

Master's Capstone Project

An Athlete's Reality: The Transition Out Of Collegiate Sports

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This capstone project will serve as a direct resource for university administrators and sports-program managers intending to foster successful academic experiences and support smooth transitions for their athletes into futures with or without professional sports. The project aims to make a difference in the lives of student-athletes by demystifying the collegiate athlete experience, fully illustrating the transition process, informing expectations, and motivating these men and women to begin planning for their future.

For many of these elite athletes, extra attention during high school and throughout the recruiting process, in addition to general youthful inexperience, may lead to a sense of entitlement. Student-athletes arriving on campus with this outlook may find it difficult to develop the kind of attention, trust, and motivation necessary to bring about positive reflection and action. In order to provide educators with the tools to reach student-athletes, this project will design the structure and curriculum of a course that incorporates firsthand collegiate-athlete experience to maximize benefit and clarity for students.¹

The course's main aims are to help student-athletes become more aware of the specific challenges they may face during and after graduation, and to demonstrate why and how they should take action as early as possible to make the most of their opportunities and ease their transition out of sports. The lessons are designed to help athletes:

1. Recognize the long-term value of their education.
2. Find purpose in studying something they enjoy.

¹ All lesson plans are withheld due to impending copyright.

3. Understand just how challenging sport retirement can be if they do not prepare in advance.
4. Become aware of identity, health, and body image issues, as well as other post-eligibility hazards.
5. Avoid negative effects that can occur after such a significant life change.
6. Better prepare themselves for their transition into a professional life outside of athletics.

My Story

As a former collegiate athlete, my own experiences were indicative of the kinds of challenges facing student-athletes as they contend with the end of their athletic careers. I experienced a wave of shaking changes once my eligibility ended. By graduation, I was left lost, trying to process an unexpected sense of regret. I had been a starter in the Big Sky Conference for Idaho State University Women's Soccer; I was a Bengal, it was my identity and I loved it. Soon after, with a degree in Mass Communications in hand, I had become one of the 82 percent of athletes that graduated in 2012 (NCAA, Hosick, 2013). I had worked hard for my degree, but it was not until after the quick succession of my playing career ending, graduation, and then re-entering "civilian life," that I realized how important university academics really were. Between all the early morning workouts, long road trips, personal accolades, and home events, I wish I would have understood the significance of my degree while I had been working toward it.

During my time as a student-athlete in a Division I sports program, I encountered the nearly impossible team/studies balancing act that has characterized much of the literature on the topic over the last few decades. I attribute most of my academic success

to the different relationships I formed over my five years in the program, along with the strong family support I received. In other words, I was lucky -- both to have had the experience I did as an athlete, and to have had a built-in support system.

I learned a lot from my university education and grew tremendously as a person. My only regret is that I wish I would have known what I wanted out of my education sooner. I could have worked harder and been much better informed, especially as I set myself up for the future. By the time I had clawed my way to the collegiate level, though, I had already come to understand myself within the context of sport. I never really considered what it meant to have my time on the field eventually end. Not only had I lacked such a context, but I also lacked any tools with which to have dealt with it. I had been playing the game since I was four years old; I could not have imagined my life without it. I grew up wanting to play college soccer. That was always the goal.

After graduation, the major problem for me was not an expectation to play professionally. In my case, professional soccer was not on the horizon. This is true for nearly all-collegiate athletes, as of the “more than 400,000 NCAA student-athletes... almost all of them will go pro in something other than sports” (Coffey, 2009, p. 14). In my case, the issue was learning to deal with what was an overwhelming, personal and professional trial, resulting in a directionless sense of loss and, “what do I do now” feelings. I assumed that I would figure out what else I was interested in when I went to university, but that was not the case. Freshman year went by, then sophomore year, and still I did not know what I wanted to study. Then, as I entered my junior year, I was forced to choose a major in order stay eligible. I was not ready to choose, so I ended up changing my major three times before I decided on Mass Communications.

I wish I had been more prepared for a professional career and more confident moving forward. I knew academics were important, but I had always had soccer in the foreground. After all, as one of the thousands of students that enter academic programs through sports recruitment every year, I felt as if I were only in the university because of my athletic scholarship. Of course, I understood my eligibility was limited and knew there was no professional women's soccer league like there was when I was growing up. But, I felt that playing elite-level athletics would open doors to other opportunities, even after graduation. Eventually I did realize the true significance of my degree and attendance at ISU, but only well after my playing time was over.

The difficulties I experienced transitioning to life after athletics were not unique. To be sure, my case merely scratches the surface of the challenges that student-athletes wrestle with annually. As a little girl, I dreamed of playing sports at the collegiate level. After years of hard work and sacrifice, I achieved that goal, only to encounter the difficult and unexpected identity issues that often follow graduation and linger well into a post-sports professional career. Although demanding, my journey has informed my views, as my passion has evolved from playing sports to helping athletes. I am now dedicated to easing the transition of others by helping student-athletes learn how to adjust to the harsh changes that lie ahead. In this endeavor, the first steps must be to encourage the universities that produce major athletics programs to acknowledge these issues, and to engineer support for administrators in their efforts to produce proactive educational resources.

Literature Review

Academic approaches to the study of collegiate athletes, their experiences and challenges alike, have evolved over the last several decades. Historically, the main focus of the literature has been aimed at student-athletes' academic success and graduation rates (Southall, 2014, p. 129). Although there has been extensive research done on student-athletes toward this end, substantial gaps remain that leave important questions unanswered. One of the most significant of these understudied areas is the difficult transition student-athletes encounter as they graduate or retire. This hole in the literature means a lack of understanding, and therefore a hindered prevention effort, of the resulting identity, body image, health, and professional issues that can manifest during this period of misperception (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013, p. 144).

Decades ago, a number of studies indicated a lack of support for student-athletes academically, and in turn, led to more university and NCAA involvement in athletes' academic affairs (Harrison, 1981, p. 113). "Although colleges and universities offer a myriad of support services and programs for student athletes, they have not managed to consistently and effectively enhance student-athletes' learning and personal development. Rather, many support centers focus on simply maintaining academic eligibility" and helping to meet graduation percentages (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, p. 236). Some studies go as far as saying, "College athletics have occasionally failed to fulfill their obligation of providing genuine educational opportunities to student-athletes. Critics and reform-minded analysts argue that these shortcomings go beyond occasional oversights and are, rather, evidence of a corrupted system that threatens the academic integrity of

higher education” (Ferris, Finster & McDonald, 2004, p. 555). On the whole, the research identified problems but did not give any answers.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has taken critical steps forward in hopes of helping improve student-athlete academic performance. Southall (2014) stated, “The NCAA had made tremendous progress in addressing historic academic concerns... increased initial eligibility requirements, mandatory progress toward degree requirements, as well as stringent Academic Progress Rates (APRs) and “record” Graduation Success Rates (GSRs)” (p. 129). Additionally, the NCAA “has intensified its efforts to improve the educational experiences of student-athletes and bring some sense of balance between athletics and the university’s traditional educational role” (Comeaux, 2011, p. 521).

As welcome as these changes might be, the NCAA’s efforts to address the particular academic challenges that student-athletes face only affects the front end of the issue. More recent research has shown that, in addition to the challenge of balancing sports and coursework, these athletes will likely encounter a difficult and potentially harmful transitional period. Once one’s playing career is over, managing the stressors of life without the comfort and structure of an organized sport can take a substantial amount of adaptation.

The transition for collegiate athletes from a life revolving around sports to one of post-athletic anonymity can be challenging. Kissinger and Miller’s (2009) research on college student-athletes’ challenges posed by academics, social injury, and college career termination exposed pressures that lead to negative effects dealing with depression, loss of self-esteem, unhealthy body image, and loss of identity (p. 12). Research into the

student-athlete experience still contends with a large gap in the literature, neglecting the transitional period out of athletics. There is evidence that student-athletes struggle with their transition out of a life defined by sports (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignières, 2003) yet there appears to be a lack of consensus as to how to help student-athletes process and manage the dramatic changes that will take place once their eligibility is over.

As a result, the consequences of what is often an abrupt and traumatic shift can be severe. One study explained that poor coping mechanisms led to a host of high-risk behaviors, such as substance abuse, addiction, low academic success, violence, and depression. "Poor coping also manifested itself in student-athlete contingency career plans should the big leagues not be interested" (Kissinger & Miller, 2009, p. 12). Many of these elite athletes are ill equipped to handle the kinds of adjustment necessary to acclimate to life following graduation. This issue is unfortunately overlooked not solely by academics but by the collegiate sports community in general.

Social Identity Theory

Borrowing from the fields of social psychology, sports communication, and others, there are certain theoretical approaches that have been utilized by scholars to better understand why athletes often have a difficult time transitioning out of the sports-centered lives to which they have grown accustomed. Theories can "function as guidebooks that help us understand, explain, interpret, judge, and act into, the communication happening around us" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p.16). In the case of collegiate athletes, theoretical insight into students' independent and collective identities is key. While there is no one theory that can encapsulate all of the problems that manifest

themselves during student-athletes' retirement transitions, Social Identity Theory (or SIT) is a useful tool to help one begin to understand why this period can be problematic.

Fink, Parker, Brett, and Higgins (2009) explained, "Social identity theory suggests that individuals have both a personal identity and a social identity" (p. 143). According to the authors, personal identity is built upon attributes such as abilities, hobbies, and interests, while social identity is concerned with group categories and feelings of membership (Fink et al., p. 143). SIT explains that an individual's self-concept is founded in-group memberships. "Naturally, people desire positive self-evaluations and, often, those evaluations are linked to positive characterizations about groups to which they belong" (Schmidt & Cole, 2014, p. 658).

SIT deals with both in-group and out-group concepts. In-groups are the groups to which one belongs, while out-groups are the groups to which one does not belong. Baiocchi (2009) explained, "social identity then describes and prescribes how one should think, feel, and behave in order to be considered part of the in-group" (p. 3). In particular, collegiate athletes aspire to be part of the student-athlete in-group or membership, especially in the case of one's own team. This devotion to membership in a particular group can cause isolation and inhibit the maintenance of a varied support system. "As a result, individuals often work—consciously or not—to contribute to the positive value of their in-groups while devaluing out-groups" (Schmidt & Cole, 2014, p. 658). It is natural to push away out-groups in order to find commonality and belongingness in one's own group. Social Identity Theory helps to take this process apart, illustrating how student-athletes find much of who they are within a team identity, and pursue feelings of belongingness despite possible costs to their own greater senses of self.

As Fink et al., (2009) wrote, “Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals are driven by a need for high self-esteem and this self-esteem is established, in part, by being members of social groups” (in Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 143). This fact is useful when considering why this transitional period can be problematic for collegiate athletes. These athletes attribute belongingness to being part of one’s team and university; once retirement, injury, or end of eligibility occurs, that belongingness is gone, and it can be very difficult for a former student-athlete to picture life within what may feel like a very different expectation.

Messer and Jones (1999) noted the following:

Social Identity Theory suggests...that the search for personal identity and self esteem is the motivation for joining groups. But this becomes linked to the need to maintain group or social identity once membership has been attained. The social identity of groups is thus created by a process of social categorization that simplifies the social world by 'clumping' it into discrete categories 'us' and 'them'. (p. 138)

Categorization further demonstrates why leaving one’s in-group, whether through the success of graduation or the failure of being cut from a roster, can cause one distress at the loss of self-esteem and belongingness. Student-athletes are no exception: leaving the in-groups of team and alma mater during the transition out of collegiate sports can lead to unexpected difficulties and negative effects.

While this theory has been applied within the context of sports, research has been limited to fan interactions and fan identity, with respect to team identification. Social Identity Theory application has been expanded in recent years, and has been used in the

“realms of language use, examining the ways in which interaction styles are adapted in response to others in various cross-cultural situations” (Scott, 2007, p. 125). SIT research has also been applied to an array of other topics, including media studies (Krämer, and Trepte, 2006) linking differences in gender, behavior in social groups, stereotyping and racism (Goar, 2007) religion (Acevedo, Chaudhary, & Ellison, 2014) and less sensitive topics, such as music (Tekman & Hortaçsu, 2002) and sports. Further research utilizing Social Identity Theory in the area of post-athletics could help increase scientific understanding of this difficult transition and shed light on possible ways of minimizing its negative effects. As a model for research, SIT provides a promising entry into work on the mindset of collegiate athletes, both approaching retirement and after. Additionally, the theory lends itself well to producing useful evidence as to why potentially skeptical student-athletes should take these challenges seriously. Essentially, SIT leads us to understand just how complex and hazardous the transition period can be for these students.

Challenges Of Being A Student-Athlete

In 2013 the National Collegiate Athletic Association, popularly known as the NCAA, announced that there are more than 460,000 student-athletes that play sports collegiately -- and of that amount, fewer than 2% will go on to play professionally (NCAA, 2013). Considering their large numbers, and despite the relatively certain expectation of retirement they share, the amateur collegiate athletic experience remains a strong draw. The NCAA.org website reported, “For the rest, the experiences of college athletics and the life lessons they learn along the way will help them as they pursue careers in business, education, athletics administration, communications, law, medicine

and many more fields” (NCAA.org, 2013, p. 1). For this diverse group of nearly half a million university students, what are the costs that coincide with a lifestyle that is so appealing?

It is common to hear of the perks student-athletes can receive by playing sports collegiately. Being a student-athlete does allow for unique and often rewarding experiences, such as traveling around the country -- in some cases even abroad -- as well as the chance to form deep bonds with teammates who are going through the same experiences and fighting for the same goal. These students are also afforded numerous educational and professional opportunities from their universities. The NCAA explains that possible student-athlete benefits include a college education, academic and support services, scholarships, medical care, elite training opportunities, healthy living, exposure to new experiences, and preparation for life (NCAA.org, 2013).

With such a strong focus on the positives of collegiate athletics, it is easy to overlook the difficult challenges that athletes face during their experiences and once their time in the spotlight is over. In a nation-wide study, approximately 53% of student-athletes stated that they had not spent as much time on all aspects of their academic work as they would have liked, with 80% of them citing athletic participation as the reason (Potuto and O’hanlon, 2007).

In their psychoanalytical study of student-athletes, Heird and Steinfeldt (2013) identified numerous specific challenges many will face: balancing athletic and academic endeavors; organizing social activities within the isolation of athletic pursuits; managing athletic success (or bearing lack of success); maintaining one’s physical health and addressing any injuries; balancing several tiers of relationships, including coaches,

parents, family, and friends; and finally, dealing with the termination of one's athletic career (p.143). The combination of these challenges may have negative and unhealthy consequences for athletes.

Athletic Identity

Heird and Steinfeldt (2013) defined athletic identity as “the degree to which an athlete identifies with the athlete role. Athletic identity can be conceptualized as both a cognitive structure and a social role” (p. 144). The research in this area points to loss of athletic identity as one of the most problematic issues student-athletes may have to deal with after graduation. Student-athletes represent a unique, clearly identifiable, college student subpopulation or subculture. Valentine and Tabb (1996) wrote, “Student athletes have long been the most recognized, yet unofficial, special population on our nation's college campuses” (p. 1). They are the only extracurricular program that is actually called by their activity, “student-athlete.”

According to Heird and Steinfeldt (2013), athletes interpret information as organized through a specific kind of symbolic, cognitive structure, which determines how a person deals with situations, and inspires behavior consistent with the athlete role. As a social role, athletic identity can be determined by the perceptions of those close to the athlete, such as friends, family members, or coaches, who emphasize the athletic identity (p. 144). Athletes do not take the athletic identity on their own, they learn over time from both their own cognitive structure and from those close to them. “Sports sociologists have identified the major sports socializing agents as family, peers, schools, community, and the mass media. Most of these agents have been instrumental to the overemphasis on athletics that they perceive in their personal lives” (Beamon, 2010, p. 296). Still, the

sports socialization process is not limited to stimuli from the outside. Finding and connecting with people with whom one can relate is important, for athletes and traditional students alike. "People with higher levels of athletic identity may surround themselves with other athletes who encourage a self-definition centered on athletics, further strengthening the identification with the athlete role" (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013, p. 144).

Research has shown that student-athletes can suffer negative consequences in non-athletic areas of life if they over-identify with the athlete role (Heird & Steinfeldt 2013). Once student-athletes leave their athletic roles, several potentially damaging emotional, physical, and physiological effects may take place. Heird and Steinfeldt (2013) explained that athletes with strong athletic identities tend to have a more difficult adjustment period upon career termination. Some of the problems they face are career immaturity, physical health concerns, poor emotional well-being, social isolation, low academic achievement, poor social relations, and low levels of help seeking (p. 145).

Stress from congested schedules can lead to negative effects as well. Jolly's (2008) research showed that a "majority of student-athletes report that the demands of intercollegiate athletic competition have prevented them from devoting as much time to the student side of their lives as they would like" (p. 146). The author explained, "These relentless, regimented schedules can take a toll on student-athletes. Because of the highly-structured time demands, many of my student-athletes, particularly freshmen, exhibit considerable stress and, in some cases, suffer from depression." Jolly continued, "By the end of my first two months on the job, I had a student withdraw from the term and quit the team because of stress and depression so severe it led to an attempted

suicide” (p. 146). The combination of classroom obligations and team pressure can be too much, especially for first-year athletes.

Watson and Kissinger (2007) wrote that many student-athletes do find participation in collegiate athletics to be rewarding, but the number of athletes that experience issues related to adjustment problems, emotional concerns, and personal issues due to their collegiate participation is growing (p. 53). “In fact, approximately 10% to 15% of college student-athletes experience psychological issues that could warrant professional counseling” (Watson & Kissinger, 2007, p. 1). As student-athletes connect strongly with their athletic roles, Menke (2013) observed, “these students face intense time commitments associated with college sports and a sports culture, causing them to be at risk for lack of engagement in academic pursuits and delayed career development” (p. 1).

By the time student-athletes enter college, most have participated in competitive sports for years. Because of the success they will have encountered within their sport, student-athletes mold an identity that emphasizes their athletic role. “The power of the role-set was demonstrated in Stevenson’s (1999) qualitative study of international athletes, who found that their commitment to their sport developed and deepened as their identity as an athlete became more solidified. For these athletes, it was “the actions and perceptions of others that shaped the saliency of their athletic role” (Bell, 2009, p. 22). As Potuto and O’hanlon (2007) explained, “Perhaps student-athletes’ relative isolation from other students and campus academic life is one reason why 61.8% of student-athletes still at least ‘somewhat agree’ that they view themselves as more of an athlete than a student” (p. 953).

Body Image and Sense of Self

As student-athletes contend with the combination of challenges inherent to the academics-sports balance, one method of coping is to lean on a devotion to a team or competitive activity. Participation in collegiate athletics requires dedication and some manner of sacrifice. Athletes have continuous opportunities to absorb themselves into their efforts and frame their value in relation to their output. This devotion, which ties into the student-athlete identity, has the potential to exacerbate negative effects that can distort student-athletes' views of their self-worth, their own body, and their sense of self.

One reason some students-athletes develop a blurred vision of themselves, particularly after their playing time ends, is because much of their self-worth is based on their playing ability. Morris (2013) explained that in this scenario, "athletes' physical self-perceptions are linked to physical activity level and quality. Therefore when an athlete retires, there is a decline in their sporting capacities and a negative perception of how they view their body" (p. 1). Morris (2013) finished by saying, "This decline in performance and deterioration of bodily perception is assumed to be very stressful and threatening to the self-esteem of retired athletes" (p. 1).

In addition, athletes that place a significant value on their athletic identity are at "risk for depression" because of "negative lifestyle changes like losing social support from coaches and teammates, getting physically out of shape, lacking the structure of training schedules, and missing a sense of identity" (Siddique, 2013, p. 2). Considering the competition itself, Martin and Horn (2013) explained that, moreover, "individuals with high athletic identity place great importance on their success or failure in the athletic

realm and may attribute large portions of their self-worth to these accomplishments” (p. 340).

Although the experiences and unique benefits that student-athletes enjoy will keep university sports programs' rosters filled for the foreseeable future, fundamental questions of body and self will continue to trouble some of these athletes.

Philosophy professor Leslie A. Howe explained (2003):

There is an existential cost to the pursuit of [‘the core athletic’] experience. The athlete invests a tremendous amount of effort to achieve and maintain the ontological unity of self and body. But the identity of self and physical activity entails risk... For most of us, physical incompetence is forgivable because, after all, we are not our bodies, really. For the dedicated athlete, however, physical failure is much more likely to be seen as a failure of self. (p. 99)

Paired with the stress athletes may already feel while struggling with identity loss, a fight with negative body image and a distorted sense of self may lead to further difficulty adjusting to life after graduation, precisely when unpreparedness can be most costly.

Student-Athletes: Post-Career Challenges and Strategies

The NCAA, speaking as both the surrogate voice of U.S. university sports programs and as the rule of law for student-athletes, often touts the personal and professional benefits of collegiate sports. “Member schools support their student-athletes’ academic success by providing state-of-the-art technology, tutoring and access to academic advisors. More than eight out of 10 student-athletes will earn a bachelor’s degree, and more than 35 percent will earn a postgraduate degree” (NCAA, 2015, para.1).

Although these statistics are encouraging, and many student-athletes do leave with a diploma in-hand, they also demonstrate a gap between the official position of leadership and the reality of the experiences of their athletes.

In practice, student-athletes are different than their academic peers. Not only do collegiate athletes share in their professional uncertainty -- as students often do -- their focus is such that, they can too often disregard their non-athletic futures entirely. As Pargman (2012) noted, "Why do we impose upon young, talented, and serious-minded high school seniors the imperative of selecting an academic major that is, more often than not, completely irrelevant to, or at least inconsistent with, their heartfelt desires and true career objectives: to be professional athletes?" He continued, "Acquisition of athletic skills is what significant numbers of NCAA Division I student athletes want to pursue. And this is undeniably why they've gone to their campus of choice" (para. 4-5). The singular focus required by elite athletics programs can leave athletes largely unaware of, and unprepared for, the challenges they are likely to face during and at the end of their athletic careers.

Although it may be impossible to change the nature of inexperience and youth, the challenges student-athletes face are worsened by a lack of educational programs. There is a significant need for universities to adopt awareness initiatives for the benefit of their athletes. These institutions do not provide sufficient programs for student-athletes because, as Watson (2003) explained, "Universities frequently act under the assumption that the individual athletic programs will handle issues and concerns of athletes" (p. 1). Therefore, the intention of this project is to create a model "awareness course" designed

to help institutions and athletics programs bridge the gap between their visions of the student-athlete experience and that of their athletes.

In order to make this course as useful and effective as possible, the project will research and deconstruct the ways student-athletes are unprepared for the duration and especially the conclusion of their collegiate sports careers -- and develop a curriculum designed to provide insight and tools that will assist student-athletes in managing both, the student and the athlete.

The course, "Student-Athletes: Post-Career Challenges and Strategies," will help student-athletes understand three specific topics:

1. Expectations of daily life as an athlete on a university campus, and strategies for managing challenges,
2. How to better prepare themselves for life after athletics,
3. The potential difficulties of this transition and how to avoid them.

In general, the numerous challenges facing student-athletes fall into one of three major categories: physical struggles, mental struggles, and harsh realities.

Physical Struggles: body image, health problems, injuries, eating habits, diet plans, workout regimen, weights, lack of working out, substance abuse, lack of real-world experience, sleep.

Mental Struggles: balancing success and failure, body image, dealing with the termination of one's athletic career, loss of identity, loss of sense of self, support system, motivation, time management, poor emotional well-being, social isolation, low academic achievement, poor social relations, low levels of help seeking, and low career maturity.

Harsh Realities: relationship strains, family and friends, holidays, weekends, travel, immersion in academic interests, missing class, traditional college experience, hobbies, balancing athletic and academic endeavors, social activities, career path, picking a major, eligibility constraints.

Course Structure

The structure of the course will be based on a hypothetical 16-week one-credit course, with full curriculum, titled, “Student-Athletes: Post-Career Challenges and Strategies.” The focus of the coursework will relate to the three categories of challenges listed in the previous section. All handouts and materials used in class will be provided, including discussions, activities, writing assignments and projects. Each class will come with a detailed lesson plan that dictates the materials and lessons taught in that specific class, as to allow this course to be offered immediately.

The course will illustrate strategies that will help student-athletes balance their efforts physically, academically, and socially, and foster early preparations for the transition following their collegiate careers. The curriculum will describe the negative effects, personal struggles, long-term consequences, and other possible pitfalls facing student-athletes. It will demonstrate a big-picture perspective that is easy to miss for athletes often focused on the here and now. The lesson plans incorporate elements obtained from the research, including activities that are created to address issues of identity, career maturity, and major life-transition.

In addition, the method utilized in the design and presentation of these assignments will reflect contemporary, learner-based classroom theory. The course will

ensure all of the athletes are engaged by offering methods of instruction and participation that speak to their learning style. The course will contain elements of visual, audio, kinesthetic, and critical-thinking concepts to help reach every student. It will also include individual, partner and group work to try and emulate traditional work experiences. In essence, this course seeks to provide a useful formula for helping student-athletes learn how to prepare themselves for a professional life outside of their sport, their sport identity, and their sport relationships.

It is important to note the limitations encountered during the creation of the project. First, one can only speculate how the course will influence the students as a whole. The program will need to be put into motion and tested, in order to assess the practical efficiency of this method. Although the program's initial impact is likely to vary, this approach is a good first step toward meeting student-athletes' particular needs. The second limitation is that the literature has, for the most part, focused on current student-athletes rather than retired athletes. This distinction may skew the findings. More research in this area is necessary to extend our knowledge of the mentalities and perspectives of former collegiate athletes.

Teaching And Learning Styles

When designing and implementing a curriculum for such a specific group of learners, it is important to understand their lifestyles and what they go through on a day-to-day basis. In order to create a course that will connect with student-athletes and keep their attention throughout, it is imperative to teach in a way that relates to their lives and offers information that is truly beneficial to them personally. These students place a high value on their time, as it is such a limited resource for them.

Jolly (2008) explained:

The first step in helping student-athletes succeed academically in the major is to develop an understanding of the day-to-day lives of student-athletes and the challenges that they face. Key aspects of developing this understanding and forming an effective relationship with student-athletes are opening new lines of communication beyond lecture and beyond the classroom, as well as venturing into their world (p. 148).

To reach any level of success, the coursework and activities must get through to these athletes, and present compellingly useful and applicable information in a varied and engaging manner.

As any potential instructor of this course must acknowledge, collegiate-athletes can understandably find themselves so focused on preparation for the next game, competition for their current roster position, or a related stress that differentiates student-athletes from other students, that their attention and potential for engagement is limited. In order to effectively get beyond these distractions and restraints, the course must utilize a variety of approaches to meet the needs of students.

Dr. Christopher Jolly, Student-Athlete Success Program Coordinator (2008) demonstrated one such approach:

Communication Studies faculty (as well as faculty in other departments) at CSULB [California State University Long Beach] who have taken an active interest in student-athletes' academic success report beneficial results from informal contact with student-athletes, such as attending games and practices. Seeing their faculty engaging with the athletic sides of their lives gives student-

athletes a greater comfort zone for approaching faculty in the academic arena. Such interactions convey an overall interest in the student-athletes' success, creating "omygosh—it's my professor!!" moments that help overcome many student-athletes' insecurity in approaching faculty in strictly academic settings. (p. 148).

The lesson plans will incorporate this extension of "classroom" space in order to increase the amount of reference points between students and potentially helpful staff (including the instructor.)

Each teacher will have his or her own style and reservoir of experience from which to draw. "Awareness and knowledge about teaching styles can help teachers to understand, explain, and define elements of the teaching-learning process. It is important for teachers to examine their teaching styles and cognitive styles if they are to teach in a manner that respects the learners' diverse learning styles and different learning situations" (Evans, Harkins & Young, 2008, p. 576). Instructors of the course are recommended to adapt their own distinctive teaching styles to those of this unique subculture, student athletes, in order to work to engage students inside and outside of the classroom.

During their formative years, while learning the fundamentals of their sport, these elite athletes doubtlessly encountered different styles of training and coaching. There has been research done on coaching methods and how various approaches affect a variety of personalities differently. Course instructors, and their chosen teaching styles in the classroom, will work in a similar way. "Teachers play a critical role in the teaching/learning process. Teachers' classroom behaviors impact on many different areas

of this process, such as teacher preparation, classroom presentation, learning activities and approaches to the assessment of learning” (Harkins & Young, 2008, p. 568).

Furthermore, researchers have concluded that all learners, including athletes, learn by different philosophies. Gorham, (1986) refers to learning styles as the “cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to learning environments” (p. 411). To tie it back to the student-athletes specifically, Stewart and Owens (2013) define five major variables within the cognitive style as the fundamental concepts for athletes’ needs: immediate environment, physiological needs, psychological needs, sociological needs, and emotionality (p. 1). Along with the fundamental needs, the authors list four types of learners: visual learners, auditory learners, kinesthetic learners, and the thinkers. Gorham (1986) explained how “style elements may be conditions under which an individual is most comfortable and prefers to learn or factors which must be considered to understand how information will be decoded and stored” (p. 411). Baribeau (2006) noted that because student-athletes learn in different ways, such as by seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting, and reasoning logically and intuitively, it only makes sense that teaching methods must also vary (p. 51). The curriculum for “Student-Athletes: Post-Career Challenges and Strategies” will account for these categories of learning needs, as well as the diverse population of students within the classroom, and provide coursework using various methods and sensory approaches to learning.

In conclusion, the men and women who choose to become student-athletes take on a path that is both often personally fulfilling, as well as potentially professionally and emotionally damaging, as they move through their years of eligibility and beyond.

Collegiate athletics is more than simply the culmination of many years of hard work and likely some natural talent; it is a series of serious, life-affecting challenges that, for the good of the athletes, requires universities to provide support and guidance.

Up to this point, neither universities nor the NCAA have produced an organized, holistic response to this need. However, this project, in accordance with learner-based educational methodologies, will introduce a course designed for the ultimate goal of filling this gap -- providing student-athletes, regardless of their gender, sport, or athletic level, the tools necessary to meet their unique challenges.

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