

Benchmarks and Boundaries: A Content Analysis of Student-Athlete Development Programs for Women

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Abstract

This study examined disparities in support structures for women's sport college athletes competing at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Power-4 member institutions. Through qualitative content analysis, findings revealed that only 33% of institutions currently offer dedicated personal and professional development programming for women's sport athletes. Among the Power-4 conferences, the Big Ten Conference led in total programmatic support, while the Big 12 Conference showed notable gaps compared to their Power-4 conference peers. While available programmatic development programs promoted leadership, cohesion, and career transitions for women's sport athletes, and career initiatives supported transitions beyond sport, critical areas such as mental health and physical well-being remained insufficient in existent women's sport athlete development programming. The present study underscores the need for expanded inclusive programming and increased resource allocation to enhance accessibility and visibility for women's sport athlete development programming. Future research assessing programmatic effectiveness and financial investment would be valuable to inform strategies for advancing support for women's sport athletes in collegiate athletics.

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Women now comprise 43.5% of all National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes, a significant increase from just 28% in 1982 (Haile, 2023). While this growth reflects broader societal progress and the expansion of opportunities for women in sports, a substantial resource disparity persists between men's and women's athletics. On average, NCAA institutions allocate nearly twice as much funding to men's sports compared to women's, with Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools spending up to three times more on men's sport athletes (Haile, 2023). Although federal legislation (i.e., Title IX) in the United States mandates men and women receive equal opportunities within programs receiving federal aid, the commercial enterprise surrounding collegiate athletics in the United States prioritizes predominantly men's sports (e.g., football, men's basketball), often at the expense of women's sport athletes (Collins, 2022). Despite increased attendance, fan interest, and revenue generation in women's college sport, recent alterations to the structural operation of collegiate athletics (e.g., name, image, and likeness [NIL], revenue sharing) continue to foster funding disparities within the institutional setting of collegiate athletics in the United States (Jimerson et al., 2025; Sveinson et al., 2022).

While disproportionate funding of men's and women's college sport produces competitive disparities and existential threats (Ridpath et al., 2008), inadequate funding also negatively impacts the holistic development and experience of collegiate athletes (Corr et al., 2024). College represents a formative period during which young adults navigate independence, face new challenges, assume responsibilities, and shape their identities. For competing college athletes these challenges are amplified by the demands of athletic training and elevated social standing (Corr et al., 2023; Corr & Paule-Koba, 2026). More specifically, women's sport athletes encounter a set of pressures distinct from their men's sport counterparts. These distinct pressures are partially resultant from heightened societal expectations placed on women in the United States (Wilkins et al., 2024). Accordingly, such expectations often involve conforming to traditional gender norms pertaining to behavior, appearance, and/or performance, adding additional stressors to the experience of women's sport athletes competing in NCAA athletics (Steinfeldt et al., 2011). Contrary to the experiences of men's sport athletes, women's sport athletes are frequently held to both a higher standard and subjected to double standards in how their actions are judged (Treisman, 2023). Accordingly, many women college athletes struggle with self-doubt, body image concerns, and performance anxiety (van Niekerk et al., 2023).

Beyond the individual experiences of women's sport college athletes, the structural nature of global sport and athletics further credentials men's sport, presenting additional obstacles for women's sport athletes. With the collegiate athletics system in the United States, women's sport athletes typically receive less media visibility, lower compensation (e.g., NIL, revenue sharing), and less access to professional sport pathways as compared to athletes competing in men's sport (NCAA, n.d.). As a result, many women's sport athletes develop a heightened awareness of the need for career preparedness during college. Regardless of talent or performance level, women's sport athletes often recognize that making a sustainable living through sports is significantly less likely for women as compared to men (Moiseichik et al., 2019).

In fact, Park and Williams (2022) found that women's sport athletes frequently plan for alternative career paths, placing a greater emphasis on their educational experience in college compared to men's sport athletes. At the highest level of competition within NCAA athletics (i.e., Power-4 Conference competition), the scarcity of professional sport opportunities in women's sport intensifies the urgency to identify and secure post-graduation employment among women's sport athletes.

Seemingly recognizing the unique and distinct challenges of women's sport athletes, several institutionally sponsored programmatic initiatives have been introduced to support women's sport athletes and address existing disparities. At Clemson University, POWER is an institutionally supported personal and professional development program specifically for Clemson University women's sport athletes. Founded in 2022, the program features personal leadership development seminars, professional networking opportunities, and regular trips to national and international corporations across the United States (Clemson Tigers, n.d.). Such programmatic development at the institutional level is an effective mechanism NCAA members institution can implement for the personal and professional development of women's sport athletes (Stokowski & Rubin, 2024).

Accordingly, the present study sought to conduct a content analysis of athlete development programming offered specifically for women's sport athletes. This analysis was delimited to NCAA Power-4 member institutions and aimed to explore the nature and structure of initiatives targeted to women's sport athletes while assessing their potential effectiveness. To guide the methodological approach and foundation of this manuscript, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How prevalent is women's sport athlete development programming among NCAA Power-4 member institutions?
2. Among women's sport athlete development programs, what is the functional composition of programming for personal and professional development?

By conducting this study, the researchers sought to examine the current landscape of women's sport athlete development programming and provide actionable recommendations for NCAA institutions to enhance their support systems for women's sport athletes.

Literature Review

Gender Equity and Stereotypes

NCAA (2024a) data indicates that more than 230,000 women's sport athletes currently compete in collegiate athletics, rates that are historical high with regards to women's sport participation. However, increased access and participation do not guarantee transformative change. In fact, women's sport athletes continue to face systemic discrimination and entrenched gender disparities despite NCAA mandates promoting gender equity and cultural diversity among member institutions (NCAA,

2024b; Sveinson et al., 2022). One significant challenge arises from pervasive stereotypes and stigmas, where women's sport athletes' identities often conflict with traditional gender roles, exposing them to stereotype threats which may adversely affect their perception of self and performance, both academically and athletically (Coakley, 2016; Hively & El-Alayi, 2014). These challenges are compounded by intersectional discrimination – particularly salient along racial and gender lines – pushing women's sport athletes to alter their behavior to navigate conflicting identities (Ferguson & Satterfield, 2017; Simons et al., 2007).

As sport has long been constructed as a masculine domain, casting women as *invaders* within sport settings often results in the continuous negotiation of place in an environment that upholds male privilege and patriarchal norms of physical superiority (Coakley, 2016; Hively & El-Alayi, 2014). This marginalization extends to societal expectations around femininity and body image, where women's sport athletes face a paradox between the muscularity and physical strength required for athletic success and societal perceptions of femininity, leading to psychological distress (Lunde & Gattario, 2017; Steinfeldt et al., 2011). Further complicating these dynamics are perceptions of homonormativity within women's sport. This derogatory stereotype is regularly deployed to convolute women's participation in sport by equating female athleticism with homosexuality, thereby reinforcing heteronormative social ideologies that delegitimize women's sport athletes' roles (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009; Waldron, 2016). Such representation is often subversively found in media portrayals of women's sport athletes and serves to undermine the accomplishments or capabilities of women's sport athletes.

In media representations, women's sport athletes' athletic accomplishments are also often overshadowed by emphasis on physical appearance. Such focus directs attention away from athletic competence and perpetuates gender stereotypes, further undermining the legitimacy of women's sport (Romney & Johnson, 2020; Strehlow et al., 2021; Sutton et al., 2021; Weiller-Abels et al., 2021). Despite the significant progress achieved since the enactment of Title IX in 1972, which has, notably, increased women's collegiate athletic participation by over 50% (Staurowsky et al., 2020), persistent inequalities remain.

Male coaches disproportionately occupy leadership roles in women's sport, and athletic grant-in-aid (GIA) distribution continues to fall short of proportional equity. Such examples alone are indicative of Title IX's failure to fully dismantle structural and cultural barriers that preserve male dominance in women's sport spaces (Marx et al., 2023; Stokowski et al., 2018). Resource disparities further compound these inequities, with men's sport programs consistently receiving greater funding, superior facilities, and better support services, all despite Title IX's mandates for equal treatment of men's and women's sport athletes. This systemic imbalance extends to GIAs and operational budgets, highlighting the financial challenges women's sport programs face and the substantial investments required to achieve compliance (Rubin & Lough, 2015; Staurowsky et al., 2022).

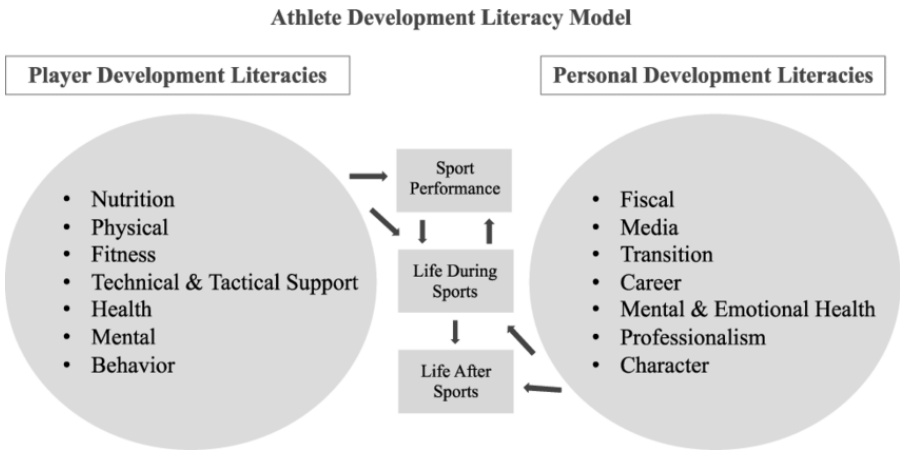
Athlete Development and Empowerment

Beyond athletic performance, holistic athlete development programs address personal growth, mental health, and leadership skills. Each of these areas are supported by NCAA initiatives such as the Student-Athlete Leadership Forum and campus-based Student-Athlete Advisory Committees (Heim et al., 2022). Career development presents an additional challenge for competing college athletes, who must balance rigorous training schedules with internship and career exploration opportunities, all while confronting societal stereotypes that question their commitment to non-athletic professions (Park & Williams, 2022; Turick et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, women's sport athletes often demonstrate higher career maturity than their men's sport counterparts, recognizing limited professional athletic prospects and preparing earlier for post-athletic transitions (Moiseichik et al., 2019). Emerging platforms like Her Competitive Advantage (HCA; 2023) provide tailored support to leverage the unique skills women's sport athletes bring to the workforce. Leadership development, facilitated through NCAA programming like SAAC, empowers college athletes by fostering advocacy, personal growth, and the skills necessary to thrive beyond their athletic careers (Heim et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2021). While these examples of programmatic offerings exist at a macro-institutional level (i.e., the NCAA itself), institutionally supported programming among NCAA member athletic department is of much greater potential value in the personal and professional development of women's sport athletes (Stokowski & Rubin, 2024).

Athlete Development Literacy Model

The Athlete Development Literacy model (ADL) emphasizes the importance of holistic and multidimensional approaches to college athlete development. Research highlights that such programming should not only address the athletic and academic needs of college athletes, but also their personal growth, identity development, and transition to life beyond sport (see Figure 1; Stokowski et al., 2020; Stokowski & Rubin, 2024).

Within ADL, the personal development categories reflect this emphasis, capturing initiatives aimed at fostering self-awareness, confidence, and advocacy skills such as mentorship, leadership, peer collaboration, and community-building platforms (e.g., student athlete advisory committee [SAAC]). The inclusion of professionalism and career categories reflects extant research on the structural and logistical barriers athletes face in preparing for careers post-graduation, particularly due to time constraints and limited access to experiential learning opportunities (Stokowski et al., 2020). While professionalism focuses on skills, networking, and exposure to industry pathways, career initiatives are oriented towards long-term planning, goal setting, and the transition from sport to full-time employment. The financial category (i.e., *fiscal*) acknowledges the critical role that funding, scholarships, and resource allocation play in shaping the environment of opportunity for college athletes. Stokowski and Rubin (2024) assert that institutional investment is a key enabler of athlete success, making financial programming a relevant dimension in assessing the overall support landscape.

Figure 1*The Athlete Development Literacy Model (ADL; Stokowski et al., 2020)*

Theoretical Framework

Empowerment theory offers a compelling lens through which to examine the development of women's sport college athletes. Rooted in the work of Rappaport (1987), empowerment is defined as a process by which individuals and communities gain greater control over their lives, develop self-efficacy, and participate meaningfully in decision-making. Empowerment theory has been widely adopted across education, psychology, and public health disciplines as a framework for promoting agency and challenging systems of marginalization (Blinde et al., 1993; Duda et al., 2017; Streetman & Heinrich, 2024). In the context of collegiate athletics, empowerment theory is particularly relevant to understand how structured programming can support the personal and professional growth of women's sport athletes who often face significant barriers compared to their male counterparts (e.g., gender stereotypes, underrepresentation in leadership positions).

Empowerment is not an automatic outcome of sport participation but emerges when athletes are placed in environments that intentionally promote agency, identity development, and leadership opportunities. Conceptual models integrating psychological empowerment theory into sport participation highlight the role of sport to empowering women when certain structural and relational conditions are met (e.g., safety, inclusivity, agency; Lim & Dixon, 2017). Accordingly, such models support the idea that empowerment arises through experiences that enhance self-determination and perceived control over one's athletic and professional journey. Similarly, women's sport college athletes who participate in intentional development programs reported increased bodily competence, self-confidence, and a more proactive life orientation, attributes that closely align with psychological empowerment (Blinde et al.,

1993; Zimmerman, 1995). Zimmerman (1995) identified the four key components of empowerment at the individual level as meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. In sport contexts, these constructs are cultivated through programming that moves beyond skill-building to include leadership training, mentorship, identity work, and advocacy. When such elements are present, empowerment theory shifts the focus from what women's sport college athletes *lack* to what they can *contribute*, framing them as leaders and change agents within their institutions and beyond.

Athlete-centered forums – such as SAAC – women's leadership academies, and targeted mentorship programs exemplify empowerment theory in practice. These initiatives provide women's sport athletes with structured spaces to advocate for themselves, develop their leadership identities, and exercise agency. As Jolly and co-authors (2024) noted, when women athletes are engaged as active participants in their development as opposed to passive recipients of support, they build stronger professional identities and a greater sense of agency. Such programming is especially critical given the persistent challenges women face in sport. Correspondingly, empowerment theory is a valuable lens for understanding how structured support, decision-making opportunities, and identity-affirming environments can enhance women's sport college athletes' self-efficacy, leadership capacity, and holistic development. Given the value of programmatic offerings at the individual level (i.e., NCAA member institution), the present study sought to explore the prevalence of personal and professional athlete development programming for women's sport athletes at NCAA Power-4 member institutions.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to promote descriptive understanding and interpretive meaning of non-numerical data (Flick, 1994). Qualitative research is particularly effective for exploring complex social issues and lived experiences, offering the flexibility and depth that standardized instruments often lack (Mezmir, 2020). It is especially well-suited for addressing questions pertaining to human behavior and/or institutional structures (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In the context of this study, qualitative methods were used to investigate the availability and structure of programming specifically designed for women's sport college athletes at NCAA Power-4 institutions.

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to systematically examine institutional websites for evidence of programming tailored to women's sport athletes. This method involved coding textual and visual content into categories in alignment with an empowerment theory framework, allowing for researchers to identify patterns, themes, and the frequency of specific elements (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015). In addition to empowerment theory, the analysis in this study was guided by the ADL Model which underscores the need for holistic, athlete-centered programming (Stokowski et al., 2020; Stokowski & Rubin, 2024). These frameworks informed the de-

velopment of the coding structure and provided a lens through which to assess how institutional offerings addressed specific developmental needs of women athletes.

Data Collection

The primary data sources were official athletic department websites of all 67 NCAA Power-4 member institutions. Each website was systematically reviewed to identify any personal, professional, or leadership development initiatives aimed specifically at women's sport athletes. The scope of the study was intentionally delimited to Power-4 institutions, which typically have greater access to resources and more extensive online infrastructures compared to smaller or less-resourced NCAA divisions (Corr et al., 2023; Corr & Paule-Koba, 2026).

To guide the search process, the researchers established clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. Accordingly, programming was included if it was (1) explicitly designed for women's sport athletes, (2) affiliated with the athletic department, and (3) focused on personal, professional, or leadership development. Conversely, programming was excluded if it was university-wide but not sport-specific, targeted to general student populations without reference to athletes, or hosted by third-party media sites rather than the institution's official domain. Each website was reviewed by three researchers independently to ensure reliability and minimize bias. The researchers examined navigation menus, resource subpages, and relevant downloadable documents. Internal site searches were also conducted using a standardized set of search terms. The complete list of search terms used to locate relevant content can be found in Table 1.

Coding and Analysis Procedures

Once data was collected, relevant programming descriptions were entered into a spreadsheet organized by institution and athletic conference. A codebook was developed specifically for this study grounded in empowerment theory and the ADL framework. The codebook categorized programming according to five key domains: (1) access to resources, (2) skill development opportunities, (3) community and support networks, (4) advocacy and representation, and (5) career and leadership preparation. The coding process was conducted in multiple stages. During the first stage, each researcher independently coded data from half of the institutions. In this stage, each researcher coded data from the exact same institutions. In the second stage, the researchers exchanged coded datasets and conducted a peer review of the coding decisions to ensure consistency and clarity. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively, with iterative refinements made to the codebook as needed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). During this stage, the researchers did not identify any meaningful discrepancies within intra-coder decisions. After ensuring consistency across coding conducted by each of the researchers, each of the researchers coded the remainder of the institutional data.

Table 1
Formulation and Justification of Search Terms

| Search Term | Justification | Supporting Citations |
|--|--|--|
| women student-athlete programming | Broad term to capture institutional initiatives explicitly described as serving women sport college athletes. Its generality accommodated variation in institutional terminology (e.g., women's enrichment, female athlete academy). | Sveinson et al., 2022 |
| female athlete leadership | Reflected recurring emphasis on leadership development as a key area where women sport college athletes face disparities. Addressed programming targeted toward building leadership skills among women in sport. | Jolly et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2016 |
| women's sport development | Frequently used in athlete development and sport policy literature to refer to holistic, gender-informed support structures encompassing training, education, and resource access for women's sport athletes. | Sveinson et al., 2022 |
| athlete career development | Addressed the career transitions and post-sport preparation embedded in college athlete support services. Though gender-neutral in phrasing, programs can include components specifically for women sport athletes. | Smith et al., 2016 |
| student-athlete resources | Captured institutional infrastructure related to wellness, academics, and life-skills support. Often linked to programming that broadly includes specific components for women's sport athletes. | Mezmir, 2020 |
| NIL and women athletes | Reflected the emerging landscape of financial opportunities and concerns regarding gender equity in access and support. Helped identify institutional efforts to support women in this evolving area. | Jolly et al., 2024; Sveinson et al., 2022 |
| athlete mentorship women | Directly connected to literature emphasizing the importance of mentorship for women's sport athletes' psychosocial and professional development. Ensured capture of gender-targeted or gender-responsive mentoring initiatives. | Jolly et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2016 |

Results

A review of official athletic department websites from all Power-4 institutions ($n = 67$) revealed that only 33% ($n = 22$) offered some form of programming specifically for women's sport athletes. The Big Ten Conference (Big Ten) had the highest representation, with 53% ($n = 9$) of its schools listing dedicated initiatives. The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) followed, with 44% ($n = 8$) of the conference's 18 member institutions offering leadership or development programs. In contrast, the Southeastern Conference (SEC) had only 25% ($n = 4$) of its 16 institutions feature such programming. The Big 12 Conference (Big 12) showed the least support, with only one institution providing publicly available information on women's sport athlete development programming. In total, just 22 of the 67 Power-4 institutions (32%) offered structured programs explicitly targeting the holistic development of their women's sport athletes.

Two major categories of women's sport athlete programs emerged from the data: (1) community-building and empowerment programs, and (2) career and academic development programs.

Community-Building and Empowerment Programs

Community-building and empowerment programs were the most prevalent type of initiative identified, represented by a total of 11 institutions. These programs aim to address the unique challenges faced by women in sport (e.g., underrepresentation, gender inequality). Their core objective is to cultivate a sense of belonging, connection, and mutual support among women's sport athletes. These initiatives often included mentorship, advocacy, leadership development, and networking opportunities designed to empower participants both within and beyond their athletic careers. In the ACC, four institutions featured such programs:

- **North Carolina State University** – *Wolfpack Women*
- **University of Miami** – *Honor Empower Rise (HER) Women's Leadership Academy*
- **Virginia Tech** – *Elevate Her*
- **Clemson University** – *POWER*

In the Big Ten, four institutions were represented:

- **The Ohio State University** – *SHERos OSU*
- **University of Iowa** – *HERkys*
- **Indiana University Bloomington** – *HER*
- **University of Nebraska** – *Student-Athlete Women's Leadership Group*

While two SEC schools offered empowerment programming:

- **University of Arkansas** – *Women Helping Others Lead and Empower (WHOLE)*
- **University of Florida** – *EmpowHER*

At the University of Miami, the *HER Women's Leadership Academy* offers competitive, high-impact programming and mentorship opportunities to foster leadership growth. Similarly, Clemson University's *POWER Women's Leadership Academy* emphasizes shared experiences and community support to cultivate empowerment and resilience among women's sport athletes. The University of Nebraska's *Student-Athlete Women's Leadership Group* offers a space for advocacy and open dialogue, enabling participants to champion the advancement of women in sports. Likewise, Indiana University Bloomington's *HER* program combines leadership development with peer connection to support personal, academic, and athletic growth. The Big Ten and ACC emerged as leaders in this area, with multiple institutions offering structured community groups for women's sport athletes. While the SEC had two such programs, the Big 12 had none, highlighting a potential gap in institutional support. These findings emphasize the role of empowerment-focused communities in meeting the holistic needs of women's sport athletes and building essential leadership skills.

Career and Academic Development Programs

A total of six institutions offered programming in the areas of career and academic development. These initiatives aim to prepare women's sport athletes for life after college, whether they pursue careers in sports or other professions. Common components include mentorship, networking events, financial literacy workshops, career planning, and internship opportunities. Many of these programs also supported academic success and help athletes navigate the dual demands of academics and athletics. Two ACC schools offered career-oriented programs:

- **Florida State University** – *Women in Sports Association (WISA)*
- **University of Louisville** – *Women of Influence*

Three Big Ten institutions were represented:

- **Pennsylvania State University** – *Teammates for Life*
- **Michigan State University** – *Women of Sparta*
- **University of Minnesota – Twin Cities** – *Women Invested in Leadership & Learning (W.I.L.L.)*

While one SEC institution offered relevant programming:

- **Auburn University** – *Women Inspiring and Nurturing Greatness in Student-Athletes (WINGS)*

Florida State University's *WISA* program provides a supportive community and professional development platform for women's sport athletes pursuing careers in the sports industry. It offers networking, mentorship, and skill-building opportunities aimed at career empowerment. Auburn University's *WINGS* program pairs women's sport athletes with experienced mentors to support career preparation, personal growth, and life beyond sport. Michigan State University's *Women of Sparta* program offers training in financial management, professional networking, and leader-

ship preparing athletes for successful transitions after graduation. The Big Ten led the way in this category, while the ACC and SEC each had two and one programs, respectively. No Big 12 institutions were represented. These findings underscore the increasing institutional focus on supporting women's sport athletes' long-term career trajectories and reinforce the need for tailored transition services that acknowledge the unique experiences of women in college athletics.

Other: Programs for Future Research

A final group composed of five institutions offered development programs related to financial support and fundraising for women's sports. Although not focused on direct personal, academic, or athletic development, these initiatives play a significant role in enhancing the broader environment and resources available to women's sport athletes. As such, they are identified as a separate category and recommended as a future research focus. Examples of these initiatives include:

- **University of North Carolina** – *FORevHER Tar Heels*
- **University of Oregon** – *Women in Flight*
- **University of Cincinnati** – *Cincinnati Women's Excellence Fund*
- **University of South Carolina** – *The Women of South Carolina*
- **University of California, Los Angeles** – *Women of Westwood*

Programs such as *FORevHER Tar Heels* and *The Women of South Carolina* focus on scholarships, facilities, and other financial support mechanisms aimed at elevating women's sport. Similarly, *Women in Flight*, the *Cincinnati Women's Excellence Fund*, and *Women of Westwood* direct resources toward facilities, recovery equipment, and programmatic enhancements. While these efforts do not fit within the scope of this study's definition of development programming, their strategic role in improving the overall women's sport athlete experience warrants further investigation, particularly regarding the efficacy and equity of financial resource allocation.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal both meaningful progress and persistent disparities in the development of programming for women's sport athletes across NCAA Power-4 institutions. While approximately 33% of Power-4 schools offer programming specifically tailored to women's sport athletes, the majority of women's sport college athletes still lack access to such resources. Although holistic athlete development programming exists across the landscape of collegiate athletics, it typically remains underfunded at the departmental level (Corr et al., 2024, 2025). As a result, development opportunities for women's sport athletes continue to be insufficient, despite their unique and distinct experiences. These disparities reflect broader systemic inequities faced by women in collegiate athletics, underscoring the need for targeted, intentional programming that directly addresses their specific needs and experiences (Sveinson et al., 2022).

Among the identified programs, community-building and empowerment initiatives emerged as the most prevalent, with 11 institutions offering structured spaces for women's sport athletes to foster solidarity, build relationships, and share lived experiences. These findings align with existing research emphasizing the importance of mentorship, identity development, and a sense of belonging for women's sport athletes (Hively & El-Alayi, 2014; Sabin et al., 2023). Programs such as the University of Miami's HER Leadership Academy and Clemson University's POWER Women's Leadership Academy exemplify these efforts by creating environments that cultivate leadership and empowerment through shared experiences. In addition, many of these programs respond to broader social stigmas, such as the perception of women as *invaders* in traditionally male-dominated sports spaces or the pressure to conform to narrow ideals of femininity (Coakley, 2016). By fostering supportive peer networks, these programs undoubtedly assist women's sport athletes in navigating these challenges with increased confidence and resilience. As such, they reflect the value of structured programming as a proactive strategy for mitigating stereotype threat and enhancing athlete identity (Park & Williams, 2022; Rappaport, 1987).

Career and academic development programs, found at six institutions, represented the second most common program type. These initiatives were designated to support women's sport athletes as they prepare for life beyond collegiate athletics, a particularly important focus given the limited professional opportunities available to women in sport compared to men (NCAA, n.d.). Such programs emphasized skill-building, career readiness, and professional identity development through mentorship, leadership training, and financial literacy resources. For instance, Michigan State University's Women of Sparta and Auburn University's WINGS provide targeted professional preparation designed to ease the transition from athletic identity to career identity. These efforts reinforce existing literature highlighting the career barriers faced by women's sport athletes and the importance of early tailored intervention (Park & Williams, 2022). However, a significant gap identified in the findings is the lack of programming explicitly focused on athletic performance and individual athlete wellbeing. Despite literature underscoring the importance of mental health, body image, and nutritional support for women's sport athletes (Rubin & Lough, 2015; Strehlow et al., 2021), such programming was notably absent across the institutions analyzed. This omission is troubling given the well-documented challenges women's sport athletes face due to societal pressures, media sexualization, and unrealistic body standards (Cooky et al., 2015). The lack of individual wellbeing initiatives suggests that institutions are not yet adopting the holistic support models advocated in existing scholarship – a gap that the researchers deem in need of immediate attention.

Empowerment theory provides a valuable lens for interpreting the uneven landscape of women's sport athlete development programming across Power-4 institutions. As Rappaport (1987) argued, empowerment is rooted in the expansion of individuals perceived control, self-efficacy, and ability to engage meaningfully in shaping their environments. Many of the community-building programs identified in this study (e.g., HER Leadership Academy at the University of Miami, the

Student-Athlete Women's Leadership Group at the University of Nebraska) reflect these principles by fostering a sense of agency, belonging, and leadership among participants. These programs offer both support and provide structured environments in which women's sport college athletes can define their own goals, voice their experiences, and develop critical leadership competencies (Zimmerman, 1995). In this sense, the presence of community-based initiatives at select institutions demonstrates a shift away from deficit models of support toward strength-based, athlete-centered programming.

While several institutions offer strong examples of programming that align with empowerment theory, the fact that only 33% of Power-4 institutions provide any women-specific programming highlights a systemic underinvestment in women's holistic development. Empowerment is not solely about individual initiative but depends on access to structural opportunities (Zimmerman, 1995). From this perspective, the lack of programming in the Big 12 and limited offerings in the SEC reveals institutional environments that may hinder rather than enable empowerment of women's sport college athletes. Without consistent, system-level investments in leadership development, mentorship, and professional preparation, women sport athletes are left to navigate structural inequities with insufficient support.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Several limitations were inherent in this study. Most notably, the analysis relied exclusively on publicly available information from institutional websites, which may not always be current, comprehensive, or accurate. As a result, some programs may have been overlooked or misrepresented. In addition, because the content analysis was guided by specific search terms, programming that did not include targeted keywords – particularly outdated or renamed initiatives – may have been missed during data collection.

The researchers also acknowledge the broader presence of athlete development programming at Power-4 institutions. While scholars have noted that such programming is often underfunded and deprioritized within the college athlete experience (Corr et al., 2024, 2025), it is important to recognize that the absence of women's sport-specific programming does not necessarily indicate a complete lack of athlete development opportunities. Furthermore, many leadership initiatives were designed for the general female student population, making it difficult to assess whether they adequately addressed the unique needs and experiences of women's sport athletes. While acknowledging these limitations, the researchers conducted the study within the parameters of available data.

The findings of this study underscore a pressing need for more robust, accessible, and comprehensive programming that addresses the unique challenges experienced by women's sport athletes. Despite progress in some areas, the persistent disparities ranging from underrepresentation and limited access to career development to the near absence of mental health and wellbeing support highlight the structural barriers that continue to limit women's sport athletes' full participation and holistic develop-

ment success in collegiate athletics. We posit that college athletic departments must prioritize both the development and visibility of these programs. Historical, in addition to ongoing, challenges (e.g., gendered stereotypes, funding inequities, the lack of female representation in collegiate athletics leadership positions) necessitate sustained institutional investment in initiatives that empower and support women across athletic, academic, and professional domains. These tools also offer opportunities for women's sport athletes to take on leadership roles in promoting and shaping program content, thus furthering their personal development and individual agency.

Institutional commitment must also extend beyond just visibility to include equitable funding and resource allocation. Investment in women's sport is not only a matter of equity but a strategic opportunity to foster inclusive cultures that support high performance, wellbeing, and long-term success. If implemented effectively, such efforts will help ensure that future generations of women's sport athletes inherit a more equitable and empowering athletic environment than those who came before them. In creating and expanding these initiatives, athletic departments can establish a legacy of gender equity and leadership. This study serves as a call to action for institutions to invest not only in programming but in the broader cultural shifts needed to support women in sport. Such call is especially salient with recent structural alterations to the foundation of collegiate athletics (e.g., NIL, athlete revenue sharing).

While this study effectively identified the presence and nature of programming across Power-4 institutions, it did not assess the effectiveness or impact of these initiatives. Subsequent studies should incorporate qualitative methodologies such as interviews or focus groups with program participants to evaluate whether women's sport athletes find these programs beneficial, what areas require improvement, and how effectively the initiatives address disparities identified in the literature. Further research is also warranted in the financial support for women's sport in general. While several institutions maintain fundraising-focused initiatives, the structure, equity, and impact of these programs remain unclear. Key areas for exploration include the origins and distribution of funds, the degree to which these initiatives benefit women's sport athletes relative to their men's sport peers, and institutional comparisons across demographic/psychographic variables (e.g., geographic position, political orientation, religious affiliation). Finally, greater attention must be paid to athletic conferences (e.g., Big 12) demonstrating the lowest level of women's sport athlete development programming. Research into barriers specific to these institutions can inform strategies for expanding access and developing scalable, inclusive models of women's sport athlete support.

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