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Exploration of Leadership Competencies in College Athletes: An Impact of Student-Athlete Advisory Committee on Leadership

Development

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Abstract

The Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) is designed to engage college athletes in decision-making processes that influence the NCAA and its member institutions. College athletes provide personal insight into the NCAA intercollegiate athletic experience, thereby influencing policy. SAAC participation prompts the application of transferable sport-specific skills such as leadership and work ethic in a professional setting. This study explores SAAC's impact on the leadership competencies of college athletes. Results reveal that college athletes who participate in SAAC scored higher on three of the nine leadership factors examined. These findings highlight the importance of leadership programming tailored for college athletes, with SAAC emerging as a promising initiative within every athletic department. Consequently, both practical and theoretical implications emphasize the need for structured leadership initiatives to prepare college athletes for post-sport endeavors.

Keywords NCAA, leadership, college athletes, professional development

Although universities offer an assortment of professional development programming, few are structured to accommodate the demanding schedules of college athletes. Skills refined through sport, such as a strong work ethic and goal setting, are transferable and thus can be utilized in non-sport settings (Sebri et al., 2020). The power to influence others is highly valued both on-field and off-field, and sport participation augments leadership dexterity and instills the confidence to seek influential roles in professional settings (Cotterill et al., 2022). Moreover, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) professes that athletic participation enriches the educational experience of college athletes. Yet, the substantial time demands often limit this population's exposure to experiences necessary to enhance personal, social, and professional development (Stokowski et al., 2019).

The Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) provides college athletes with the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process and influence NCAA policy by sharing their experiences as NCAA college athletes. Specifically, SAAC participation prompts the application of transferable sport-specific skills such as communication, judgment, decision-making, and collaboration. This exposure helps college athletes build leadership skills beyond sports, strengthening abilities they can apply across different fields. Furthermore, this is crucial for holistic development and enhancing career readiness as athletes transition beyond their sporting careers (Navarro et al., 2020).

Beyond enhancing individual skills, SAAC serves as a platform to step out of one's comfort zone and engage in leadership experiences. As student-athletes approach the conclusion of their playing careers, opportunities to lead, advocate, and collaborate in broader organizational contexts support a smoother transition into life beyond sport (Heim et al., 2022; Stokowski et al., 2019). Engagement with SAAC can therefore foster more complex leadership competencies that benefit student-athletes in professional roles. This developmental pathway is particularly important given the growing visibility and influence of college athletes in governance, advocacy, and policy discussions, including matters related to Name, Image, and Likeness (Coakley et al., 2024).

The NCAA requires member institutions to sponsor and support SAAC, meaning every athletic department must have its own SAAC. Serving as a SAAC representative gives college athletes a structured, institutionally supported way to develop skills beyond their sport (O'Brien et al., 2021; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Leadership skills gained through athletics prove valuable both within and outside of sports (Luján, 2023). Likewise, leadership attributes such as decision-making, communication, and strategic thinking, developed in non-sport contexts, can strengthen team dynamics and boost athletic performance (Cairney, 2024; Cotterill et al., 2022).

However, despite the widespread presence of SAAC across NCAA institutions, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding its specific influence on leadership competencies. With the increased focus on improving student-athletes' experiences (NCAA, n.d.), it is important to examine whether SAAC fosters leadership development. Findings from this study carry meaningful scholarly value and practical implications for athletic departments, conferences, and the NCAA. Therefore, this study aims to examine the differences in leadership competencies between college athletes who participate in SAAC and those who do not. Specifically, the research questions guiding this study are:

1. Is there a difference in leadership competencies between SAAC participants and non-SAAC participants?

2. Which leadership competencies are different in SAAC participants vs non-SAAC participants?
3. Does gender impact leadership development in SAAC vs non-SAAC participants?

Method

Leadership development research among college athletes is still emerging. Since leadership development supports personal and professional growth beyond sport (Hoffman et al., 2013; Lord & Hall, 2005), it is important to examine how SAAC participation shapes leadership competencies (Heim et al., 2022). Accordingly, a quantitative, nonexperimental survey design was chosen as the most appropriate approach for this exploratory study. Since little prior research has examined leadership development specifically among college athletes (Longhead, 2017), a quantitative methodology allows for collecting data from a larger sample and conducting analyses to identify potential differences between college athletes as members of SAAC and non-members. Utilizing a purposeful sampling method, the survey was distributed via email to senior athletic department officials at all NCAA institutions across Divisions I, II, and III, who were asked to forward it to their college athletes. The form of sampling allowed for the collection of a representative sample of the whole college athlete population across all three Divisions. The body of the email included the study's purpose and the survey link.

Survey

The survey included descriptive questions such as gender, race, athletic division, sport, athletic classification, plans upon graduation, and SAAC membership. Additionally, if the SAAC membership answer was yes, then a follow-up question regarding the number of years being a member and leadership role within SAAC. Following the demographic questions, the questions focusing on leadership competencies based on two previously developed scales were included.

Bouland-van Dam et al. (2022) Leadership Learning Agility Scale (LLAS) scale was used to measure learning agility within the student-athlete population (e.g., achievement, motivation, extraversion, conscientiousness). It included 18 items with three main factors (developing leadership, seeking feedback, and development systematically) measured on a 5-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). The strong internal consistency reliability in the original study ranged between Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$ and 0.89 . As the original scale was created for use in the workplace, this study modified the scale to fit the context of the college athlete population. For example, the item "I put effort in getting better in influencing others to reach our project goals" was revised to "I put effort in getting better in influencing others to reach our team goals."

The second scale used, Kimura et al. (2022) Student Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS), measures students' leadership behaviors. It includes 30 items with six leadership constructs (taking the initiative and modeling the way, challenging the process, sharing goals, managing goals and tasks, task-oriented support, and people-oriented support). This scale is answered on a 5-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). Cronbach's alpha indicated adequate internal consistency reliability, ranging between $\alpha = 0.74$ and $\alpha = 0.84$. As done previously, SLBS was also modified to fit the content of the college athlete population.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using statistical software (SPSS). First, descriptive statistics were analyzed to identify gender, division, athletic/academic classification, SAAC membership status, and years of participation in SAAC and Leadership roles. Two multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were performed with leadership development subscales as the dependent variables. The first, one-way MANOVA analyzed the difference between SAAC vs non-SAAC members on the leadership competencies. The second two-way MANOVA analyzed SAAC membership and gender as between-subjects factors.

Results

Descriptive statistics showed the number of participants was $n = 386$. The participants were predominantly female (61.9%) and white (81.6%). The breakdown of the division participation included DI (26.4%), DII (60.6%), and DIII (13.0%), with the academic classification of freshman (23.3%), sophomores (19.2%), juniors (25.4%), seniors (20.5%), 5th year (5.4%), 6th (0.3%), and graduate (6.0%). In terms of SAAC participation, 160 (41.5%) participants were members of SAAC. Of those, 17.9% were only members for one year, and 32% held leadership positions (see Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive Frequencies and Percentages by Gender, Race, NCAA Division, and SAAC Participation

	n	%
Gender		
Male	147	38.1%
Female	239	61.9%
Race		
White	315	81.6%
Black or African American	37	9.6%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0.5%
Asian	6	1.6%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	0.3%
Other	25	6.5%
NCAA Division		
DI	102	26.4%
DII	234	60.6%
DIII	50	13.0%
Student-athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) membership		
Yes	160	41.5%
No	226	58.5%

Before answering the research question, the internal reliability of the responses to survey items associated with the leadership factors was analyzed using Cronbach's alpha (α). The internal reliability

of 48 survey items (leadership constructs) was strong at $\alpha = .97$.

A two-way MANOVA revealed significant main effects for SAAC membership, Wilks' $\Lambda = .913$, $F(9,252) = 2.66$, $p = .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .087$, and gender, Wilks' $\Lambda = .883$, $F(9, 252) = 3.72$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .117$. The SAAC $\times$ Gender interaction was also significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .934$, $F(9,252) = 1.97$, $p = .043$, partial $\eta^2 = .066$.

Follow-up testing, indicated that SAAC members scored significantly higher on developing leadership, $F(1,260) = 10.70$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .040$; taking initiative/modeling the way, $F(1,260) = 9.92$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .037$; sharing goals, $F(1,260) = 10.31$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .038$; and challenging the process, $F(1,260) = 6.24$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .023$ (see Table 2).

Using the full sample (not only SAAC members), gender main effects showed that female athletes scored higher on developing leadership, $F(1,260) = 7.27$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .027$; seeking feedback, $F(1,260) = 13.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .049$; developing systematically, $F(1,260) = 5.76$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2 = .022$; taking initiative/modeling the way, $F(1,260) = 5.66$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2 = .021$; and people-oriented support, $F(1,260) = 6.70$, $p = .010$, $\eta^2 = .025$.

Significant SAAC $\times$ Gender interactions were found for developing systematically, $F(1,260) = 4.89$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = .018$; taking initiative/modeling the way, $F(1,260) = 4.12$, $p = .043$, $\eta^2 = .016$; managing goals and tasks, $F(1,260) = 3.98$, $p = .047$, $\eta^2 = .015$; challenging the process, $F(1,260) = 8.74$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .033$; and people-oriented support, $F(1,260) = 4.06$, $p = .045$, $\eta^2 = .015$ (see Table 3)

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for One-Way MANOVA

	SAAC member			Non-member			α	Partial η^2
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD		
Leadership Learning Agility Scale (LLAS)								
Developing leadership	132	4.28*	.76	190	4.09	.78	.91	.01
Seeking feedback	131	4.35	.79	188	4.40	.74	.93	.001
Developing systematically	132	4.10	.83	190	4.05	.77	.85	.001
Student Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS)								
Taking initiative and modeling the way								
	102	4.38***	.59	168	4.15	.74	.81	.03
Challenging the process	102	4.30	.63	168	4.23	.73	.84	.002
Sharing goals	100	4.37***	.69	168	4.10	.77	.87	.03
Managing goals and tasks	101	4.17	.73	168	4.01	.77	.83	.01
Task-oriented support	101	4.42	.67	167	4.26	.72	.88	.01
People-oriented support	101	4.44	.69	167	4.35	.69	.84	.004

Note.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3*Means and Standard Deviations for SAAC by Gender MANOVA*

	SAAC member			Non-member			Male		Female		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
Leadership Learning Agility Scale (LLAS)											
Developing leadership	132	4.36***	.66	190	4.09	.78	4.02	.91	4.30***	.58	.91
Seeking feedback	131	4.38***	.59	188	4.14	.744	.08	.85	4.33***	.56	.93
Developing systematically	132	4.37***	.69	190	4.10	.77	4.11	.84	4.26	.67	.85
Student Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS)											
Taking initiative and modeling the way	102	4.41	.66	168	4.39	.77	4.17	.91	4.54*	.55	.81
Challenging the process	102	4.42*	.67	168	4.26	.74	4.18	.86	4.41	.59	.84
Sharing goals	100	4.18	.74	168	4.07	.80	3.94	.87	4.22*	.69	.87
Managing goals and tasks	101	4.30	.64	168	4.23	.74	4.22	.84	4.27	.59	.83
Task-oriented support	101	4.18	.74	167	4.01	.77	4.02	.83	4.11	.72	.88
People-oriented support	101	4.45	.70	167	4.35	.69	4.23	.84	4.49*	.55	.84

*Note.** $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion and Implications

This study explored whether SAAC participation is associated with differences in leadership competencies. Student-athletes involved in SAAC scored significantly higher on four key competencies: developing leadership, seeking feedback, developing systematically, and challenging the process. These findings aligned with previous research and suggested that structured leadership development, like SAAC, could improve overall leadership development of student-athletes (Cotterill et al., 2022; Heim et al., 2022).

The significance of developing leadership highlights how participation in SAAC serves as a catalyst for student-athletes to actively seek feedback, pursue leadership challenges, and embrace growth mindsets. This aligns with theories of leadership, learning agility, and experiential learning, suggesting that when athletes are placed in leadership roles, they become more attuned to opportunities for improvement (Bouland-van Dam et al., 2022; Yukl, 2012). Similarly, developing systematically indicates that SAAC members are more comfortable taking charge and are likely to influence peer behavior by setting a positive example (Heim et al., 2022). The ability to effectively share goals reflects a collaborative mindset and demonstrates the importance of aligning with group values and working toward shared

objectives (Kimura et al., 2022).

Although many student-athletes demonstrate leadership potential, they may be reluctant to act without clear support or structure (Cotterill et al., 2022). One area where SAAC members excelled—sharing goals—illustrates how SAAC encourages athletes to step outside their comfort zones and work collectively toward common objectives. The SAAC environment helps normalize leadership behaviors by creating opportunities apart from athletic status or team hierarchy (Nwosu & Rubin, 2021). These results suggest that leadership growth depends more unintentional opportunities than on sport participation alone. Although this study did not examine institutional or divisional variation, prior research shows that differences in SAAC structure can influence how athletes develop leadership (Heim et al., 2022).

Gender differences were observed across five leadership competencies, with female student-athletes reporting significantly higher scores than males in developing leadership, developing systematically, seeking feedback, sharing goals, and challenging the process. These findings are aligned with previous research on leadership development and gender, emphasizing that genders differ in their leadership development (Debebe et al., 2016). While findings on leadership competencies are important; it is also essential to recognize that gender differences exist in how these competencies develop.

From a practical standpoint, the findings have several implications. Athletic departments could strengthen SAAC's developmental capacity by embedding leadership training modules, structured onboarding, and reflective assessments that help student-athletes track their growth. They might also expand SAAC's impact through gender-specific leadership liaisons or partnerships with campus leadership programs to offer co-curricular workshops. Together, these strategies reinforce the link between SAAC participation and professional readiness.

Participation in SAAC supports student-athletes' career readiness by offering transferable skills in communication, collaboration, and advocacy—domains that may extend beyond sport-specific contexts (Navarro & McCormick, 2017; Stokowski et al., 2019). SAAC provides structured experiences that encourage leadership exploration through involvement in advocacy, administration, public speaking, and collaboration. SAAC's developmental potential is especially relevant in today's evolving collegiate sport environment. Experiences through SAAC prepare student-athletes to lead with authenticity, navigate institutional systems, and represent the broader athlete voice effectively (Coakley et al., 2024).

Overall, this study affirms that SAAC participation offers meaningful leadership competencies development for student-athletics that could potentially help careers beyond sport (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). The committee serves as more than a platform for athlete advocacy. It also functions as a hands-on training round where leadership competencies are formed, refined, and internalized. Athletic departments, conferences, and the NCAA can strengthen the impact of SAAC by investing in its structure, recognizing its developmental value, and ensuring that all student-athletes have equitable access to its benefits. In doing so, college sport systems will better equip student athletes not only to lead their teams but to lead in their careers, communities, and beyond.

Future Research

Future research on the leadership competencies of college athletes could explore alternative methods beyond survey research. Despite a well-represented sample, the predominance of white female

participants may limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, future research could consider additional factors that influence the leadership development of college athletes. While this study focused on leadership development through a quantitative lens, future studies could explore SAAC membership and structure in greater depth. Specifically, research could examine inter-institutional differences in SAAC structures and the factors that motivate college athletes to join SAAC. Such findings will assist the NCAA in gaining a deeper understanding of stakeholder perceptions of SAAC experiences and benefits while guiding initiatives to increase SAAC awareness and legitimacy at the campus level.

Conclusion

This study examined the leadership competencies of college athletes, focusing on the role of SAAC participation in shaping leadership development. Results suggested that student-athletes involved in SAAC report significantly higher competencies in developing leadership, taking initiative, and sharing goals compared to their non-SAAC peers. These findings reinforce the growing body of research emphasizing the importance of intentional, structured leadership experiences in collegiate athletics (Cotteril et al., 2022; Heim et al., 2022).

The study highlights that leadership development within athletics is not an automatic outcome of sport participation but rather requires intentional opportunities that challenge and support student-athletes in cultivating broader leadership skills. SAAC participation provides a critical platform for student-athletes to develop confidence, collaborative skills, and leadership skills that extend beyond athletic performance. These experiences may contribute to student-athletes' personal and professional readiness, especially as they transition beyond their playing careers.

Institutions, conferences, and the NCAA each have an important role in expanding leadership development pathways. By strengthening the structure, support, and reach of initiatives like SAAC, the collegiate athletic community can foster more equitable, accessible, and impactful leadership opportunities for student-athletes across all divisions. Investing in leadership development prepares athletes not just for success in competition but also for leadership roles in their future careers and communities, reinforcing the broader educational mission of collegiate athletics.

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