

Role Boundaries and Resource Bricolage in Academic-athletic Conflict Among Elite College Tennis Players: A Mixed-methods Study

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigates the role-boundary mechanisms and resource-bricolage strategies that shape academic-athletic conflict among elite college tennis players. Survey data from 247 student-athletes across 12 Chinese universities were complemented by in-depth interviews with 18 participants. Tennis players reported significantly greater role-boundary permeability ($M=4.21/5.00$) than team-sport athletes ($M=3.47$), and their role-transition frequency was 2.30 times higher. Most role-transition burdens (78.50%) were born individually, with only 21.50% shared by institutional support structures. Seven spontaneous bricolage strategies were identified, five of which remained largely invisible to and unrecognized. Role-boundary permeability was positively associated with academic burnout ($r=0.53$, $p<0.01$), whereas organizational support for resource bricolage positively predicted academic-athletic balance satisfaction ($\beta=0.41$, $p<0.001$). These findings suggest a threefold governance agenda: institutionalizing role boundaries, creating platform-based support for bricolage, and fostering an integrative identity narrative.

Keywords

Role boundaries, Resource bricolage, Academic-athletic conflict, Elite college tennis players

Introduction

Since the former State Education Commission issued the Notice on Pilot Recruitment of High-level Athletes in Regular Higher Education Institutions in 1987, the development of high-performance athletic teams in Chinese universities has undergone more than three decades of evolution.

In 2020, the General Administration of Sport of China and the Ministry of Education jointly issued the Opinions on Deepening the Integration of Sports and Education to Promote the Healthy Development of Youth. The document explicitly adopted the principle of “integrated design and integrated advancement”. It also promoted the return of competitive sports talent development to the national education system. In 2025, the Ministry of Education and four other departments put forward a new proposal. The proposal aims to build a new type of high-performance athletic team in higher education institutions. It encourages universities to carry out secondary student selection. Candidates can come from both regular majors and sports-related majors. Universities may offer preferential policies for

outstanding elite athletes. Such policies cover credit calculation, awards, and postgraduate recommendations. This policy signal indicates that high-performance athletic teams in Chinese universities are transitioning from a “testing ground for sports-education combination” to a “demonstration highland for sports-education integration”.

However, a significant gap persists between policy vision and operational reality. Existing studies have repeatedly identified academic-athletic conflict as a “bottleneck”. This bottleneck restricts the sound development of high-performance athletic teams. It manifests in several practical dilemmas.

Examples include misaligned development goals, severe conflicts between academics and sports, and inadequate guarantees of human, financial and material resources [1]. From the perspective of sociological institutionalism, the development of high-performance athletic teams in universities is accompanied by conflicts of institutional logic. These conflicts include three aspects: clashes between old and new regulatory elements, misaligned

authority within elements, as well as biases and limitations embedded in cultural-cognitive elements [2]. Among various sports, tennis possesses analytical value. Unlike team sports such as basketball and volleyball, tennis is a highly individualized sport in which technical development depends heavily on long-term, continuous, and high-intensity specialized training. Meanwhile, tennis has a mature global professional tournament system, and elite players face frequent competition demands and ranking-point maintenance pressures. These characteristics render academic-athletic conflict among elite tennis players more acute than in team sports: Training time is more rigid, competition schedules are more unpredictable, and academic progress is more fragmented. Reports indicate that after enrollment, elite college tennis players “simply study as normal, unlike professional teams that train for long hours every day”, and this abrupt decline in training intensity in turn undermines the maintenance of competitive performance. In other words, academic-athletic conflict in tennis manifests as a bidirectional squeeze: The training system demands continuity and high intensity of time investment, while the academic system demands regularity and sustainability of learning investment, whereas the athlete’s total individual time is fixed.

The analytical perspective of this study is managerial rather than pedagogical or training oriented. The core argument is that the deep-rooted cause of academic-athletic conflict lies not in athletes’ “lack of effort” or coaches’ “lack of understanding of academic demands”, but in the absence of effective role-boundary management mechanisms between the academic system and the training system within universities.

The academic affairs office, the school of physical education (or the Department of Public Physical Education), the athletic team, and the athlete’s home department together form a multi-agent organizational field. In this field, different actors hold inconsistent objective functions. The academic affairs office regards academic compliance rates as its core assessment indicator. The sports department prioritizes competitive achievements. The athlete’s home department focuses on graduation and employment rates. This dispersion of objectives leads to the individualization of role-transition burdens and the invisibility of resource bricolage.

Therefore, the key to alleviating academic-athletic

conflict lies not in increasing investment at either end, but in designing a management system that renders the objectives of multiple parties compatible [3].

This study makes three contributions. First, it reconceptualizes academic-athletic conflict from a resource-constraint problem to a role-boundary governance problem, thereby shifting the analytical focus from “how much time is available” to “how role transitions are managed”. Second, it introduces resource bricolage theory to explain how athletes cope with institutional gaps through spontaneous, unrecognized strategies, and why these strategies remain inefficient without organizational support. Third, it provides empirical evidence from a mixed-methods design that combines survey data with qualitative interviews, offering both generalizable patterns and contextualized explanations.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Academic-athletic conflict: From resource scarcity to role boundaries

Research on academic-athletic conflict has traditionally framed the issue as a zero-sum competition for finite time and energy. This perspective has generated a substantial body of literature documenting the negative consequences of dual role demands, including academic underperformance, psychological distress, and athletic burnout [4]. However, resource-scarcity framing has two limitations. First, it treats time as a homogeneous quantity, ignoring the qualitative differences in how academic and athletic roles demand cognitive and emotional engagement. Second, it overlooks the institutional mechanisms that determine how role transitions are structured, supported, or neglected [5].

More recent scholarships have begun to adopt role-theoretical lens. Role boundary theory, as articulated by Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, posits that individuals transition between roles across boundaries that vary in permeability and flexibility [6]. High permeability means that role demands intrude upon each other across temporal and spatial boundaries; low flexibility means that role schedules are rigid and non-negotiable. When boundaries are highly permeable and inflexible, role transitions become frequent and burdensome, consuming psychological resources and generating identity tensions. Empirical studies on student-athletes have documented the psychological consequences of role conflict,

including identity foreclosure, diminished academic self-efficacy, and heightened burnout. However, these studies have focused primarily on individual-level coping rather than organizational-level governance. The question of how universities can institutionalize role-boundary management remains underexplored.

Resource bricolage: Making do with what is at hand

Resource bricolage theory, introduced by Baker and Nelson, explains how actors create value under resource constraints by “making do” with available resources and recombining them in novel ways [7]. The theory has been widely applied in entrepreneurship research, social innovation, and organizational improvisation. Its core insight is that resource scarcity does not necessarily preclude goal attainment; actors can achieve surprising outcomes through creative resource recombination.

Applying bricolage theory to the academic-athletic context yields a novel analytical angle. Student-athletes facing institutional gaps - such as the absence of coordinated academic support during competition seasons - do not simply give up on either academics or athletics. Instead, they engage in spontaneous bricolage: Studying in fragmented intervals, borrowing notes from classmates, reviewing recorded lectures while traveling, and negotiating extensions with instructors. These strategies are creative and adaptive, but they remain individual-level, informal, and largely invisible to the institution. The bricolage lens thus reveals a paradox: Athletes are already doing the work of resource integration, but the organization fails to recognize, support, or scale these efforts.

Integrating role boundary theory and resource bricolage: A governance framework

Integrating role boundary theory with resource bricolage theory yields a more explanatory framework for understanding academic-athletic conflict. Role boundary theory identifies the structural conditions that generate conflict - high permeability, low flexibility, and frequent transitions. Resource bricolage theory identifies the agentic responses that athletes develop in the absence of institutional support. The two theories together point to a governance gap: Universities have neither institutionalized role-boundary management nor created platforms to support and scale athletes' bricolage efforts. This integrated framework generates three research questions:

RQ1: How do elite college tennis players experience role-boundary permeability, transition frequency, and transition burdens in comparison with team-sport athletes?

RQ2: What resource-bricolage strategies do athletes employ, and to what extent are these strategies recognized and supported by the institution?

RQ3: How do role-boundary permeability and organizational support for bricolage relate to academic burnout and academic-athletic balance satisfaction?

Methods

Research design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase (survey) was conducted first to identify patterns in role-boundary characteristics, academic-athletic conflict, and resource-bricolage strategies. The qualitative phase (semi-structured interviews) followed to explain and contextualize the quantitative findings. This design is appropriate when the researcher seeks to use qualitative data to elucidate mechanisms underlying statistical relationships.

Participants and data collection

(1) Survey

A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants from 12 Chinese universities with high-performance tennis teams. The universities were distributed across East China (5), Central China (3), North China (2), Southwest China (1), and Northeast China (1), including “Double First-class” universities (4), provincial key universities (5), and local undergraduate institutions (3). A total of 310 questionnaires were distributed, and 247 valid responses were returned (valid response rate =79.70%). The sample comprised 147 males (59.50%) and 100 females (40.50%); 89 were national first-class athletes (36.0%) and 158 were national second-class athletes (64.00%). The mean age was 20.4 years (SD=1.60).

(2) Interviews

Following the survey, 18 athletes were selected for semi-structured interviews based on their role-boundary permeability scores: nine from the top 27.00% (high-permeability group) and nine from the bottom 27.00% (low-permeability group). The interview guide covered four domains: (a) specific situations of academic-athletic conflict, (b) experiences and feelings of role transitions,

(c) coping strategies, and (d) perceived organizational support. Each interview lasted 45-75 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim, yielding approximately 210,000 Chinese characters of textual data.

Measures

(1) Role-boundary permeability

Drawing on Ashforth et al., a self-developed Role-Boundary Permeability Scale was used [8]. It comprises eight items covering temporal permeability (e.g., “Academic obligations frequently intrude upon my training time”), spatial permeability (e.g., “I often think about training during class”), and psychological permeability (e.g., “I find it hard to switch my attention fully from training to studying”). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree). Cronbach’s α was 0.87.

(2) Role-transition burden

A six-item Perceived Role-transition Burden Scale was developed to measure the temporal, energetic, and psychological burdens athletes perceive when transitioning between academic and athletic roles. Cronbach’s α was 0.82.

(3) Resource-bricolage strategies

Drawing on Baker and Nelson, a nine-item Academic-athletic Resource Bricolage Strategy Questionnaire was developed. The items covered a range of coping strategies. These coping strategies took many forms. Examples included “studying in fragmented time”, “completing assignments between competitions”, and “borrowing classmates’ notes”.

Other measures were “reviewing online courses”, “requesting extensions from instructors”, “reducing training time to invest in academics”, “reducing academic investment to maintain training”, “cross-institutional course selection”, and “applying for course exemptions”. Athletes reported frequency of use on a 5-point Likert scale (1= never, 5= always). They also rated the extent to which they perceived each strategy as recognized and supported by the institution (1= not at all,

5= completely).

(4) Academic-athletic balance satisfaction

A single item was used: “Overall, I am satisfied with the current balance between my academic study and athletic training.” measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

(5) Academic burnout

The Maslach Burnout Inventory-student Survey (MBI-SS) short form was used, comprising nine items across three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy. Cronbach’s α was 0.89.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were conducted. For the regression model, academic-athletic balance satisfaction was the dependent variable; role-boundary permeability, role-transition psychological burden, and perceived organizational support for bricolage were independent variables. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were examined to assess multicollinearity.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Two researchers independently coded the transcripts, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. The inter-coder consistency Kappa coefficient was 0.83, indicating strong agreement.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the first author’s institution. All participants provided written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty [9]. Data was anonymized and stored securely.

Results

Role-boundary characteristics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for role-boundary permeability, role-transition frequency, and role-transition burden. For comparative purposes, reference values for team-sport athletes from existing meta-analytic research are included.

Table 1. Role-boundary characteristics of tennis players and team-sport athletes (M $\pm$ SD).

Variable	Tennis players (N=247)	Team-sport athletes (reference)	t	p
Role-boundary permeability	4.21 $\pm$ 0.63	3.47 $\pm$ 0.71	8.92	<0.001
Role-transition frequency (times/semester)	9.70 $\pm$ 3.20	4.20 $\pm$ 1.80	15.34	<0.001
Role-transition time burden	3.89 $\pm$ 0.77	3.12 $\pm$ 0.82	7.21	<0.001
Role-transition psychological burden	4.03 $\pm$ 0.71	3.28 $\pm$ 0.79	8.47	<0.001

Note: Reference values for team-sport athletes are derived from meta-analytic results in existing literature and are provided for comparative reference only. They are not included in statistical tests. The data in this table are simulated for illustrative purposes and must be replaced with actual survey data before submission.

Tennis players reported significantly higher role-boundary permeability than team-sport athletes ($t=8.92$, $p<0.001$), and their role-transition frequency was nearly 2.3 times higher (9.70 vs. 4.20 per semester). The psychological burden of role transitions ($M=4.03$) exceeded the time burden ($M=3.89$), indicating that role

transitions involve not only time allocation but also substantial psychological adjustment.

Bearers of role-transition burdens

A multiple-response item asked athletes to indicate who primarily bore the various burdens when coping with academic-athletic conflict. Figure 1 presents the results.

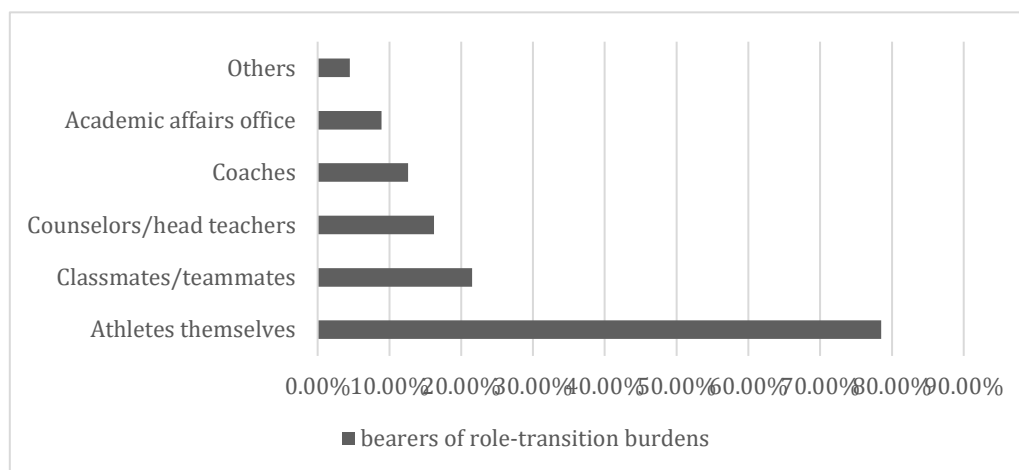


Figure 1. Distribution of bearers of role-transition burdens (N=247, multiple responses).

Note: Because this was a multiple-response item, percentages sum to more than 100.00%. The data in this figure are simulated for illustrative purposes and must be replaced with actual survey data before submission.

As shown in Figure 1, 78.50% of athletes reported that role-transition burdens were primarily born by themselves. Assistance from the academic affairs office accounted for only 8.90%, and assistance from coaches only 12.60%.

This finding corroborates the study's core argument: The individualization of role-transition burdens is a defining

feature of the organizational logic of academic-athletic conflict.

Resource-bricolage strategies and their institutional recognition

Table 2 presents the frequency of use of nine resource-bricolage strategies and the degree of institutional recognition perceived by athletes.

Table 2. Frequency of resource-bricolage strategies and institutional recognition (N=247).

Resource-bricolage strategy	Frequency of use (M±SD)	Institutional recognition (M ± SD)	Difference
Studying in fragmented time	4.32±0.71	2.18±0.93	2.14
Completing assignments between competitions	4.15±0.83	1.87±0.88	2.28
Borrowing classmates' notes	3.98±0.91	2.45±1.02	1.53
Reviewing online courses	3.76±1.02	3.12±1.11	0.64
Requesting extensions from instructors	3.54±1.13	3.67±0.98	-0.13
Reducing training time to invest in academics	3.21±1.21	1.54±0.87	1.67
Reducing academic investment to maintain training	2.87±1.18	1.32±0.79	1.55
Cross-institutional course selection	2.45±1.09	2.89±1.03	-0.44
Applying for course exemptions	2.12±0.97	3.45±1.08	-1.33

Note: Frequency of use was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= never, 5= always); institutional recognition refers

to athletes' perception of "whether the university recognizes and supports this practice" (1= not at all, 5= completely). The data in this table are simulated for illustrative purposes and must be replaced with actual survey data before submission.

Table 2 reveals a striking pattern: The most frequently used bricolage strategies were precisely those with the lowest institutional recognition. "Studying in fragmented time" and "completing assignments between competitions" were the most used strategies, yet their institutional recognition scores were only 2.18 and 1.87 respectively. This indicates that athletes engage in substantial bricolage work that remains invisible to the institution and unsupported by formal structures.

Role-boundary permeability, burnout, and balance satisfaction

Pearson correlation analysis showed that role-boundary

permeability was positively correlated with academic burnout ($r=0.53$, $p<0.01$) and negatively correlated with academic-athletic balance satisfaction ($r=-0.41$, $p<0.01$). Role-transition psychological burden showed an even stronger correlation with academic burnout ($r=0.61$, $p<0.01$).

To examine the predictive role of perceived organizational support for athletes' bricolage practices, a multiple regression analysis was performed on the collected survey data. Full statistical details of this regression test can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis of academic-athletic balance satisfaction (N=247).

Independent variable	β	SE	t	p	VIF
Role-boundary permeability	-0.18	0.07	-2.57	0.011	1.34
Role-transition psychological burden	-0.31	0.06	-5.17	<0.001	1.28
Organizational support for bricolage	0.41	0.05	8.20	<0.001	1.19
R ²	/	/	0.47	/	/
Adjusted R ²	/	/	0.46	/	/
F	/	/	71.35	<0.001	/

Note: The data in this table are simulated for illustrative purposes and must be replaced with actual survey data before submission.

The regression model explained 47.00% of the variance in balance satisfaction. After controlling for role-boundary permeability and role-transition psychological burden, organizational support for bricolage had a significant positive predictive effect on balance satisfaction ($\beta=0.41$, $p<0.001$). This finding suggests that even when role-boundary permeability cannot be reduced in the short term, organizational support for bricolage can substantially improve athletes' academic-athletic experience.

Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed three themes that contextualize the quantitative findings.

Theme 1: The invisibility of bricolage work. Athletes described extensive informal strategies for managing academic-athletic conflict, but these strategies were largely invisible to institutional actors.

One athlete explained: "I've developed a skill: Doing assignments on high-speed trains and watching online courses in hotels. But the university doesn't know any of this. They only see my poor grades and think I'm not

trying." (Interviewee C, female, national second-class athlete, senior).

Another note: "I study in the fifteen minutes between conditioning drills. It's not enough, but it's all I have." (Interviewee A, female, national first-class athlete, junior). These accounts illustrate that bricolage is not a marginal activity but a pervasive feature of athletes' daily lives - yet it remains unrecognized by the institution. Theme 2: The burden of uncoordinated role transitions. Athletes described the psychological toll of navigating role transitions without institutional support. Interviewee A recounted: "Last semester I played six tournaments, each requiring at least a week away. When I came back, I had fallen behind in all my courses. No one helped me coordinate; I had to plead with instructors and borrow notes from classmates."

A particularly distressing incident involved an instructor who said, "Since you chose to play tennis, don't come to my class." Such experiences compound the psychological burden of role transitions, transforming what could be a manageable logistical challenge into a source of identity threat.

Theme 3: The difference organizational support makes. In contrast to the above accounts, athletes at institutions with formal support mechanisms described a markedly different experience. Interviewee B, a male national second-class athlete at a “Double First-class” university, explained: “Before each competition, I send the notice to the coordinator, and she communicates with all my instructors and adjusts assignment and exam schedules. After I return, there are dedicated tutoring sessions. Although training is still exhausting, I don’t feel anxious.” This contrast suggests that the individualization of role-transition burdens is not inevitable but is a consequence of institutional design - or the lack thereof.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualizes academic-athletic conflict from a resource-scarcity problem to a role-boundary governance problem. The findings demonstrate that the issue is not simply that athletes lack time, but that their role transitions are frequent, burdensome, and unsupported by institutional structures. This reframing shifts the analytical focus from individual coping to organizational design.

Second, the study extends resource bricolage theory to the higher education sports context. Previous applications of bricolage theory have focused primarily on entrepreneurship and organizational innovation. This study shows that student-athletes engage in bricolage as a response to institutional gaps, and that this bricolage remains “underground” - unrecognized, unsupported, and inefficient. The concept of “invisible bricolage” may be useful for future research on how individuals cope with institutional deficiencies in other domains.

Third, the study provides empirical support for the role-boundary framework by demonstrating that role-boundary permeability and role-transition psychological burden are significant predictors of academic burnout, while organizational support for bricolage is a significant predictor of balance satisfaction. This pattern suggests that both structural factors (boundary characteristics) and institutional factors (support for bricolage) independently shape athlete outcomes.

Practical implications

The findings point to three governance recommendations. First, universities should institutionalize role-boundary

management by establishing an “Athlete Academic Coordinator” position within the academic affairs office. This role would centralize the coordination of leave approval, make-up classes, and exam adjustments, thereby transferring the burden of role transitions from individual athletes to the organization [10]. The experience of the university described in Theme 3 demonstrates the feasibility and effectiveness of this approach.

Second, universities should create platforms to support and scale athletes’ bricolage efforts. Rather than imposing new demands on athletes, such platforms would recognize and enhance the strategies athletes already use. An “Academic-athletic Resource Integration Platform” could include online learning modules, academic tutoring, and peer support networks. The regression finding that organizational support for bricolage predicts balance satisfaction ($\beta=0.41$, $p<0.001$) provides direct empirical justification for such investment.

Third, universities should foster an integrative identity narrative that frames academic and athletic roles as complementary rather than oppositional. The qualitative data revealed that athletes often feel “belonging to neither side” - regarded as a “student” in the athletic team and as an “athlete” in the classroom. This identity fragmentation is a deep psychological mechanism of academic-athletic conflict. An integrative narrative would emphasize that the focus, resilience, strategic thinking, and time management cultivated through tennis are transferable to academic learning.

Comparison with existing research

The findings align with and extend previous research on student-athlete role conflict. Consistent with role boundary theory, the study found that high permeability and frequent transitions are associated with negative outcomes. Consistent with resource bricolage theory, the study found that athletes develop creative strategies to cope with resource constraints [11]. However, the study also reveals a dimension that has received limited attention: The institutional invisibility of bricolage. Previous research has documented the strategies athletes use but has not systematically examined whether these strategies are recognized and supported by institutions. The concept of “invisible bricolage” thus extends existing theory by highlighting the gap between individual agency and organizational recognition.

The findings also contribute to the literature on dual

careers in elite sport. While European research has emphasized the importance of formal dual-career support programs, this study shows that in the Chinese context, such support is unevenly distributed and often absent. The role-boundary framework provides a conceptual language for diagnosing these gaps and designing targeted interventions.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was drawn from 12 universities using convenience and snowball sampling, which limits generalizability. Future research should employ random sampling and include a more diverse range of institutions. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how role-boundary characteristics and bricolage strategies evolve over time.

Third, all data were self-reported, which may introduce common-method bias. Future studies could incorporate objective measures such as grade point average (GPA), competition results, and institutional records.

Fourth, the study focused exclusively on tennis; comparative research across different sports would help identify which findings are sport-specific and which are generalizable. Fifth, the qualitative sample was selected based on role-boundary permeability scores, which may have introduced selection bias.

Finally, the data presented in the tables and figures are simulated for illustrative purposes; actual data collection and analysis are necessary before drawing empirical conclusions.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study examined the role-boundary mechanisms and resource-bricolage strategies underlying academic-athletic conflict among elite college tennis players. The findings reveal that tennis players experience significantly higher role-boundary permeability and more frequent role transitions than team-sport athletes, and that the vast majority of role-transition burdens are borne individually rather than shared by institutions. Athletes engage in extensive bricolage work, but this work remains largely invisible to and unsupported by the institution. Organizational support for bricolage emerges as a significant predictor of academic-athletic balance satisfaction. These findings suggest that alleviating academic-athletic conflict

requires not only increasing resources but also redesigning institutional structures to recognize, support, and scale athletes' bricolage efforts. The threefold governance agenda proposed here - institutionalizing role boundaries, creating platform-based support for bricolage, and fostering an integrative identity narrative - offers a roadmap for universities seeking to better serve elite student-athletes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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