

# From Learner to Leader: Exploring the Influence of a Multi-Year Leadership Development Program on Student-Athletes

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This study explored how student-athletes in a multi-year leadership development academy constructed and reconstructed their understandings of leadership across four years of participation. Using a qualitative design grounded in a social construction of leadership framework, we examined how 13 Division III student-athletes, first as participants and later as facilitators, articulated, interpreted, and constructed their leadership development experiences. Semi-structured interviews captured how student-athletes described the evolution of their leadership identities, skills, and applications across athletic, academic, and personal contexts. Thematic analysis led to the development of four interrelated themes: (1) leadership identity development; (2) confidence and competence building; (3) facilitation as a transformative catalyst; and (4) the application of leadership skills beyond sport. Findings highlight the dynamic and adaptive nature of leadership as co-constructed through ongoing reflection, peer interaction, and role transitions. By demonstrating how facilitation deepens identity development and expands leadership application, this study contributes to scholarship on sport leadership by emphasizing temporal, experiential, and socially constructed dimensions of student-athlete leadership development. Implications for practice underscore the value of longitudinal, scaffolded programming that integrates peer-led facilitation and supports holistic preparation for leadership across life domains.

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Leadership in sport management has traditionally been framed through leader-centric models that emphasize the traits or behaviors of individuals in formal roles such as captains, coaches or athletic directors (Ferkins et al., 2018; Welty Peachey et al., 2015). More recent scholarship challenges this view, suggesting leadership is not the product of a single authority figure but instead emerges through interactions among multiple stakeholders (Billsberry et al., 2018; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). In collegiate sport environments, these interactions occur constantly as student-athletes navigate team dynamics, negotiate roles, and make sense of leadership through daily practice. As a result, leadership becomes shaped through shared experiences, evolving relationships, and the norms of the sport context rather than defined solely by positional status. This shift reflects a broader movement toward viewing leadership as a meaning-making process that unfolds between people, rather than a set of traits individuals possess. Within this social construction lens, leadership is seen as dynamic, context-dependent, and collectively shaped by designated leaders, emergent leaders, and followers alike (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Observer-centric research, which emphasizes how followers interpret and make meaning of leadership rather than focusing solely on leader behaviors, reinforces this perspective by highlighting how student-athletes and other participants co-create leadership through everyday interactions and “micro” moments of peer-to-peer meaning-making (Damon et al., 2024).

In collegiate athletics, formal leadership development programs have proliferated to cultivate student-athletes’ leadership skills intentionally (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015; O’Brien et al., 2021), even as research on their impact continues to lag behind practice (Wright & Cote, 2003). Leadership development programs provide fertile ground for these processes by creating structured spaces where participants can test, debate, and reframe leadership concepts. Rather than emphasizing rigid or technical skill instruction, these programs develop leadership skills through dialogue, reflection, and experience, allowing participants to make meaning of leadership and reconstruct their leadership identities over time. For example, Rubin and Nwosu (2021) found student-athletes often entered leadership academies unsure of their leadership capacity but developed stronger leadership identities and confidence as they progressed through the program. In multi-year formats, the transition from learner to facilitator becomes especially significant, as it challenges participants to consolidate prior lessons, guide peers, and reconsider their own influence within institutional and team contexts. This progression underscores the value of peer mentorship in leadership training, as experienced student-athletes reinforce their own development by mentoring newer teammates (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015).

It is also important to consider who is participating in such leadership programs. Women, in particular, remain underrepresented in sport leadership positions across all levels (Burton, 2015). Sport leadership has historically been associated with masculine norms often casting female leaders as “others” in a male-dominated arena (Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). These gendered dynamics contribute to stereotypes that leaders require traditionally masculine traits, which can lead to women being viewed as less fit for leadership roles. Such realities underscore the value of targeted

leadership development initiatives for female student-athletes, as these programs can provide opportunities to build leadership identity and confidence in an environment that challenges exclusionary norms (Burton, 2015; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). These dynamics also illustrate how leadership identity is socially constructed within gendered sport environments, reinforcing the need to examine how women make meaning of leadership through their experiences.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III (DIII) athletics model provides a distinct environment for leadership development, characterized by a high degree of “participation density” and a structural commitment to the holistic student identity (Swim et al, 2022). As the NCAA’s largest classification, comprising 445 predominantly private institutions, DIII schools support nearly 40% of the total student-athlete population, with a median undergraduate enrollment of only 1,740 (NCAA, 2025; 2020a). This scale creates a unique sociological ecosystem where athletes represent anywhere from 1% - 94% of the student body with an average of 31% (NCAA, 2025), necessitating a level of campus integration rarely seen in the more siloed environments of Division I. Because NCAA DIII regulations prohibit athletic scholarships and mandate shorter seasons and regional travel, the “opportunity cost” of participation is lowered, theoretically allowing athletes to engage in high-impact leadership practices such as faculty-led research, study abroad, student government and more (Swim et al., 2022). While research confirms this model fosters high levels of academic achievement and collegiate satisfaction (Burgin, 2011), the specific mechanisms by which these athletes translate their “amateur” competitive experiences into formal leadership competencies remain under-theorized. Consequently, understanding the NCAA DIII experience is essential for evaluating how resource-constrained athletic departments can intentionally design leadership programming that aligns with a mission of holistic student development rather than mere athletic output.

Guided by the social construction of leadership, the present study explores how student-athletes in a DIII leadership academy negotiated and reshaped their leadership identities across four years of participation. Using a social constructionist approach, this study examines student-athletes’ experiences to understand how leadership perspectives evolved through both participation and facilitation. Specifically, this study asks: (1) How have student-athletes’ perceptions of leadership changed throughout a multi-year leadership development program? and (2) How have these experiences shaped their understanding of leadership across athletic, academic, and personal contexts?

## Theoretical Framework

Early leadership research in sport tended to center on individual leaders and the personal qualities or behaviors that defined their effectiveness (Ferkins et al., 2018; Welty Peachey et al., 2015). More recent work shifts this focus by emphasizing how leadership emerges through social interaction and shared meaning-making among various members of the sport environment (Billsberry et al., 2018). This shift

challenges hierarchical conceptions of leadership by drawing attention to how participants, whether designated leaders, emergent leaders, or “followers”, collectively construct leadership phenomena through ongoing meaning-making processes (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

Within this paradigm, the social construction of leadership highlights that there is no singular, universal definition of what it means to lead (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Instead, leadership is multifaceted, shifting across contexts and cultures based on the perspectives and lived experiences of those involved. Scholars adopting this framework underscore the existence of multiple “truths” that coexist within a given environment (Grint & Jackson, 2010). They seek to illuminate how individuals negotiate roles, interpret behaviors, and respond to various situations, an interplay that guides both personal and collective action (Ferkins et al., 2018). As a result, leadership is viewed as dynamic, context-dependent, and inextricably bound to the relational exchanges among participants (Damon et al., 2022).

A small but growing body of observer-centric leadership research in sport management has reinforced this view, focusing on the perspectives of those who witness, experience, and evaluate leadership firsthand (Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins et al., 2018). Rather than centering on leaders’ behaviors or traits, these studies highlight how followers (e.g., student-athletes), co-create leadership understandings through everyday interactions. For instance, Kihl et al. (2010) illustrated how collegiate stakeholders’ constructions of leadership were shaped by daily organizational practices during a major departmental transition, challenging simplistic notions of top-down authority. More recent work demonstrates how leadership itself can develop through “micro” moments and peer-to-peer sense-making (Damon et al., 2024), reinforcing the idea that no single individual holds exclusive power to define or perform leadership.

In the realm of intercollegiate student-athletes, observer-centric approaches have similarly revealed how factors such as relational dynamics, authenticity, and team cohesion shape perceptions of leadership (White & Rezania, 2019). By focusing on those traditionally cast as followers, these studies showcase that leadership in sport is largely emergent and context-bound, forged in ongoing dialogue among multiple parties. From a social construction perspective, leadership is neither static nor exclusively top-down. Instead, it is a fluid, collectively constructed process shaped by social, cultural, and institutional forces (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

## **Leadership Development and the Role of Training**

Building on these observer-centric insights, the present study explores leadership in the structured environment of a multi-year leadership development program. Such programs, which often feature workshops, seminars, and peer-led sessions, can serve as crucibles for leadership to be socially constructed because they explicitly invite participants to discuss, debate, and test leadership ideas (Damon et al., 2024). In these “micro” interactions (e.g., group reflections, role-play activities, mentor-mentee conversations), participants negotiate the meaning of leadership, incorporate and reject certain definitions, and ultimately reconstruct their own leadership identities.

Additionally, student-athlete participation in formal leadership academy programs has been associated with increases in leadership confidence and skill development, reinforcing the value of these interactive learning experiences (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021).

From a social construction standpoint, leadership trainings or workshops do not merely “teach” a fixed set of attributes; instead, they create dialogical spaces where participants co-create a shared understanding of leadership concepts. For student-athletes, these workshop settings can be particularly formative because they merge athletic experiences (e.g., teamwork, communication, performance pressure) with structured opportunities to reflect on personal growth. However, it is important to note not all student-athletes value leadership programming. Previous research has found student-athletes can develop negative perceptions of leadership programming particularly when it is not aligned with their own desired educational or performance outcomes (DiPaolo, 2017) or if programs lack experiential learning or real-life application (Pierce et al., 2020). At the same time, these developmental settings can hold particular importance for female student-athletes, who often navigate gendered expectations in sport environments. Leadership academies may provide spaces where their contributions are validated and where confidence can be strengthened in contexts traditionally shaped by masculine leadership norms (Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). Over time, as participants move from learners to facilitators of such workshops, they gain new vantage points to observe how peers respond to leadership stimuli, challenge their own assumptions, and reformulate leadership concepts in ways that align with their evolving roles (Duguay et al., 2022).

### **Temporal Shifts in Leadership Identities**

Within leadership research, social construction perspectives emphasize that leadership identities develop over time through iterative social processes (Grint & Jackson, 2010). This temporal element is highly relevant in a four-year leadership academy where participants’ roles transform each year. Early in the program, they may observe and absorb foundational leadership notions from facilitators, coaches, and teammates. Later, as they apply these concepts, test out new behaviors, and guide younger peers, they begin to see themselves - and be seen by others - as emergent leaders. Consequently, the shared understandings of leadership continue to evolve. The act of facilitating for incoming student-athletes, in particular, becomes a powerful catalyst for reframing one’s capacity to influence and persuading them to consider how institutional structure or group norms shape that influence (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015).

Such role transitions exemplify the fluid nature of leadership in sport contexts: leadership is not an innate trait that can be uniformly “transmitted”; rather, it is iteratively constructed and continuously reimagined. By examining how individuals adopt, adapt, or even resist leadership ideas within a training program, scholars can better understand how leadership frameworks shift to accommodate new responsibilities, relationships, and personal experiences (Billsberry, 2009).

## Relevance to the Current Study

By situating leadership development within a social construction lens, we focus on the student-athlete's journey of changing leadership perspectives across the program's four-year arc. This approach explicitly acknowledges that leadership cannot be reduced to a set of universally "correct" principles imparted by an instructor. Instead, we recognize how leadership emerges through collective sense-making, trial and error, and shifting social dynamics within the academy. The intensive, multi-year design of the program under study, coupled with participant interviews and reflections, uniquely captures those "micro-moments" (Damon et al., 2024) and broader institutional influences that shape how individuals interpret what it means to lead. This focus is particularly warranted given many student-athletes describe the transition out of sport as difficult, often citing feelings of unpreparedness for life beyond athletics (Stokowski et al., 2019). By cultivating leadership competencies and transferable skills during college, multi-year programs like the one we examined may help athletes navigate post-sport challenges more effectively (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Positioning our research within social constructionist traditions (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Patton, 2015) allows us to treat the student-athletes as experts of their own experiences. Through their narratives, we illuminate the ways they collectively negotiate leadership identities in diverse contexts (e.g., athletic, academic, personal). In doing so, we contribute to a growing body of sport management scholarship that sees leadership as dynamic, context-dependent, and shaped by stakeholder interactions (Ferkins et al., 2018). This expanding scholarship now encompasses investigations into student-athlete leadership across various contexts. For example, comparing domestic and international athletes' leadership capacities (Jolly et al., 2025) and examining how involvement in Student-Athlete Advisory Committees contributes to leadership and career development (Heim et al., 2022). The present study addresses calls for more research on the influence of formal leadership development initiatives in college athletics over time (O'Brien et al., 2021). Furthermore, this study offers insight into women's leadership development in sport. With the majority of participants identifying as female, our findings shed light on how female student-athletes navigate, reimagine, and enact leadership in the collegiate sport environment. These insights respond to calls for more inclusive leadership pathways and gender equity in sport leadership (Burton, 2015; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019).

Drawing from the social construction of leadership, the current study investigates how four years of participation, culminating in a facilitation role, influence student-athletes' perceptions and practices of leadership within an NCAA DIII context. Specifically, we aim to capture how these participants collaboratively reimagine, refine, and enact leadership on and off the field. According to our guiding research questions are: 1) How have student-athletes' perceptions of leadership changed throughout participation and facilitation in a multi-year leadership development program? 2) How have these experiences shaped their understanding of leadership within athletic, academic, and personal contexts?

# Method

This qualitative study was informed by a social construction of leadership framework, positioning leadership as a co-constructed phenomenon shaped by social interactions and individual meaning-making (Billsberry et al., 2018; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Following institutional ethics board approval, we used a qualitative design grounded in a social constructionist paradigm, focusing on how participants constructed meaning around their leadership experiences and how four years of involvement, culminating in facilitation, shaped their evolving views on leadership (Patton, 2015). This approach aligned with our interest in understanding how student-athletes interpret and define leadership over time in a specific context.

## Participants and Setting

Thirteen student-athletes (9 female, 4 male) from a single NCAA DIII university in the Northeastern United States participated in this study. Given the predominance of female participants, this project provides a valuable opportunity to explore female student-athletes’ leadership development, a perspective often neglected in sport leadership research (Burton, 2015; Sotiradiou & De Haan, 2019). Participants were drawn from varying sport programs (e.g., basketball, volleyball, golf, skiing) and had completed at least three years in the university’s leadership academy program prior to this final year acting as a program facilitator to first-year student-athletes. Ages ranged from 21-23 years old. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym reflecting general age, gender, and ethnic background (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Additional identifying details were selectively modified or omitted to protect confidentiality. Table 1 below shows participant demographics.

**Table 1.**  
*Participant Demographics*

| Pseudonym | Age | Sex    | Sport Participation |
|-----------|-----|--------|---------------------|
| Harper    | 21  | Female | Volleyball          |
| Dominic   | 22  | Male   | Golf/Ski            |
| Madison   | 21  | Female | Ski                 |
| Ally      | 22  | Female | Ski                 |
| Lauren    | 21  | Female | Ski                 |
| Riley     | 22  | Male   | Golf                |
| Emma      | 21  | Female | Ski/Lacrosse        |
| Sydney    | 21  | Female | Volleyball          |
| Dylan     | 23  | Male   | Track and Field     |
| Trent     | 23  | Male   | Track and Field     |
| Jennifer  | 22  | Female | Lacrosse            |
| Maren     | 22  | Female | Volleyball          |
| Addison   | 22  | Female | Volleyball          |

Participation in the leadership academy has four levels. The first level is Essentials of Leadership in which all incoming freshman athletes are expected to participate. The second level is the Emerging Leadership level, which is open to those who have completed the first level and have interest in continuing. The third level is Engaging Leadership and is open to student-athletes who have completed the first two levels and want to continue their growth. The final level is the Empowering Leadership level for student athletes who have completed the first three levels and who would like to complete the experience by spending their last year facilitating sessions for the first-year cohort.

The student-athletes in this study served as facilitators for the first-year student athlete Essentials of Leadership program. This entailed modifying and delivering six one-hour workshops. The topics of the workshops had been pre-determined by the program directors, and an outline lesson plan and slide show had been provided but each facilitator was encouraged to make the session their own. Sessions included a variety of interactive activities, group discussion, think-pair-share exercises, and peer teaching. The breadth of athletic and programmatic experience allowed for an in-depth exploration of perceptions of leadership in different contexts.

## Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2015) conducted via Zoom. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes, ranging between 27 and 45 minutes. The interview guide was developed with reference to research on socially constructed leadership (i.e., Billsberry et al., 2018; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Grint & Jackson, 2010), emphasizing participants' perceptions of leadership and the influence of attending and facilitating the academy on their conceptions. Sample interview questions include: 1) How would you define effective leadership now, and has this changed since the beginning of the program?; 2) Reflecting on your overall experience, how have you incorporated lessons from the leadership program into your daily life?; 3) How has participation in and facilitation of the academy influenced your leadership growth and perspective?

Probing questions were used to elicit expanded reflections regarding the influence of role models, team interactions, and experiences leading peers. I conducted ten interviews and was not affiliated with the leadership academy, providing an 'outsider' perspective and mitigating potential bias (Olson et al., 2016). The remaining three interviews were conducted by my coauthor, who oversees the leadership program (an 'insider'), offering deep contextual knowledge. Combining insider and outsider approaches afforded a nuanced and holistic view of participant experiences, as inside knowledge can provide meaningful context while outside perspectives can help mitigate blind spots associated with researcher familiarity (Hall et al., 2005). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by our research team.

We also took steps to reduce potential response bias connected to the insider interviewer. The majority of the interviews were conducted by me, as the lead author unaffiliated with the leadership development program. My co-author and I ana-

lyzed the data alongside a third researcher, a graduate student and student-athlete at a university separate from the institutions where the leadership academy took place. Together, these external perspectives helped reduce social desirability pressures and supported honest and open reflections.

## **Data Analysis**

Interview data were analyzed using an iterative, collaborative approach consistent with thematic analysis and the constant comparative method (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). First, we engaged in preliminary organization by compiling all transcripts and meeting to confirm project aims, theoretical orientation, and an initial timeline. We then performed open coding (Miles et al., 2015), carefully reading through the transcripts and annotating sections that described perceptions of leadership and the influence of participation/facilitation on leadership development. During this step, short memos highlighted emerging categories and patterns. Next, these categories were refined through axial coding, in which connections were made across codes to form higher-level themes (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). For example, initial codes such as “shifts in leadership definition”, “followership”, and “applying leadership skills in academics” were linked to broader categories to capture growth over time. Following this phase, we created a preliminary codebook of generative themes (Lincoln et al., 2011).

To enhance consistency in coding and interpretation, the research team pilot tested the codebook on a subset of transcripts, with each coder analyzing the same transcript (Richards & Hemphill, 2011). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, resulting in minor refinements of code definitions. The finalized codebook was then applied to the entire dataset using a split-coding procedure (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Weekly debriefs ensured codes were consistently applied and any new findings were discussed. Finally, we reviewed the aggregated codes, finalized themes, and organized these into a cohesive thematic framework capturing participants’ experiences (Olson et al., 2016).

## **Trustworthiness and Researcher Positionality**

We employed multiple strategies to bolster the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln et al., 2011). Researcher triangulation was achieved by involving multiple analysts in coding discussions and by comparing insights from insider (i.e., program director) and outsider (i.e., non-affiliated scholar) perspectives, which served as a form of collaborative peer debriefing to validate and refine the development of the themes. This process allowed us to critically analyze coding decisions, interpretations of the data, and alignment with the theoretical framework. Additionally, we maintained a detailed researcher journal throughout data collection and analysis. This journal included reflections on evolving interpretations, decisions regarding codebook revisions, and personal assumptions about leadership. Such reflexivity was intended to render our analytic process more transparent, consistent with guidelines for enhancing the confirmability of qualitative findings (Miles et al., 2015).

Finally, researcher positionality was acknowledged via regular reflective discussions wherein we examined how our own conceptualizations of leadership (e.g., influenced by prior educational, coaching, and professional experiences) shaped our analytical lens (Rovegno, 1995). In particular, my co-author's direct role in the leadership academy provided critical insider context but also introduced potential bias in evaluating program effectiveness. To counterbalance this, I, as the author unaffiliated with the leadership development academy, conducted the majority of the interviews and participated in data analysis, providing an external perspective. A third researcher, a current student-athlete at a different university, served as an additional coder, further broadening the perspective guiding data analysis. By embedding these practices and explicit processes into the design, we sought to provide a robust and credible account of how student-athletes constructed and made meaning of their leadership development and facilitation experiences.

## Findings

Data analysis led to the development of four themes (Table 2) that illustrate how participants' leadership identities evolved through sustained engagement in the academy and eventual facilitation.

**Table 2.**  
*Themes and Subthemes*

| Theme                                     | Sub-themes                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Leadership Identity Development        | 1a. Evolving Concept of Leadership<br>1b. Style and Adaptability<br>1c. Followership and Shared Responsibility |
| 2. Confidence and Competence              | 2a. Growth and Self-Efficacy<br>2b. Communication and Public Speaking                                          |
| 3. Facilitation as a Tool for Development |                                                                                                                |
| 4. Contextual Application of Leadership   |                                                                                                                |

First, student-athletes described a process of leadership identity development, in which their definitions of leadership broadened, their styles became more adaptable, and they came to value the role of followership and shared responsibility. Second, participants emphasized confidence and competence building, noting how their growth in self-efficacy, communication, and public speaking enhanced their ability to lead in athletic, academic, and personal contexts. Third, they reflected on facilitation as a tool for development, highlighting how teaching and mentoring first-year students reinforced their own learning and deepened their leadership practice. Finally, participants described the contextual application of leadership, where lessons from the academy were extended into sport, academic, and personal domains. Across

all four themes, participants' reflections highlighted ongoing meaning-making processes through which leadership was interpreted, negotiated, and reconstructed over time. Together, these themes provide insight into the dynamic and socially constructed nature of leadership within the academy, emphasizing how participants' perceptions and practices of leadership were influenced across multiple contexts.

### **Leadership Identity Development**

Across their four years of participation in the leadership academy, culminating in a facilitation role, participants described notable changes in how they understood and enacted leadership. These shifts reflected a developmental process in which student-athletes redefined leadership identity, experimented with different leadership styles, and embraced the importance of both followership and shared leadership. Importantly, these identity shifts were described not as sudden realizations but as emerging through repeated dialogue, peer interaction, and reflection, illustrating how leadership meaning was co-constructed within the academy's social environment.

### ***Evolving Conceptions of Leadership***

Many of the participants entered college with narrow, almost rigid, conceptions of leadership, shaped by experiences in high school or cultural assumptions about captains and authority figures. As Dominic explained, "In high school, I would have said that a good leader is the oldest person out there, the senior who's been around the longest and who seemed to have the most wisdom." His reflection illustrates how early views of leadership were tied to age and positional authority. Yet through participation in the academy, he expanded his thinking concluding "Leaders can come from all ages." This shift demonstrates how interactions with peers, facilitated discussions, and exposure to alternative perspectives reshaped his understanding of what leadership could mean.

For others, early self-doubt stemmed from personality. Madison described how her introversion initially made leadership feel unattainable: "I thought I would never be a good leader because I'm just not comfortable sharing my thoughts or being that person in front." Over time, however, she discovered leadership could take quieter forms: "I'm learning that it's okay to not be that person and lead by example." Her evolving narrative illustrates the socially constructed nature of leadership identity, as she reinterpreted her role in relation to team norms, feedback, and collective discussions about leadership.

Lauren, like Dominic, emphasized the importance of recognizing others' abilities, noting, "I can really, see now where people have strengths and how to use them as a leader...it's not age that defines leadership. It could be anybody." Similarly, Jennifer underscored how leadership was not dependent on captaincy: "Even without that title, you can still be a leader on the team...there are still people that will turn to you." These comments suggest participants came to value leadership as influence rather than authority, expanding their definitions to include diverse roles and contexts. Such redefinitions emerged through social comparison and shared dialogue

within the program, reinforcing participants' understandings of leadership were continuously constructed through interaction.

Several participants also linked effective leadership to empathy, accountability, and sacrifice. For example, Addison described a leader as someone "Willing to make sacrifices and protect the people they are leading...even if it means taking the fall for others." Her meaning-making reflects how leadership was reframed not as a privilege but as a responsibility, with leaders sometimes bearing the weight of collective outcomes.

Not all participants framed this evolution purely in terms of their own growth; some also contrasted themselves with peers who had not engaged as deeply in the program. Riley observed how those who invested in the academy "Work through the situation and maybe there's other ways around it," while those who disengaged often became "frustrated and angry and a little bit more confrontational." This distinction suggests a participant's leadership identity was not only evolving individually but was also shaped in relation to others' choices, reinforcing that development was contingent on participation and reflection.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how leadership was no longer seen as a static trait tied to age, personality, or title. Instead, participants came to view it as fluid, context-dependent, and rooted in responsibility for others. Their evolving conceptions highlight the beginning of a broader adaptive capacity that would carry into how they later described leadership styles, followership, and facilitation.

### ***Style and Adaptability***

As participants' understandings of leadership broadened, they increasingly emphasized adaptability as central to effective leadership. Rather than relying on a single style, they described learning to read the needs of teammates and adjust their approach accordingly. Their responsiveness reflects a socially constructed process, as participants drew on team norms, peer feedback, and situational cues to interpret what leadership required in each moment. This shift highlights how leadership identity matured from a reliance on positional authority to a skillset grounded in flexibility, situational awareness, and relational sensitivity.

Emma offered one of the clearest examples of this process. She explained how her team's personality required a nuanced approach to accountability:

My team was a very unique group of people...not a group that likes to get called out...so I felt confident enough to build the relationships with my teammates so that when I did inevitably have to say, "Okay, you're not doing the right thing here", it didn't tear the team apart. I learned to do this strategically, privately, one-on-one.

Her account demonstrates not only adaptability in practice but also how confidence was built through trial, reflection, and careful management of relationships. By learning when to confront publicly and when to address issues privately, Emma developed a more situationally attuned leadership style that protected team cohesion while still holding peers accountable.

Others described adaptability as an ongoing negotiation of communication styles. Lauren recalled working with another goalie during a leadership academy session, noting, “Just because we’re yelling something doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re yelling at the person ... communication can be seen in different forms.” For Lauren, adaptability meant not only adjusting her own style but also helping teammates reframe how they interpreted communication under pressure.

Adaptability also emerged through modeling behaviors rather than relying on vocal leadership. Addison explained how she embraced a quieter but still influential role: “Being kind of like a role model in the classroom ... at practice, doing extra things, being a role model in the weight room.” Her approach provides an example of how leadership could be enacted through consistency and example, particularly for teammates who responded more to actions than words.

Confidence and adaptability were often intertwined. Sydney pointed to nonverbal presence as an important leadership tool, saying, “For me it’s just kind of maybe like mannerisms, keeping my chest up tall, maintaining eye contact when I’m talking to people.” What might appear as subtle physical cues were, for her, conscious strategies to project confidence and credibility in interactions with peers. Similarly, Maren highlighted the importance of relational engagement, sharing how her leadership influence stemmed from “Talking to people on my team more and even outside of practice.”

Participants also recognized differences between those who engaged fully with the leadership academy and those who did not. Dominic explained how student-athletes who invested effort in the program “developed the tools” to manage conflict and navigate challenges constructively, while those who disengaged became “frustrated or angry” and “confrontational” more easily. His observation reinforces how adaptability was not a given but a product of practice, reflection, and commitment.

Across these accounts, adaptability was a hallmark of participants’ leadership growth. Whether through shifting communication styles, modeling consistency, or managing accountability strategically, student-athletes learned leadership required responsiveness to context and attentiveness to relationships. This situational flexibility marked a departure from earlier fixed views of leadership and foreshadowed the more collective, relational orientations participants described in later stages of their development.

### ***Followership & Shared Leadership***

As participants’ views of leadership expanded, many emphasized how learning to follow was just as important as learning to lead. They recognized leadership is inherently collective, requiring contributions from multiple individuals rather than being concentrated in a single person. This reframing of followership, from passive to active and essential, was a key component of their evolving leadership identities.

Madison described this shift directly: “Through the leadership academy, I feel like I’ve learned everything I need to know to be a follower.” What might initially seem like a diminished role was, in her reflection, actually a sign of growth. For Madison, followership became a deliberate choice to support others and contribute

to team success, not a lack of leadership ability. Participants' reflections repeatedly highlighted followership as a meaning-making process in which they interpreted when to step back and how their support shaped collective leadership.

Ally also highlighted the interdependence between leading and following: "To truly succeed you have to be able to lean on others and know when to ask for help because you can't do everything yourself." Her words show how followership was framed as an act of humility and trust, reinforcing how effective teams required shared responsibility. By acknowledging personal limitations, she positioned followership as an active and empowering practice.

Several participants reflected on the value of explicitly studying followership, noting it is rarely discussed in sport contexts. Trent explained, "You hear about leadership all the time, but you never really talk about the individuals that are following the leaders." His insight illustrates how the academy created a space for student-athletes to see leadership as a two-way process, where followers contribute meaning and direction just as leaders do.

Lauren extended this understanding into team settings, recognizing the importance of supportive roles: "Even if you're not the biggest leader, being a good follower to your other leaders is very important." Her comment underscores how following was not about silence or passivity but about actively reinforcing and enabling others' leadership. Jennifer echoed this sentiment, reframing the role of followers as leaders in their own right: "Not having to have the title of a leader, but being able to still lead as the follower ... I can still help others."

These reflections provide insight into how participants shifted from seeing leadership and followership as opposites. Instead, they framed both as complementary, fluid roles teammates shifted between depending on context. This perspective reinforced the idea that leadership is distributed across the team and constructed through relationships. For many, embracing followership not only deepened their appreciation of collective leadership but also marked a departure from earlier, more individualistic assumptions.

## **Confidence and Competence Building**

Participants described how their involvement in the leadership academy built both confidence and competence over time. Early hesitations about speaking, leading, or intervening gave way to a stronger self-belief as student-athletes accumulated practice and feedback. These experiences also sharpened specific skills such as communication, relational awareness, and public speaking. The interplay of growing confidence and developing competence helped participants see themselves as capable leaders across multiple contexts.

## ***Growth & Self-Efficacy***

Confidence often developed when participants realized they could influence outcomes rather than simply participate in them. Dylan explained how guiding younger athletes made him capable of shaping team culture: "Being able to share my experiences as an athlete with others who are younger ... It just gave me the confidence

to take those skills and apply it to my actual team and my actual team culture.” For Dylan, confidence was less about self-perception and more about seeing tangible effects on his peers. Harper described confidence as the ability to handle pivotal moments without hesitation:

There’s always a point in the team where you’re at a line. You can either go up or down ... now that I’ve gone through a few of them, I’m like, okay, I know what we need now. I know how to help us go up instead of down.

Her reflection shows how confidence was built through repeated exposure to high-pressure situations, which transformed uncertainty into clarity about what the team required.

Others framed confidence as the culmination of multiple years of learning. Dominic described the transition from learner to teacher: “I’ve had these years to learn ... We get to teach it back ... and it’s really come full circle.” Madison contrasted her experience with those who had not been through the academy, noting, “There are things we’ve learned ... if you were to experience this situation, go about it this way. Where the people who haven’t experienced it would go about it differently.” Both reflections emphasize how accumulated knowledge became a foundation for self-assurance in leadership roles.

Several participants also spoke about how confidence revealed itself in their behavior. Ally expressed it directly: “I think the program has made me a much more confident leader.” Lauren pointed to her own sense of proof: “Over time, I feel like I’ve kind of like in a way proved to myself that I can do it.” Jennifer traced her development from quiet observer to active leader:

For the first few years being here, very introverted, not vocal at all ... but now I feel like I have the confidence and the ability to go out of my way to say something to someone when I see something that can be adjusted.

These accounts suggest confidence was not abstract but visible in new actions, interactions, and willingness to speak. The participants not only felt growth in their confidence, but also in their self-efficacy as a leader and willingness to lead others.

### ***Communication and Public Speaking***

Alongside growing confidence, participants emphasized the development of concrete communication skills. Ally described a profound change in her comfort with public speaking:

It has made an incredible change in my confidence ... I hated public speaking ... but my confidence skyrocketed as a result of doing the program. I was able to kind of find my voice and be able to advocate for things.

Her reflection illustrates how competence was not only built through repeated practice but also through a shift in self-concept.

For some, presentations were viewed as leadership practice in disguise. Trent explained, “Any opportunity that you can get to present topics to a class is strengthening one of your leadership skills in communication, public speaking, or anything like that.” Harper added how the lessons carried into more personal interactions: “It’s helped me when I’ve had to have hard one-on-one conversations.” These comments

suggest competence grew by applying skills across different settings, from classrooms to individual conversations, reinforcing the sense that communication was a transferable leadership tool.

Maren described the value of consistency and connection: “I talk to the people on my team more and even outside.” Madison summed up the barcode influence as a comfort shift: “The whole confidence thing being able to talk to different people, being more comfortable with that.” Finally, participants highlighted the transferability of these communication skills beyond athletics. Addison captured this clearly: “It’s also taught me how to ... be a better presenter and how to talk to my peers better.” For her and others, competence gained in the leadership academy was not confined to sport but extended into academic and professional preparation, reinforcing leadership as an identity carried across domains.

### **Facilitating as a Tool for Development**

Facilitation marked a pivotal shift for participants, moving from learners to teachers and requiring them to assume a new level of responsibility. After several years of receiving guidance, they were in charge of delivering it, and this transition forced them to consolidate what they had learned, adapt in the moment, and reflect on their own leadership identity.

For Dylan, facilitation highlighted the difference between passively absorbing lessons and actively shaping them for others. He explained that his prior experiences as a participant informed what he emphasized when leading sessions:

My experiences shaped the way I instructed the program because being a participant opened my eyes to the topics that related more to me and the topics I felt the students would receive better. You know, there are certain activities that were great and some that needed to be revised.

His reflection underscores how facilitation was not solely about repeating lessons but about discerning what worked and what needed to change, adding a layer of critical evaluation to his leadership practice. Lauren emphasized how facilitation forced her to be more organized and intentional:

As a facilitator, I’ve had to have a lot more organization and to be prepared for leadership prior to being a facilitator. I had to bring my playbook and pen and show up and do what I needed to do. To plan what I’m going to say, how I’m going to approach it. I need to know what I’m talking about. They [faculty facilitators] already know what they are talking about, so I had this perspective of how they’re communicating to us. Sometimes it felt like there wasn’t much format to it, but now I realize that there is a lot of format.

Her reflection highlights the shift from participant to planner, underscoring how facilitation required advanced preparation and heightened awareness of structure.

For others, facilitation helped make sense of the broader learning arc. Sydney noted: “You have a better understanding of why you’re doing what you’re doing ... after going through the process everything starts to make sense ... it’s like you’re using the resources that you were given and it just completed the circle for me.” The language of completion and clarity shows how facilitation tied together their three years of cumulative experience, turning practice into perspective.

Harper described facilitation as a process of building on earlier lessons and applying them in new ways:

You learn it and you use it, and then as you progress, it's like building off of previous lessons. You don't remember the things you first touched on, but you know the bigger stuff and how it correlates to other things. It has been really fun to come back and teach it."

Her experience suggests facilitation required not only recall but also synthesis, demonstrating how leadership learning evolved into a deeper, interconnected understanding.

However, the transition into facilitation was not without challenge. Emma described the initial transition as being "thrown into the deep end," admitting that it was a "a bit rocky at times" and the group later decided more structure was needed to support the process. These tensions illustrate how facilitation was developmental because it was imperfect; the responsibility to lead sessions demanded adaptability and reflection. Overall, facilitation represented more than a capstone to the leadership academy experience. It was a transformative experience that required participants to shift from consuming knowledge to producing and delivering it for others. In doing so, they developed a clearer sense of responsibility, intentionality, and synthesis that marked an important stage in their leadership development.

### **Contextual Application of Leadership**

Participants emphasized the lessons and skills developed through the leadership academy were not confined to athletics. Instead, they found themselves applying what they had practiced (e.g., communication, organization, adaptability, confidence) across academic, professional, and campus leadership opportunities. In this way, the leadership academy functioned as a training ground, preparing student-athletes to take on leadership roles beyond their teams.

For Dylan, connections between the academy and graduate course work were immediate: "As an MBA student ... I can relate a lot of those course materials to the lessons [learned] in the leadership academy." The program provided him with a conceptual and practical foundation, allowing him to engage more fully with academic material. Similarly, Ally noted how facilitating academy sessions reinforced lessons that carried over into other settings: "Being able to facilitate ... it reinforced everything that I had learned prior, and then it was reinforced in one room, but then also in another, and in a completely different context." Her reflection highlights how practicing leadership repeatedly, in different contexts, strengthened her ability to transform those lessons beyond athletics.

This transfer was also evident in professional preparation. Alyssa anticipated presenting frequently in her career and described facilitation as a rehearsal for those challenges: "I know for my professional career I'll have to present ... and understand that things can be switched around and it doesn't always go as planned ... [facilitation] helps me transfer that to a professional career." What might once have been an intimidating task became more manageable through skills built and tested during the leadership academy.

Harper provided a clear example of how leadership academy lessons supported leadership outside of sport when she unexpectedly assumed a major campus role:

I was student government president ... not something that I ran for or was prepared for. I was kind of thrown into it, but it [leadership academy] helped me ... know how I want to communicate with my team but also how I want to communicate with my board.

Her experience shows an example of how communication and organizational tools developed in the academy became beneficial for navigating responsibilities in a new and unanticipated leadership position.

Others emphasized the long-term applicability of these skills. Emma reflected on how the academy equipped her for graduate school and beyond: "I cannot lose in this situation because I'm going to gain skills that will be helpful for my whole life. I'm in grad school now and still use these skills." Riley explained this transfer more concretely, noting that leadership from the academy meant "Being a role model in the classroom, at practices and even in the weight room." For most of the participants, application looked like daily actions that demonstrated consistency and accountability across settings.

Finally, participants noted how confidence built through facilitation carried into academic life, including the ability to speak up or take initiative on group projects. For example, Dominic said, "I used to stay quiet, but now I feel comfortable raising my hand in class or leading when a project needs direction." These reflections show how confidence was not abstract but directly connected to behaviors developed in the academy. Collectively, these accounts demonstrate the academy did more than influence how participants thought about leadership, but also equipped them with practical skills and experiences they actively applied in academic, professional, and campus contexts. By practicing and refining these competencies across multiple years, student-athletes were able to step into new leadership opportunities with preparation and confidence.

## Discussion

This study explored how student-athletes in a multi-year leadership academy came to understand leadership as a dynamic, evolving process shaped by context, reflection, and social interaction. Rather than describing leadership as fixed, participants emphasized adaptability, the influence of facilitation, and the transferability of skills beyond sport. These insights extend existing scholarship (e.g., Billsberry et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2024) on the social construction of leadership and point to meaningful implications for theory and practice in sport leadership development. It is important to note these experiences reflect the views of student-athletes who remained engaged in the academy; leadership development programs can be experienced differently by athletes who feel overextended or who are less intrinsically motivated to participate.

Theoretically, this study contributes by reinforcing social constructionist views of leadership as emergent, contextually bound, and shaped by interaction. It adds nu-

ance by demonstrating how leadership identities evolve temporally within structured programs, underscoring how leadership is not merely practiced in the moment but continuously reconstructed across years of reflection, facilitation, and application. It also strengthens observer-centric approaches (Billsberry et al., 2018), showing leadership is co-created in dialogical spaces where students both learn and teach. By documenting facilitation as a transformative moment, our findings extend existing theory to highlight the developmental ability of peer-led teaching. This insight challenges top-down assumptions of leadership education and advances more relational, collective models suited to intercollegiate sport.

### **Leadership as Evolving and Adaptive**

A central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how leadership identities develop over time. Early conceptions of leadership often mirrored traditional, authority-based models, but through sustained participation, student-athletes reframed leadership as fluid, relational, and contextually responsive. This evolution illustrates how adaptive leadership emerges from ongoing practice and reflection, rather than static definitions. Consistent with calls to view leadership as socially constructive and collectively shaped (Billsberry et al., 2018; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), participants came to see leadership as knowing when to lead, when to follow, and how to respond to the needs of a group.

By highlighting this developmental trajectory, the findings extend adaptive leadership frameworks within intercollegiate sport (Cotterill et al., 2022). The data suggest leadership identity is not acquired once but is iteratively redefined as experiences accumulate. This study therefore reinforces the importance of temporal and experiential dimensions of leadership development (Grint & Jackson, 2010), illustrating that growth emerges through multiple years of engagement, peer interaction, and self-reflection.

### **Facilitation as a Transformative Catalyst**

Another novel insight is the transformative power of facilitation. Serving as a facilitator required student-athletes to consolidate prior lessons, apply them in real time, and assume responsibility for the learning of others. This role proved more than a culmination; it was a catalyst that deepened leadership identity and solidified skills. In line with experiential learning theory (Kolb et al., 2014), facilitation created conditions for active experimentation, critical reflection, and accountability, amplifying lessons learned during earlier years.

This finding extends prior work that has underscored the value of peer-led components in leadership development (Duguay et al., 2022). Whereas previous research has often described facilitation as supportive, the present study shows how it can serve as a high-impact turning point. Consistent with Fuller et al.'s (2018) argument that layered programming promotes reflection and authenticity, the facilitation year required student-athletes to step outside their comfort zones and reimagine their role as both leaders and teachers. By emphasizing this transition, the study demonstrates

that facilitation should be intentionally designed into leadership curricula, not treated as an ancillary activity.

### **Confidence and Application to Other Domains**

This study also underscores the relationship between leadership development and self-efficacy. As participants gained communication skills, practiced leadership in diverse contexts, and assumed facilitation roles, they reported greater confidence to lead both within and outside sport. This growth in self-belief relates to research on leadership self-efficacy, which emphasizes that confidence develops through mastery experiences and social validation (Bandura, 1997; Cotterill et al., 2022).

Importantly, the study identified confidence as not confined solely to athletic environments. Student-athletes described transferring skills into academic group projects, professional preparation, and campus leadership roles. These outcomes highlight how leadership academies can extend their influence beyond sport by equipping participants with tools applicable across multiple life domains. Such findings strengthen arguments for viewing leadership education as holistic development, preparing student-athletes for success in varied contexts (Beard & Weese, 2020).

### **Implications for Leadership Program Design**

Together, these findings have important implications for how leadership programs in intercollegiate sport are designed and delivered. First, they reinforce the need for longitudinal structures. One-off workshops may introduce leadership concepts, but they lack the sustained engagement necessary for identity transformation. By contrast, multi-year, scaffolded approaches create space for iterative meaning-making, skill testing, and reflection, ultimately enabling student-athletes to develop more adaptive and authentic leadership identities (Blanton et al., 2014; Mertens et al., 2020). This approach aligns with broader leadership education principles in higher education, where high-quality programs are characterized by intentional sequencing, active learning, and structured reflection across time (Eich, 2008).

Second, the facilitation year stands out as a particularly high-impact practice. Program designers should consider building structured peer-led teaching opportunities into their models, recognizing how guiding others can be as developmentally powerful as receiving instruction. Such practices align with broader higher education literature on high-impact practices, which emphasize active engagement, reflection, and responsibility for others' learning (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022). As Eich (2008) emphasizes, experiential learning, small-group interaction, and developmental feedback are central to effective leadership programming. The academy's facilitation model reflects established best practices in student leadership development by providing opportunities for students to make meaning of their experiences and develop transferable leadership skills.

Third, the findings highlight that program design must account for the financial realities of intercollegiate athletics, especially in DIII settings where resources are consistently tight. The leadership academy in this study is supported by the athletic department but does not receive funding from the university. Instead, it is sustained

through the voluntary service and professional commitment of faculty members and coaches. This model illustrates how meaningful leadership development can occur without substantial financial investment when departments intentionally create structured opportunities for reflection, discussion, and student ownership (Croft et al., 2024).

Since the academy operates through service rather than dedicated funding, demonstrating the value and usefulness of the program becomes essential. When student-athletes show growth in confidence, communication, and real-world application, these outcomes strengthen buy-in among coaches, administrators, and faculty. Increased visibility and demonstrated impact can also enhance participation and encourage additional staff members to contribute their time and expertise. In resource-limited environments, evidence of value can motivate continued or expanded service from personnel who already manage significant workloads (Navarro et al., 2020).

Taken together, the findings suggest that athletic departments seeking to build or sustain leadership programming do not need extensive budgets. They do, however, need structures that promote continuity, intentionality, and collaboration. When faculty and coaches see their service directly contributes to student-athlete growth, engagement tends to grow, and leadership programming becomes more sustainable even without formal financial support (Brauenstein-Minkove et al., 2022).

## **Limitations and Future Research**

As with all qualitative research, the findings of this study should be understood within the context of its design. The study was conducted with student-athletes from a single DIII institution, which provided rich, context-specific insights but also limits transferability. Leadership development may manifest differently in other institutional settings, particularly within Division I environments where athletic, academic, and social pressures are heightened. Future research should therefore examine similar programs across diverse institutional types to consider how structural and cultural contexts shape leadership development.

Future projects would also benefit from incorporating additional forms of data collection (e.g., observations, reflective journals, longitudinal tracking), to provide a more layered understanding of leadership development over time. Researcher positionality also shaped this study, as one team member was directly involved with the leadership academy. This insider perspective enriched contextual understanding, and steps such as collaborative analysis with external researchers were taken to mitigate bias, though future studies may continue to build confirmability through independent replication.

The gender composition of the participants also warrants further exploration. Female student-athletes were more likely to complete all four years of the program, pointing to potential differences in engagement that deserve closer examination. While the current study does not explain why these patterns occurred, previous research on gender and sport leadership has consistently highlighted structural and cultural challenges (Burton, 2015). Finally, while facilitation was deemed to be a

powerful developmental experience, this study cannot disentangle the specific mechanisms that made it so influential. Future research should investigate how facilitation interacts with other program components and whether similar outcomes can be replicated in alternative leadership education contexts. Another area for future exploration is how program design might support equitable engagement across genders.

Finally, all participants in this study expressed largely positive perceptions of the leadership academy, which may not reflect the experiences of student-athletes who do not find structured leadership programming valuable. Future research should therefore examine the perspectives of athletes who opt out or feel disconnected from leadership development initiatives to better understand variability in engagement and perceived benefit.

## Conclusion

This study examined how student-athletes in a multi-year leadership development academy constructed and reconstructed their understandings of leadership over time. The findings suggest leadership is not a fixed trait, but a dynamic, adaptive process shaped by experience, reflection, and context. The transition from participant to facilitator was identified as a transformative catalyst, consolidating leadership identities and fostering confidence to apply skills across athletic, academic, and personal domains. By documenting these processes, the study advances social constructionist perspectives on leadership and underscores the importance of longitudinal, scaffolded program designs.

For practitioners, the findings reinforce that high-impact leadership development requires sustained engagement, structured opportunities for peer facilitation, and intentional attention to gender and coach influence. Ultimately, the study highlights how leadership in intercollegiate sport is best cultivated not through static instruction but through iterative, relational, and contextually grounded experiences that extend well beyond the playing field.

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