In the Philippine state college context, this sense of representation aligns with national narratives of service, discipline, and communal responsibility (Aquino, 2023). Overall, the discussion underscores that sport in state colleges functions as a cultural and institutional practice that shapes identity, governance, and public meaning within higher education.

Conclusions

This study examined how student-athletes in a Philippine state college experience sport as part of institutional and academic life within public higher education. The findings demonstrate that sport is not perceived as a leisure or purely extracurricular activity but as a structured and institutionalized practice embedded within academic systems, administrative regulation, and public accountability. Student-athletes experience athletic participation as a formal responsibility comparable to academic obligations, governed by rules, monitoring mechanisms, and performance expectations.

The study further revealed that student-athletes manage academic and athletic demands through continuous negotiation, self-directed coping strategies, and personal sacrifice, often in the absence of consistent institutional academic accommodations. Institutional rules and administrative structures were found to play a central role in shaping discipline, compliance, and pressure, influencing how student-athletes organize their time, behavior, and performance. Finally, student-athletes strongly perceive their role in intercollegiate sport as one of institutional

representation, collective responsibility, and service, where athletic participation contributes to school pride, public image, and institutional identity.

Overall, the study concludes that sport in Philippine state colleges functions as a cultural and institutional practice that shapes student-athletes' academic experiences, identity formation, and sense of responsibility within public higher education.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education policy, sports administration, and student development in public institutions. First, recognizing sport as an institutional practice underscores the need for state colleges to treat student-athletes not only as competitors but also as students navigating complex academic and administrative demands. Institutional acknowledgment of this dual role is essential in promoting equitable academic support systems.

Second, the strong influence of institutional rules and monitoring systems suggests that while discipline and accountability are necessary, excessive regulation may intensify pressure and limit flexibility for student-athletes. This highlights the importance of balancing governance with supportive structures that consider student well-being. Third, the individualized nature of academic adjustment indicates a gap in structured academic assistance for student-athletes, particularly during competition periods.

Finally, the perception of sport as institutional representation emphasizes the public and civic role of collegiate athletics in state colleges. Student-athletes function as visible representatives of the institution, reinforcing the need for ethical, educational, and developmental approaches to athletic programming that align with the public mission of higher education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. For State College Administrators:**

Develop and institutionalize academic support mechanisms for student-athletes, such as clear academic accommodation guidelines, coordinated faculty communication, and structured academic recovery plans during competition periods.

- 2. For Sports Development Offices and Coaches:**

Balance discipline and performance expectations with athlete well-being by reviewing training schedules, monitoring practices, and compliance systems to reduce unnecessary pressure while maintaining accountability.

- 3. For Faculty Members:**

Strengthen collaboration with sports offices to ensure consistent understanding of student-athletes' institutional responsibilities, promoting fairness and transparency in academic expectations.

- 4. For Student-Athletes:**

Encourage the development of self-regulation skills, time management strategies, and help-seeking behaviors to better manage academic and athletic demands within institutional structures.

5. For Future Researchers:

Conduct comparative studies across multiple state colleges or between public and private institutions, and consider mixed-methods approaches to further examine the institutional dynamics of collegiate sport and their impact on student outcomes.

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