"From Sweats to Suits": Administrators' Recommendations for Student-Athlete Career Development Services

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Division I college athletes are faced with numerous academic challenges during their time in school, including conflicts of interest between the university (e.g., academic success), athletic department (e.g., athletic success), and their own priorities (e.g., quality of life, balancing academic and athletic success). These growing demands may impact student-athletes' ability to prepare for a career after sport. Thus, there is a need for high-quality student-athlete career development programming and services in student-athlete support centers. The purpose of this study was to gain senior administrators' perspectives of student-athlete support services to determine best practices of career development programming. Division I administrators (N = 10), who oversee student-athlete support centers, provided insight and feedback via semi-structured interviews. A directed qualitative content analysis was conducted to discern best practices, levels of student-athlete engagement, and preferred attributes of career development personnel. The findings provide specific recommendations, which can help other student-athlete career development personnel improve their programs and adds to the holistic care literature.

"Almost all of us will go pro in something other than sports" was a popular NCAA commercial in the early 2010s that showed student-athletes and their future professions. A 2019 NCAA social media campaign echoed the same, noting "only 2% of college athletes will go pro" (NCAA, 2021). In an effort to focus on the mission of Division I college athletics as a part of higher education, athletes as scholars, and highlighting amateurism at the time, the NCAA also conducted and promoted research data on their website showing the low percentages of student-athletes going from collegiate sport to professional sport. Given the infrequency of college athletes transitioning to a professional sport career, college athletic departments began establishing career development resources and support for students within athletic departments to assist students in the transition to careers.

Student-athletes are faced with numerous responsibilities and the commercialization of NCAA Division I sports has intensified pressures, thereby fueling a heightened demand for enhanced academic support (Benson, 2000). Additionally, student-athletes feel pressure from coaches, families, friends, and professors regarding their academic and athletic performance while in college (Benson, 2000). Despite athletic departments' efforts to improve academic experience, a gap regarding student-athlete career development still exists. The heightened emphasis on student-athlete athletic identities only hampers their career transition, as athletes struggle to envision themselves beyond their athletic roles. Further, a general lack of preparedness for the workforce limits the opportunities that student-athletes may pursue after their college athletic career finishes. Within academic support, student-athlete career development to prepare individuals for life after sport remains an area of focus and is a growing area of research. Sport management research must increase its emphasis on student-athlete career development services to examine current offerings and provide practical recommendations to improve the current landscape.

Student-athletes often experience difficulties in balancing school and sports (Bell, 2009; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Hatteberg, 2020). A fundamental aspect of comprehending the student-athlete experience resides in the holistic care model, which addresses mental, social, and emotional well-being alongside academic and athletic pursuits (Hotz, 2003). Within student-athlete support centers, collegiate teams embrace this holistic approach, bringing together a diverse range of professionals to empower student-athletes with different motivations, majors, academic achievements, and ambitions to achieve their personal and professional goals. Preparing a student-athlete for life after sport and their chosen profession is a part of this approach.

This study highlights the need for continued research to bridge the gaps in student-athlete support and to better understand the nuances of career preparation and transition for student-athletes. The purpose of this study was to gain the perspectives of senior administrators of student-athlete support services to determine best practices of career development programming. Additionally, the study seeks to determine key attributes in effective student-athlete career development personnel. By examining strategies for successful career development programming, perceptions of the offered services, and attributes of successful student-athlete career development personnel, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on improving the holistic well-being and all-around success of student-athletes. As the landscape of college athletics continues to evolve, the pursuit of a comprehensive support system remains crucial to ensuring that student-athletes thrive both on and off the field.

Literature Review

Challenges to Student-Athlete Career Development

While exploring career development programming, it is necessary to consider the academic and career preparedness challenges student-athletes face during their time in college (Davis et al., 2022; Huml et al., 2019). Some of these are spurred

by the institutional and structural nature of athletics within a university, such as competing interests between the university, athletic department, and the student-athlete which may lead to conflict of interest amongst these groups. The university's funding structure may create competing interests between the athletic department's goals (focused on sports success) and the university's broader academic mission, creating tension in the expectations placed on student-athletes. This could potentially lead to conflicts in resource allocation and priorities by athletic department staff, such as coaches, academic support services, advisors, or career counselors.

Moreover, student-athletes face academic issues with eligibility, course scheduling around practices, or rigor of degree programs. Huml et al. (2014) found that student-athletes believe that their advisors are more focused on maintaining eligibility than achieving academic goals. This can materialize in the form of academic clustering, which is a significant challenge that is often cited as a point of contention (Gurney et al., 2017; Huml et al., 2019). This clustering includes the practice of student-athlete's pursuing majors that are completely irrelevant to the career that they wish to pursue upon graduation (Paule-Koba, 2019). While key metrics like Academic Progress Rate (APR) and Graduation Success Rate (GSR) may increase via academic clustering, the practice itself remains harmful because it discourages student-athletes from pursuing their desired major and can influence potential career development.

Another institutional challenge placed on athletes that may impact college to career success is the sheer amount of time that they must dedicate to their sport. The NCAA attempted to limit student-athlete time commitments on sport to a maximum of 20 hours per week (NCAA, 2017). However, these time limits are frequently exceeded, which leaves less and less time for academic endeavors (Benford, 2007). This includes limiting opportunities to do internships or practicum-based learning, which may be effective for career placement. These time constraints on student-athletes can negatively impact their personal life balance and can result in high levels of athlete identity and/or role engulfment (Zvosec et al., 2023). In other words, student-athletes have a difficult time seeing themselves as anything other than an athlete, which makes career transition even more difficult due to the uncertainty of what is next (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Moiseichik et al., 2019; Smith & Hardin, 2020). This issue of inflated athletic identity can cause an unpleasant career transition from college athletics to the workforce or limit collegiate focus on career development as student-athletes search for a new or reshaped identity (Kidd et al., 2018; Park et al., 2012).

Career transition is difficult for most people as the process often involves a drastic life change. For student-athletes, the transition itself is not the only issue, but also career preparedness in general (Stokowski et al., 2019). Despite increased programming from these academic support centers, student-athletes are graduating unprepared to enter the workforce (Stokowski et al., 2019). Student-athletes may lack a basic understanding of career development principles like creating a resumé, drafting a cover letter, building a professional network, volunteering/job shadowing experience and more (Navarro & McCormick, 2017). However, a case study of

student-athletes at Clemson University showed that some of the HIPs, like pursuing internships while in school, were instrumental in developing key workplace skills (Coffin et al., 2021). Despite these areas of improvement, more research is needed. It is the responsibility of academicians and practitioners to discover and implement the solutions for the betterment of the student-athlete experience. Thus, perspectives of multiples administrators are necessary to understand the nature of career development practices at student-athlete support centers.

It has been well documented that student-athletes with high athletic identity often neglect their other identities, including their social and career related (Kidd et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Thus, the need for athletic administrators to have quality programming that reaches these students and provides them with the information to develop their career is evident. Further, Division I athletes studied by Rubin and Moses (2017) pointed to the need for more career development services, indicating athletes themselves desire this information for life after sport. To create effective programming, Navarro (2014) recommended Division I career planning be provided for student-athletes throughout their academic career, with special emphasis on their senior year, and suggested working across campus for resources for internships and other student experiences. The career development programming is often housed within academic support services centers, managed by athletic administrators.

Academic Support Service Centers and Career Development

Because of the challenges, athletic department student-athlete support centers are an important part of the athlete experience. The support staff of these centers often provide academic, mental health, and career development services for student-athletes. Student-athlete support centers are not a new concept as they initially helped address academic issues, but the focus on holistic care is becoming more important. In the 1970s and 1980s, critics argued that many athletic programs at large Division I institutions altered their academic standards to admit certain high-caliber student-athletes who have lower academic credentials than other students within the university (Ridpath, 2010). This resulted in student-athletes having generally lower graduation rates, and those who did graduate were often unprepared for a professional career after sport (Huml et al., 2014). The solution offered by most athletic programs was to invest in student-athlete support centers (Ridpath, 2010). These support centers provide services to student-athletes in a multitude of areas: academics, learning disabilities, career development, and life skills.

Other pressures outside of the NCAA's mandated standards (e.g., minimum GPA eligibility requirements) also influenced athletic programs to invest in these programs. For example, the commercialization of college sport in the 1990s and 2000s when an influx of dollars was infused into athletic programs. This new money put tremendous emphasis on winning and led to added stress and time demands on student-athletes (e.g., increases in practices, games, travel, training). These changes brought forth a growing need for expanded student-athlete support (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). The dollars generated by media contracts of the 2000s and 2010s created new revenue streams which led to many academic facility enhancements and

staff expansions for major Division I programs. To support their student-athletes, some universities invested millions of dollars in their student-athlete support centers. For example, the University of Arkansas spent $23 million on their 55,000 square foot student-athlete support center in 2015 (Hutchinson, 2015). Shortly after, the University of Florida's Hawkins Center which totaled $25 million in construction costs was opened in 2016 (Parler, 2016).

Currently, student-athlete support centers offer a much greater set of services which include, but are not limited to, academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, life skills training, career development, community service opportunities, networking events, internships, volunteering opportunities, job shadowing, career transition workshops, financial literacy training and more (Botelho, 2019). Despite expanded student-athlete support centers, student-athletes experience a list of academic and career preparedness challenges (Davis et al., 2022; Huml et al., 2019). Many of these challenges may be out of the student-athlete's control (Fearon et al., 2011). For example, continuously rising pressures to win on the field and succeed in the classroom force student-athletes into a position where they sometimes must choose between the two. Because of the power and scope of college athletics, student-athletes often choose to prioritize sport, as that is the entity that pays their cost of attendance (Huml, 2019). In addition to this issue, multiple researchers note that many student-athletes' graduate unaware of the many student-athlete support services that are offered (Davis, 2022; Dietsch, 2012; Fouad et al., 2009). This outcome may naturally lead to an unpleasant career transition following college sport due to lack of preparedness (Zvosec et al., 2023).

Because academic standards at Division I schools are often reduced during the admissions process, many student-athletes enter college unprepared for the transition from high school (Coffin et al., 2021; Linnemayer & Brown, 2010). Student-athletes may need extra help on a specific subject because they did not receive a rigorous enough education while in high school, or be deficient in study skills, time management skills, communication skills or a combination. At most Power 5 schools, student-athlete support is housed within the athletic department and is funded through athletic department resources. At many smaller schools, student-athlete support is funded by resources from the university itself (Watkins et al., 2022). The budget constraints at these schools may limit the scope and effectiveness of academic support programs compared to larger Power 5 institutions. Regardless, student-athlete academic eligibility and transition from high school to college is an athletic department responsibility. These resources often come in the form of high impact practices (HIPs, e.g., creating ePortfolios, First-Year Seminars, Internships, Learning Communities, Service Learning and Community-Based Learning; American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023). While these are effective programs and services offered to student-athletes should not be reduced to these existing HIPs. Calls for extended research in this area are well documented and this study seeks to help identify some of those gaps (Brouwer et al., 2022; Smith & Hardin, 2020).

The setup of these of student-athlete support centers usually include a combination of top-level administrator(s) (e.g., senior associate athletic director, associ-

ate athletic director, assistant athletic director), mid-level associates (e.g., academic advisors, career development specialists, life skills development specialists learning specialists) and part-time or graduate assistant employees (e.g., receptionists, tutors, student-athlete mentors). The centers are typically funded exclusively by the athletics department's budget; this allows for the athletic department to keep their facilities exclusive to the student-athlete population. Sport management research has examined academic advisors' (Stokowski et al., 2016; Stokowski et al., 2020) and student-athletes' (Huml et al., 2014; Otto et al., 2019; Parsons, 2013) perceptions of the student-athlete experience. Despite senior administrators of student-athlete support overseeing student-athlete career development programming in most Division I athletic programs, their perspectives are rarely the focus of scholarly inquiry. Their insight can help inform career development programming, which is an essential part of the holistic development of the individual. This study sought to fill this gap and did so by targeting a participant pool of top-level administrators that oversaw the whole student-athlete support operation.

Conceptual Framework: Holistic Care and Interprofessional Teams for Student-Athletes

Recently, researchers have noted the importance of holistic care for the student-athletes (Beasley et al., 2022a; McHenry et al., 2021; Waller et al., 2016). Holistic care addresses athlete care beyond the physical, including the mental, social, and emotional well-being associated with the student-athlete experience (Hotz, 2003). According to Waller and colleagues (2016), a true holistic care model for a student-athlete would include a long list of professionals who help aid the student-athlete in their college experience. These professionals include, but are not limited to, coach, nutritionist, academic advisor, strength coach, mental health professional, life skills coach, doctor, trainer, chaplain, sport media advisor, and more. The integration and communication among and between these groups provides an interprofessional team. As such, scholars are using the holistic care model to understand the importance and role of various groups who assist the athletes, including athletic trainers (Beasley et al., 2022a), team chaplains (Beasley et al., 2022b; Waller et al., 2016) and mental health care professionals (McHenry et al., 2022). Following this perspective, we use the holistic approach and focus on a key contributor that has been under examined—the career development staff. Student-athlete support centers are often the hub of holistic care in a Division I athletic program. At a minimum, these centers typically house academic advising services, learning specialist services, tutoring, and career development services. Other larger, more established student-athlete academic centers may also offer nutritional services, mental health services, and more student-centric resources. Student-athlete support centers play an integral role in shaping the academic and career development experience for the student-athlete as a person. Thus, the athletic administrators in the career development sector provide the resources necessary for students to prepare for and achieve their next steps after graduation.

A holistic care model within an athletic department should create interprofes-

sional teams that address the many facets of the student-athlete experience. Interprofessional teams refer to departments which employ people with different professional skillsets. The benefits of constructing an interprofessional team are quite suitable for the holistic care model for the student-athlete (Bader & Martin, 2019; Beasley et al., 2022a; Steffen, 2014). In the case of the student-athlete support center, there are varying types of employees specializing in different areas to help the student-athlete develop during their college years (Botelho, 2019). For example, within a student-athlete support center, academic advisors develop educational opportunities, career development specialists develop networking and job training opportunities, and learning specialists aid in the learning process. Each of these employees have a unique set of skills that make a direct impact on the life of the student-athlete and their experience at their university. Previous research has examined desirable attributes of other athletic department personnel including entry-level employees (Bravo et al., 2013). Their study found that communication skills are one of the most important skills to have success within college athletics (Bravo et al., 2013). However, there still exists a gap in understanding which attributes make successful student-athlete career development personnel. Given the importance of this role, we need to discern the best attributes when working in student-athlete career development.

The idea of an interprofessional team is integral to creating a holistic care model of care for the student-athlete (Beasley et al., 2022a). In this study, we examine holistic care that exists within the student-athlete academic support center, as well as the interprofessional teams that are constructed to create this model of care. The collaborative nature of interprofessional teams is key to constructing a holistic approach to student-athlete wellbeing (Barkley et al., 2018). The collaboration encourages student-athlete career development programs to offer a range of services to their student-athletes. These diverse offerings also allow athletic department personnel to understand their athletes better, which in turn should allow them to provide a better model of care (Ventegodt et al., 2016). Lastly, the scope of holistic care models for student-athletes are dependent upon the number of resources that an athletic department commits (Huffman, 2014; Waller et al., 2016). Thus, athletic department buy-in is crucial to holistic care.

Waller and colleagues (2016) provide five core principles to providing collaborative care. These five principles are individualized care, population-based care, measurement-based care, evidence-based care, accountable care. Individualized care highlights the personalization of care based on a given athlete's goals. Population-based care notes the importance of tracking and correcting cases of non-participating student-athletes. Population-based care ensures that no athlete is left out of student-athlete career development programming. Measurement-based care is characterized by setting measurable and quantifiable goals for an athlete to strive for with respect to student-athlete career development. Evidence-based care refers to care that is backed by research. Lastly, accountable care ensures that the athletic department personnel are providing high-quality care. Waller et al. (2016) suggests each of these principles must be realized in order to provide a true model of collaborative and holistic care. As such, understanding the career development opportunities and

programming available and administrators' perspectives of career development and career development personnel will inform future programming and hiring of staff to manage that programming.

Current Study

The purpose of this study was to gain the perspectives of senior administrators of student-athlete support services to determine current best practices of career development programming. As the leaders of the career services centers and members of the holistic care team for student-athletes, we need their perspectives on current practices to establish baselines and recommendations for future programming and practices regarding career development and hiring career development support staff. Through the lens of holistic care, our study will identify these perspectives through semi-structured interview discussions with the leaders (i.e., senior associate athletic directors, associate athletic directors, assistant athletic director). For the purpose of this study, three research questions were investigated:

RQ1: *What do administrators perceive to be the best student-athlete career development programming practices at their respective schools?*

RQ2: *How do administrators perceive student-athletes' reception of career development programming?*

RQ3: *According to administrators, what attributes define successful student-athlete career development personnel?*

Methodology

A directed qualitative content analysis, a deductive approach, was conducted for the purpose of this study (Kibiswa, 2019). This analysis allowed for existing theory and literature to guide the data collection and coding processes. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval, purposive sampling was used to select Division I senior administrators of student-athlete support, so we targeted staff who supervise all aspects of academic and career-related matters for current student-athletes at their institution (e.g., Assistant Athletic Director - Student-Athlete Affairs; Senior Associate Athletic Director - Office of Student Life). Individuals were invited via email to participate in a one-time semi-structured interview about their institutions' academic and career development services. A total of 10 participants agreed to participate in the study and provided informed consent. The interviews were conducted by digital teleconference (e.g., WebEx) over a three-month period in the spring of 2022. A majority of the interviews were conducted by the lead author ($n = 7$). Using the same interview guide, the remaining interviews were conducted by other members of the research team. Every interview was recorded and lasted approximately 40 minutes with the longest interview lasting 55 minutes. Subsequently, each interviewer transcribed their interview in MS Word. Later, the lead author categorized interview responses, both closed and open, based on research questions in MS Excel.

The sample included participants from the Power Five and the Group of Five (i.e., American, Atlantic Coast, Southeastern, and Sun Belt Conferences). The par-

ticipants' average number of years working in student-athlete career developed was 11.9 years. Both the Group of and Power Five institutions were selected to show the range of practices used throughout Division I.

Table 1
Overview of Participants

Job Position	Conference	Years in Field
Director of Student-Athlete Academic Services	American	14
Associate Athletic Director - Student Athlete Enhancement	American	16
Associate Athletic Director for Academic Services	Atlantic Coast	15
Total Person Program Manager	Atlantic Coast	7
Assistant Athletic Director/Student-Athlete Development & Brand Awareness	Southeastern	7
Director of Student Development	Southeastern	7
Senior Associate Athletic Director - Academic Affairs	Southeastern	14
Director Student-Athlete Development	Sun Belt	11
Deputy Director of Athletics / Administration / Senior Woman Administrator	Sun Belt	15
Senior Associate Athletic Director – Academics and Student-Athlete Development	Sun Belt	13

Data Collection

The research questions for this study were informed by existing literature and theory. Based on the previous literature and to address the purpose of this study, the research team created a six-question interview guide prior to beginning interviews. The interview guide ensured that each research question would be addressed as four questions focused on RQ1, while one question was asked for RQ2, and an additional question answered RQ3. Each interview was further guided through clarifying and probing questions. All responses were included in the data analysis. By partaking in semi-structured interviews with an interview guide, the research team was able to ask, "targeted questions about the predetermined categories," which is associated with directed qualitative content analyses (Hseish & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281).

Data Analysis

A deductive approach based in holistic care and previous literature was conducted (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The literature review and frameworks helped form our codes. Additionally, consistent with Hsieh and Shannon (2005), we included other codes that were present within our data. This second strategy includes codes not directly related to holistic care because it helps identify salient information outside the scope of literature review and improves trustworthiness (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Kibiswa's (2019) eight-step approach to deductive qualitative analysis was undertaken: 1) creating the study frame and operational definitions, 2) determining the unit of analysis, 3) becoming familiar with the data, 4) coding, 5) drawing conclusions, 6) ensuring trustworthiness, 7) making presentation of the data, and 8) providing thick description of the findings. One member of the research team created a study frame and operational definitions (codebook) for each RQ based on the existing literature before engaging in line-by-line analysis of the data. The coding process moved from codes, to categories, to themes (Saldaña, 2021). Through the coding process, current research was supported while new insights were generated (Kibiswa, 2019). A total of four themes were created to address RQ1, 3 for RQ2, and 4 for RQ3. The research team member updated the codebook based on the findings. The codebook and data were shared with two other members of the research team. Upon reviewing the codebook and data, no further changes were made. Subsequently, the two members of the research team individually coded the data based on the agreed-upon codebook.

Trustworthiness

The research team engaged in various methods to ensure trustworthiness of the data and the findings. After the two authors coded the data individually, they met to calculate intercoder reliability. The researchers evaluated reliability by examining 20% of the data pertaining to RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3, which was deemed acceptable by (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). This resulted in ($k = .75$) across the codebook, which indicates acceptable reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977). Peer debriefing with a third member of the research team took place to address discrepancies and to ensure accurate representation of the data. Throughout the findings section, a thick description of the data is provided so readers can verify and interpret the findings themselves (Kibiswa, 2019).

Findings

Research Question 1

The purpose of RQ1 was to discern the current and best practices and strategies implemented by student-athlete support centers for successful career development programming. The analysis of participant responses led to the generation of four themes: 1) Collaboration, 2) Diverse Offerings, 3) Understanding the College Athlete, and 4) Athletic Department Buy-In, which are further outlined below.

Collaboration

Participants discussed the importance of collaborating with parties outside of the athletic department. Collaboration was imperative across a variety of key stakeholders including community leaders, alumni, and the university. In terms of community leaders, many participants implored other career development personnel to contact local businesses, community partners, and athletic department sponsors to create internship opportunities, join networking nights, or become mentors. For example, one participant stated, "Looking at your corporate sponsor list and thinking

we can put some of our student-athletes in these opportunities… is a big piece of it." Similarly, other participants highlighted the importance of connecting with businesses in the surrounding area. One participant shared, "We have lots of businesses in the (city) area. There's lots of opportunities for that." Another mirrored this sentiment and stated, "If (student-athletes) tell us what they are interested in, we can identify through the community where that can be done."

Alumni, both former student-athletes and general university alum, were identified as another key stakeholder to engage. Alumni were considered relatable to the athletes. Additionally, alumni demonstrated interest in the university and the success of the current student-athletes. One participant stated:

> (Alumni) can have an immediate connection. 'I played here at (institution) also. And, I also was a student-athlete. So now we already have that in common.' (As a student-athlete) I know I'm in a room of like-minded people that makes me a little more comfortable to come out of my shell to someone.

It is important to note that while use of alumni was common amongst the participants, programs differed in how they implemented alumni support into their program. One participant was proactive about intentionally connecting students about to graduate to alumni in positions that were consistent with the current student-athlete's interests. He stated:

> Specifically with our seniors, we're trying to now do a thing where we're connecting them with another alum before they leave here intentionally. So not like, 'Hey, call us if you need something or we'll help hook you up with people like once you're gone', but let's intentionally give you a connection to another alum that makes sense before you leave

Others recognized social media as a tool to help athletes connect with alum, "We all know the power of social media. Now you can use social media to connect with alumni who are in an industry that you have a passion for or an interest in. We have direct connections." Most routinely, programs brought their alumni in for panels or networking events.

Lastly, participants encouraged other career development personnel to not solely work within the silo of the athletic department, but to use the resources available through the university. For example, one participant said, "we really rely heavily on our university's collaboration and their career center. They may have more expertise in dealing with 1-on-1 engagements with student-athletes, and with students in general."

Diverse Offerings

Through the conversations with the career development personnel, it was apparent that there was not one program offering that was more successful or desirable than others. Participants emphasized the ability to provide athletes with a plethora of programming options, primarily ones that encouraged relationship building, focused on the career transition, created internship opportunities, and emphasized holistic care. Further, although services often were similar across athletic departments, each institution conducted the offerings in a unique manner. Networking was considered

of the utmost importance across participants. As one participant stated, "Network equals net worth." Therefore, encouraging relationship building was considered necessary. This resulted in offerings such as panel discussions, career fairs, and mentoring. For example, one institution, "did a round Robin where student-athletes could talk to former student-athletes and find out why they were so successful…they did a panel up front and then after that they would move around those tables and talk with the student athletes individually."

Similarly, participants articulated the vitalness of internship opportunities, which compared to other forms of programming differed the most from athletic department to athletic department. One program even arranged a summer internship program:

> We also offer a number of internship programs. We have 20 spots. What that entails is during the summer the student athletes that apply and then are selected for it, get the equivalency of a full room and board part of the summer scholarship. So, even though they're not enrolled in classes, they're still able to get essentially what they would've gotten for their scholarship… It's over six weeks. They get about five hours four days a week. And on the fifth day, they have a 60-to-75-minute professional development meeting with our career team.

To help secure internships and jobs post-graduation entry-level positions, athletic departments often discussed career transition services. Some institutions implemented one off resume workshops, mock interviews, and etiquette dinners throughout the year. However, several institutions utilized a multi-year plan to accomplish these goals, where each year student-athletes focused on one part of the transition process (e.g., one year for resume, one year for networking). One such participant stated, "Our 4–5-year program is really built for our student-athletes to transition to careers. Every year it builds on itself." Meanwhile, other institutions offered classes specifically designed for student-athletes and student-athlete needs. For example, one school offered a three-credit career transition course specifically designed for student-athletes that could be taken as an elective which counted towards their degree.

Despite emphasis on traditional career preparation, many athletic departments recognized the necessity of a holistic approach. As such, athletic departments offered programming such as financial literacy, mental health services, and life skills training. Institutions were particularly interested in financial literacy, especially during the athlete's final year. One participant stated:

> The senior year is really the bow on that package to transition you out. Where do you want to stay? How much is that going to cost? Where do you want to go? Are you prepared for your first apartment? Are you prepared for the bills that come with being a young adult?

From a mental health perspective, almost all participants in our study mentioned that they had seen noticeable change in their athletic programs' commitment to student-athlete mental health. Despite this positive trend, mental health services varied greatly amongst the schools. One school noted that their department created a space for multiple full-time mental health providers on-site for student-athletes to work with at any time. While others with fewer resources and lesser commitment noted that they have someone that comes in to discuss mental health with student-athletes.

Understanding the Athlete

The third theme was created because of participants acknowledging the uniqueness of the student-athlete population. Thus, to implement successful career development programming, participants encouraged other career development personnel to consider the athletes they are serving. First, participants noted that there are difficulties around scheduling internships and other offerings based on student-athletes' busy schedules. One participant asserted that, "It is very difficult for student athletes to go through internships because of the amount of time that's already requested of them on a daily basis." However, it is imperative to consider their schedules when establishing services.

Further, career development personnel need to be up to date with the needs and wants of their student-athletes. This included understanding what careers and services athletes were interested in. For example, one institution conducts their own research among student-athletes, "Every three or so years, we do a pretty in-depth survey and analysis with constituents, including student athletes, coaches, staff to make sure we're staying relevant and ahead of the curve for what we need here." If athletes do not know a career, then career development personnel need to be prepared to personalize their advice and help student-athletes uncover their passions through "personality assessments" and 1-on-1 conversations. For instance, one participant shared:

> I love using the whiteboard that I have in my office. I'm a visual guy, so I like to draw a lot of illustrations, so say it's a softball player. Softball is what you do. It's not who you are at the end of the day. Softball is a gift of yours is a passion of yours that can take you places, but you're more than just that…In addition to hitting the softball or catching the softball you have more innate value than being a softball player. I know that there are other things that you or your family or your friends tell you that you're good at this. You're gifted at this…If you can't play softball for the whole day, you have no schoolwork, the whole day is yours, what would you do for fun? What brings you joy? How does that make you feel? And the deeper you dig with the questions, it allows them, a safe space, the freedom to be who they are, and then hopefully to dig out that goal.

Lastly, participants denoted that many student-athletes are unable to recognize the transferable skills they have accumulated over their athletic career. Therefore, career development personnel need to be able to acknowledge these skills. Further, personnel need to help student-athletes build confidence in their abilities and learn how to articulate their value to future employers:

> They (student-athletes) are incredibly confident in their sport but outside of their sport they are not confident. It tracks. They are feeling that their value is being a student-athlete. I would tell them to talk about quantifying or the language to use for being a student-athlete. Talk about all the transferable skills.

With the help of student-athlete career development personnel, student-athletes can and will realize their potential in the professional workplace.

Athletic Department Buy-In

These efforts were predicated on athletic department buy-in, the final theme of RQ1. Participants believed that athletic department buy-in is vital for success. Keys to athletic department buy-in included repetition, coach support, and accessible resources. Career development personnel felt that their efforts were more meaningful when they had several touchpoints with athletes throughout their career, including during the recruiting process.

For example, repetition was exhibited when institutions curated 4-year plans to ensure career development each year. One participant stated, "We mandate student-athletes to go through career planning every year that they are here with us. I am very heavily involved in recruiting, so it honestly starts then."

Participants mentioned the importance of coach buy-in to help facilitate a culture around caring about future career success. For instance, one person stated:

> I think the major thing you have to have from a coach is "buy in." … if you have a coach who believes in what you were talking about, they'll send them [the student-athletes] to you. But if you have a coach who could care less, they only care about the wins and losses, then you have to work double as hard to try to get the student-athlete to care too.

Career development personnel are able to provide better support for athletes when given more resources. For instance, more resources could result in increased staffing, off-campus networking trips, holistic care and individualized support. One participant stated, "to me, the closer we can get to offering truly individualized support, the better we are serving what today's student athlete's needs are. And of course, we can't have a complete army. So, I would literally want to take that money and, and put it into people so that we can get closer to having more individualized support."

Overall, the findings suggested that successful career development programming for student-athletes relies on collaboration, diverse offerings, an understanding of the unique athlete population, and strong buy-in from the athletic department.

Table 2

Recommended Student-Athlete Career Development Practices

Practice	Examples	Practical Applications
Collaboration	Alumni	*Maintain a list of former student-athletes' contact information and career trajectories
	Sponsors	*Connect with sponsors to offer internship or job shadowing opportunities
	Community Leaders	*Bring community leaders in for networking nights or roundtables
	University Services	*Ask university career center to assist in organizing career fairs
Diverse Offerings	Encourage Relationship Building	*Emphasize the importance of networking and facilitate opportunities
	Internships	*Help athletes connect with potential internship opportunities. *Create opportunities that are more suitable to athlete schedule or on-campus
	Career Transition Programming	*Resume workshops *Mock interviews *Etiquette dinners
	Holistic Care Offerings	*Financial literacy seminars *Mental-health services
Understand the Student-Athlete	Know Athletes' Unique Features	*Recognize schedule challenges. *Build confidence in athletes' transferrable skills
	Personalization	*Provided 1-on-1 career coaching. *Ensure wants of athletes are met *Discourage major clustering
Athletic Department Buy-In	Repetition	*Begin career development programming from recruiting stage to the graduation stage
	Support	*Discuss the importance of career development with coaches to encourage buy-in
	Staffing and Resources	*Be articulate the importance of interprofessional teams and the need for more staffing

Research Question 2

RQ2 examined how administrators perceive that student-athlete career development services are received by athletes. Within their responses participants provided insight into the wide range of participation by student-athletes. Further, participants discussed their institutions viewpoint on mandatory versus recommended offerings. Ultimately, our analysis resulted in the following themes: 1) variability in student response, 2) lack of uniformity among requirements, and 3) the importance of past success.

Variability in Student-Athlete Response

Participants consistently mentioned the variability in student-athlete motivation to engage in career development. It is typical to have student-athletes who are more future focused while having other students who lack interest or are unable to see a career option other than being a professional athlete. One participant summarized this theme by stating the following:

> You have three tiers of athletes. You have that upper tier that knows what they want to do. They're engaged in all of the student development programming and they're attending and they're attentive because they understand that sport is going to end here really quickly, you have that middle section where you kind of like hit or miss. Some will go, some will kind of blow it off because of the hopes of what can happen in sport. And you have that lower tier where you really have to stay on them, keep pushing them, and keep pounding them for little time to get them to understand.

This varied response made it difficult for the participants to make a single recommendation that could be applied to most student-athletes.

Lack of Uniformity Among Requirements

When answering RQ2, many administrators addressed the difference between mandating and recommending services and programming. Such philosophies varied among institutions. Further, it was apparent that different approaches had been taken within each institution. It is difficult to generalize these approaches as best practice due to the variability of responses, but the variability suggests administrators struggle with the buy-in by student-athletes on some campuses.

A few administrators indicated their institutions were strict about requiring student-athlete attendance to their offerings because as one participant stated, "If we didn't require it, we would have like four or five people." The administrators felt it was important all athletes attended to receive the information.

A couple of the institutions primarily provided students with the freedom to decide if the career resources were applicable to them by offering a non-mandatory approach. One administrator shared:

> We have gone away from mandatory, but to recommend. We put it out there, 'Hey this is a business fair for jobs, and it is recommended.' Those student-athletes that come really want to be there. Those who do not come we pull them to the side and say that they are missing an opportunity that will help their career. Some get it. Some do not.

In the middle ground, some athletic departments implemented a mix of mandatory and recommended offerings. For example, one institution divided programming services onto different tracks. One track was required while the other included encouraged activities. This participant stated:

> We have the green track and a gold track. The green track is required. So, at the end of the day, we have about 10 buckets that we want to be essentially filled, or they've had those experiences when they graduate. And everybody shares that. And that's part of what it needs to be a goal. That's the green track. The gold track is that all the other things that we offer that are above and beyond, but we're not going to require you to do. We just hope that you do.

Importance of Past Success

Because student-athletes varied in their focus on career development, administrators recognized the importance of past success. One department asks former student-athletes who procrastinated and waited to focus on life after college to come back to campus and talk to current student-athletes:

> We use those student-athletes to come back to Summer Bridge to talk to student-athletes to tell them not to wait until their last year to get serious about your career. Focus on that first year. Focus on your sport. Focus on everything. Be a full complete student-athlete in that mindset.

Additionally, other institutions emphasized the value of upperclassmen sharing their experiences with career development to freshmen and sophomores:

> Word of mouth, having a successful event, having an event where, where the student athlete knows what they're getting going in, and they're getting it when they're walking out the door provides positive feedback in which they pass down to the sophomores and freshmen that are now coming up wanting to be a part of it.

Overall, responses revealed the complexity of engaging student-athletes in career development and the need for tailored approaches that consider individual motivations and institutional philosophies. RQ2 demonstrated that student-athlete motivation to attend career development events is varied, however, it is important to encourage student-athletes to share their positive experiences as this may impact future attendance.

Research Question 3

RQ3 aimed to define the attributes of successful student-athlete career personnel. The data analysis generated four themes: 1) diversity 2) innovative, 3) relatable to student-athletes, and 4) excellent communication.

Diversity

RQ3's first theme was diversity. Administrators in our sample were focused on building a team of employees that held an eclectic set of skills. One participant stated that their department likes to hire new employees that "have a skill that (we) don't have." This particular participant believed that hiring oneself repeatedly did not help

diversify the team's strengths. Thus, this particular school has made the conscious decision to implement hiring practices that added new skill sets to the department. Another participant reiterated this idea by saying they like to hire employees that "do not… think exactly like you, but also someone who understands your overall vision and wants to meet that overall vision." In other words, this participant illustrated that diversity of approach is important to have within a strong department, yet visions to the direction of the program must remain aligned to achieve success. Lastly, this theme was defined by its emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace. Many of our participants noted that their hiring practices usually contain some elements of DEI in terms of demographics. One administrator said that their program seeks to "find that balance of diversity, equity, and inclusion piece. That can be race, ethnicity, major, or career field." While another participant added:

> We're looking to be diverse in our staff in as many ways as possible so that we can mirror the student-athletes. It is also important to push ourselves to be comfortable with other people too, so we can be more well-rounded as a staff.

Innovative

The athletic administrators included in the study claimed that they seek adaptable employees. Further, these interviewees noted industry trends that require employees to possess greater knowledge of technology and social media. For example, one participant stated, "I'm going to hire somebody that is social media savvy. If they know how to work computer applications and programming, they can help." Participants also noted the importance of employees devising innovative ways to maximize the resources that their department has. One administrator stated that in order to maximize the resources that the program has to offer:

> We always need someone who is innovative. All student-athletes will not be the same. We will notice things are not working anymore and we will need to pivot to something else. It is always about pivoting. Hard work, [and] grit.

Another participant echoed this sentiment and stated, "if I'm not great at building an idea, (I need) somebody who can come in with a new idea and build it." Because so many of these programs are trying to maximize their resources, creative ways to adapt remain so important. This is especially true due to the fluctuation of schedules in college athletics and the tremendous demands on athlete's time. Lastly, participants emphasized that their work is never finished, and that innovation will always remain a key part of their roles.

Relatable to Student-Athletes

Relatability to the student-athlete was a key theme and an attribute that administrators target during the hiring process. Participants in this study reiterated the importance of engaging the student-athletes in discussions about their desired career development programming. Our participants reported that when student-athletes feel included in the discussion about career development programming, they are more

likely to attend events, workshops, and other career development programming. Administrators noted that many of their current employees are former student-athletes. One of the participants even noted that "ideally you want someone that was a student-athlete themselves." He went on to share that he believed that there are few non-student-athletes able to fully understand what it means to be a student-athlete. Despite many of the participants' preference for alumni and ex-student-athletes as new hires, they are open to non-student-athletes as well.

Relatability to the student-athlete also includes personnel that are engaging with their student-athletes. One administrator said that they look for, "You look for someone who you think will recruit student athletes to come to these things who is relatable." The participant went on to say that the job itself is very relationship driven and connecting with student-athletes helps build strong relationships. As the employee-student-athlete relationships grow in strength, attendance at workshops, networking nights, etc. tends to rise as well. Lastly, and most importantly, our interviewees stated that personnel who show a passion for helping student-athletes is the most important attribute. One interviewee is quoted saying "number one is I think the passion to really help people, I think to really try to find somebody who really cares about the wellbeing and the willingness to help student athletes."

Excellent Communication

Excellent communication is paramount for a strong employee in student-athlete career development. Communication with student-athletes is important to boost attendance. Student-athletes must know where and when career development programming will occur. Additionally, communication of what career development programming will occur is also important, so student-athletes feel their time is being utilized effectively. Another key group that student-athlete career development personnel must communicate with are industry professionals. Because industry professionals are so integral to the programming that is offered within student-athlete career development, personnel must build strong relationships with these individuals through strong communication. Industry professionals can provide opportunity to student-athletes in the form of internships, job shadowing, informational interviews, and more. Administrators note that their employees often act in the role of facilitator between student-athlete and industry professional. One participant stated: "But it's also working with corporations, it's working with the career center. So, it's got to be someone that has that communication skill and level of maturity and experience expertise in career readiness." This communication skill creates more opportunities for student-athletes in the long term and job placement is another metric of success for career development personnel. Lastly, participants noted that personnel who are detail-oriented and organized tend to excel in the roles within student-athlete career development.

Table 3

Recommended Practices for Hiring Student-Athlete Career Development Staff

Desired Attributes	Examples	Practical Application
Diversity	What skill set is the department missing?	*Conduct a SWOT analysis on your employees and hire to improve your weaknesses
	Shared mission, values, & goals	*Ensure future employees have the same vision for student-athlete outcomes
	Increase DEI	*Ensure that your staff represents a variety of races, ethnicities, genders, and industry experiences
Innovative	Adaptable	*Able to handle a variety of tasks on any given day
	Willing to take the initiative	*Willing to spend time connecting with industry and community leaders *Willing to create new and engaging career development opportunities for student-athletes
	Able to maximize resources	*Able to find creative solutions to budgetary or resource constraints
Relatable to Student-Athletes	Former student-athletes	*Hire former student-athletes who can relate to scheduling, workload, and life-balance challenges
	Able to connect with student-athletes	*Able to motivate and engage student-athletes in career development programming
	Passionate for helping student-athlete career development	*Willing to listen and provide thoughtful advice to help student-athletes navigate their future careers
Excellent Communication	Outgoing	*Possess networking skills to create contacts for student-athletes
	Able to communicate across populations	*Able to communicate with a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., sponsors, industry professionals, student-athletes, university personnel)
	Detail orientated/Effective	*Able to communicate the value of program offerings *Adequately provides information to ensure attendance and understanding of provided programming

In summary, successful student-athlete career personnel were described as individuals who were diverse in background and approach, demonstrated innovation and adaptability, were relatable to student-athletes, and exhibited excellent communication skills. These attributes collectively contributed to the effectiveness of career development programs in meeting the diverse needs of student-athletes.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain the perspectives of senior administrators of student-athlete support services to determine best practices of career development programming. Through examining 3 research questions using a deductive approach, this work supports previous literature while uncovering new key areas of interest. The theoretical and practical implications are outlined below.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this work examines student-athlete career development using a model of holistic care within sport management research. Previously, holistic care has been applied in the context of athletic trainers (Beasley et al., 2022a), sport chaplains (Beasley et al., 2022b) and mental health professionals (McHenry et al., 2022). The current study uses the model to explore student-athlete career development. Student-athlete career development remains an underfunded, yet extremely important part of the student-athlete experience. This paper echoes the call for increased opportunities and resources to be committed to student-athlete development (Coffin et al., 2021). Past sport management scholars have argued that the key to creating true holistic care is through the implementation of interprofessional teams (Beasley et al., 2022a, 2022b; Botelho et al., 2021; McHenry et al., 2022). The current study also extends this application of the concept of interprofessional teams to a new area of sport management, as we argue for student-athlete career development personnel to be considered a key component of a student-athlete's interprofessional team portfolio.

Holistic care models have identified the necessity for collaboration (Barkley et al, 2016), diverse offerings (Ventegodt et al., 2016), and athletic department buy-in (Waller et al., 2016). Further, Waller and colleagues (2016) identified five principles of collaborative care which should inform implementation: individualized care, population-based care, measurement-based treatment, evidence-based care, and accountable care. The findings across RQ1 and RQ2 demonstrate how holistic care is being implemented through student-athlete career development services, based on the perceptions of senior administrators of student-athlete support. In terms of what administrators perceive to be the best student-athlete career development programming practices at their respective schools (RQ1), participants echoed the call for collaboration (Barkley et al., 2018). Further, administrators recognized the need to provide diverse offerings which aligns with the concept of holistic care (Ventegodt et al., 2016). Participants demonstrated that athletic department resources and buy-in determined the implementation of career development services. Lastly, the principle of individualized care (Waller et al., 2016) materialized as participants recognized

the need to provide personalized, and at times one-on-one, care to student-athletes.

In terms of administrators' perceptions of student-athletes' reception of career development services (RQ2), the present study suggests that the principle of evidence-based care (Waller et a., 2016) is crucial to student-athlete career development, as athletes valued past success. Our findings did not suggest that other principles of collaborative care are being realized. For example, the findings suggest that student-athletes vary in their responsiveness. However, there did not appear to be a system for ensuring that athletes do not fall behind in their career development, which is in conflict with the principle of population-based care (Waller et al., 2016). A population-based care principle applied to this context would track and correct cases where the student-athletes are not participating in the career development programming. This could materialize through mandating attendance to workshops, career coaching sessions, etc. Lastly, across interviews there did not seem to be a system for holding senior administrators of student-athlete support and their personnel accountable, which does not uphold the principle of accountable care (Waller et al., 2016). Therefore, despite elements of holistic care being found in current student-athlete career development services, the present findings suggest that not all elements are being implemented. Because holistic care has been found crucial to the wellbeing of athletes (Beasley et al., 2022a; McHenry et al., 2022), more research should examine how student-athlete career development services could better implement all principles and elements of holistic care.

Although not based in the holistic care model, previous research on athletic department employee attributes (Bravo et al., 2013) is supported through the present findings. Specifically, communication was considered crucial in both studies. Further, Bravo and colleagues discerned that creativity was on the list of top-15 attributes which administrators believed that employees lacked. The call for innovative employees is similar to this finding. Lastly, Bravo et al. (2013) suggested that employers prefer employees with a sport background, which is similar to the current administrators preferring employees who are relatable to student-athletes.

Practical Implications

This study sought to provide practitioners with strategies to improve career development practices. Because most student-athletes will not build a career through their sport after graduation (McCormick & McCormick, 2012), it is vital for them to receive adequate academic support and career development throughout their college career. The conversations with the senior administrators of student-athlete support revealed that in terms of best practices it is imperative to collaborate, offer an array of offerings, understand your student-athletes needs and wants, and help cultivate athletics department buy-in to these services. One important takeaway from this work is that there was not a single service that each institution offered in the exact same way. Therefore, it is important for career development personnel to consider the above-mentioned strategies but find the best way to implement such services within their institution.

The most notable way in which there was a lack of uniformity was in con-

sidering if athletic departments should mandate or simply encourage career service offerings. Some student-athletes may prioritize sports over long-term academic or career goals, leading to a lack of focus on academic and career preparedness until later in their collegiate experience. It is expected that student-athletes will show a wide range of interest in the services, and it is vital to engage those who may be less motivated to consider the future. One way to do this is through using the transition experiences of past student-athletes as examples for current student-athletes. By leveraging the experiences of past student-athletes, student-athlete support centers can create a more nuanced, empathetic, and tailored approach to guiding current student-athletes through their academic and career transitions. The use of real-world examples provides practical insights and helps bridge the gap between the athletic and professional aspects of their lives.

Previously, scholars have encouraged student-athlete career development programs to offer HIPs like First-Year Seminars, Internships, Learning Communities, Service Learning and Community-Based Learning to foster stronger career preparedness for student-athletes (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023; Navarro & McCormick, 2017). Based on the current study's interview data, many of these practices are currently in use, but require continued investment.

This study also provides insight into the qualities that Division I career personnel should possess to be effective in their job. These qualities include being innovative, an excellent communicator, being relatable to the student-athletes, and fitting within the athletic department. Those who would like to work within career development should highlight these skills. For the administrators responsible for the department's hiring process, these insights can inform the development of specific and relevant criteria for hiring athletic career personnel in Division I athletic programs. Hiring managers can use these qualities as benchmarks to make more informed decisions when selecting candidates. Furthermore, recognizing the need for diverse skillsets, institutions can actively seek career personnel who bring varied experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives. This promotes an inclusive environment and ensures that the career team can effectively support the diverse needs of student-athletes. While recognizing that the qualities needed for success may evolve, institutions can encourage career personnel to embrace continuous improvement.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is not without limitations. Division I Football Bowl Subdivision schools were the focus of the study, so future researchers should evaluate similar principles at the other levels of college sport (e.g., Division I Football Championship Subdivision, Division II, Division III) to discern if different academic philosophies persist. The study may not fully account for the variability in resources, structures, and priorities among different institutions, which can impact the implementation of career development programs. In-depth case studies of individual institutions or athletic programs could provide nuanced insights into the specific strategies and practices that contribute to successful career development outcomes. Though it was not

a theme nor a focus of this study, COVID-19's impact on the student-athlete career development could be an important area of inquiry for future work. Similarly, investigating the integration of technology and digital platforms in career development programs could shed light on how innovative tools impact student-athlete engagement and outcomes. It is imperative for HIPs to continue to be evaluated to best help student-athletes thrive. Furthermore, the perspectives of other key stakeholders (e.g., student-athletes, coaches, other administration, or industry professionals) should be examined. Additionally, research exploring career development in international student-athlete contexts could offer insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by athletes in different global settings. Finally, a quantitative instrument should be developed to provide a uniform measurement tool to evaluate career development HIPs across the NCAA's member institutions.

Conclusion

We investigated current practices within student-athlete career development at NCAA Division I member institutions through the lens of the student-athlete development directors of NCAA D-I athletic programs. The research team identified 11 themes to summarize the data. Through these themes, we made several recommendations to current career development personnel. These recommendations include, but are not limited to, providing diverse career development offerings to student-athletes (e.g., internships, job shadowing), collaborating/connecting with community members and stakeholders (e.g., alumni, local business owners), and personalizing the career development experience (e.g., 1-on-1 coaching, discourage major clustering). Additionally, administrators provided context to hiring strategies for student-athlete career development program staff. Our work provides theoretical and practical implications that argue for further investment of resources into student-athletes' career development. This investment will lead to a stronger, more confident group of graduates that will be prepared to thrive in their professional lives after sport.

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