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Concluding Athletic Careers: Post-Athletic Transitions in the Atlantic Coast Conference

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Abstract

Due to the pervasiveness of athletic role engulfment and a salient athletic identity, collegiate athletes often experience difficulties upon conclusion of their competitive athletic career. Such engulfment and fixed athletic identity are detrimental to an athlete's post-athletic transition. Given the role of athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches, staff) in the formative development of collegiate athletes' lives, athletic departments occupy an integral position to assist athletes in their post-athletic transition. To examine the practices currently implemented among National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic departments relative to holistic athlete development, semi-structured interviews were conducted with institutional members at nine ($n = 9$) Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) athletic departments. Findings reveal thematic emphases on athletic department specific programming and intra-institutional collaboration to ensure a variety of resources and educational opportunities are consistently available to collegiate athletes during their college experience. Implications and actionable items are discussed in detail.

Keywords: *post-athletic transition, role engulfment, athletic identity, NCAA*

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A rarity in the National Football League (NFL), running back Trent Richardson was selected with the third overall pick in the 2012 NFL draft. A consensus five-star recruit in high school, Richardson attended the University of Alabama. In his final year, Richardson was named an All-American and awarded the Doak Walker Award, recognizing the top running back in college football each season. By all accounts, Richardson was destined for professional success and NFL stardom. After three lackluster seasons, however, Richardson would never play in an NFL game again. Although acknowledging the undoubted positive impact that the University of Alabama had on his athletic development, Richardson candidly stated in 2016 that neither the university nor athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches, staff) adequately prepared him for life outside the institution. The structure of collegiate athletics participation had prepared Richardson to succeed on the field but failed to prepare him for life off the field: “It’s very easy to get lazy in the NFL—not having everything scheduled and not having everything like at Alabama where it was so structured...It was just so structured. In the NFL, everything’s on your own” (Zenitz, 2016, para. 38).

Although contextually unique, Richardson’s experience is emblematic of many college athletes’ expressed difficulties in their post-athletic transition (Kidd et al., 2018; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Given the traditional role of higher education in the formative development of students personally, socially, and professionally (Brancato, 2003; Jackson, 2011; Moxley et al., 2013), such failure to adequately develop basic life-skills (e.g., time management, organization) among a collegiate athlete population is striking. In addition, there is a dearth of extant literature relative to collegiate athletes’ post-athletic transition (Navarro et al., 2020). As athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches, staff) are integral to the growth and development of collegiate athletes (Berg & Warner, 2019; Stokowski et al., 2019), the present study sought to examine the implemented practices utilized to assist collegiate athletes in their post-athletic transition. By understanding such intervention techniques, athletic department institutional members can evaluate their current practices and cultivate the development of a more robust systematic program to assist in collegiate athletes’ post-athletic transitions.

Methodological Approach

Research Context

The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) was selected as a sampling frame to analyze institutional support (e.g., practices, programmatic offerings) currently utilized to assist collegiate athletes in their post-athletic transition. Due to the researchers’ affiliation with collegiate athletics in the ACC, the conference was deemed as a viable means in which to collect data. The study’s principal investigator currently serves in athletic administration at an ACC member institution and provided access to administrators throughout the conference. Given the insular nature of collegiate athletics (e.g., see Adams et al., 2014; Brown, 2012; Gutierrez & McLaren, 2012; Kihl, 2018; LoMonte, 2020 for a full review), such convenience sampling is appropriate in order for researchers to overcome status as an “outsider.” Such status often limits the ability to conduct and disseminate research within the college athletics population (Corr, Southall, & Nagel, 2020; Corr, Atwater, & Hall, 2022; Southall & Weiler, 2014). participants were members of a Greek-letter organization.

Procedure

The faculty athletic representative (FAR) at each ACC member institution was contacted via email to assist in securing athletic department participation. Through this method, nine ($n = 9$) of the 14 member institutions comprising the ACC agreed to participate in the study. Overall, 12 ($n = 12$) athletic department institutional members agreed to partake in this study and were subsequently interviewed to uncover current institutional support provided to athletes to assist in their post-athletic transition. Participants included institutional members from athlete development, athlete academic services, and senior athletic administration, athletic department institutional members tasked with ensuring the holistic development of athletes competing at their respective institutions.

Using Zoom, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 12 participants. Interviews ranged from 15 to 20 minutes in length and were conducted by the principal investigator. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed within a three-step coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This three-step coding process established preliminary codes, grouped codes into similar categories, and clustered categories to determine distinct thematic areas. Researchers utilized member-checking to ensure accuracy of interview transcriptions and provide participants the opportunity to clarify or revise any statements. By implementing a three-step coding process conducted by three independent coders, appropriate methods were taken to ensure reliability and triangulation of findings (Patton, 2002).

Findings

Overall, each of the nine institutions emphasized multiple *touch points* per year. Touch points varied by academic classification with freshman and junior level athletes being strategically targeted more than sophomore and senior level athletes. Freshman athlete touch points emphasized professional development and preparedness (e.g., resume development, networking) while upper classmen level touch points emphasized professional preparedness and evaluative measures (e.g., networking opportunities, exit interviews). These touch points were codified into two distinct thematic areas: (1) athletic-specific programming and (2) intra-campus collaboration.

Athletic-Specific Programming

Athlete-specific programming was similar inter-institution. Freshmen orientation and seminar sessions were commonly implemented by all participating institutions in which an emphasis on post-athletic transition preparation was common (e.g., professional preparedness, importance of educational attainment). Financial planning workshops, etiquette dinners, and alumni networking events were identified as routine practices and programs available to athletes on an annual basis. Two institutions offered interview preparation courses and a one-on-one mentoring program in which current athletes were able to be mentored by alumni athletes from the institution. The similarities and commonalities inter-institution were interesting but not surprising given the prevalence of isomorphism in collegiate athletics (e.g., see Cunningham & Ashley, 2001; Nite & Edwards, 2021; Smith & Washington, 2015 for a complete review).

The connection of current athletes with alumni athletes was deemed as integral in the preparation of collegiate athletes for their post-athletic transition. Providing tangible and relatable examples of for-

mer athletes who had deconstructed their athletic identity and, subsequently, constructed a professional identity was viewed as significant and emphasized across all participants in this study. The recruiting process was also stressed as an opportunity for institutional members to set an expectation for prospective collegiate athletes and, notably, their family members regarding what *success* looked like post-graduation for collegiate athletes. As such, administrators participating in this study stressed the importance of the holistic development of collegiate athletes from the first touch point (i.e., recruitment) through graduation.

Intra-Campus Collaboration

An athlete-centric career development course was either implemented or planning to be implemented in the coming academic year. Such academic course offering was viewed by participating athletic department institutional members as fundamental to the adequate preparation of collegiate athletes for their post-athletic transition. Four of the participating institutions promoted professional internships that were embedded within the degree offering of certain academic disciplines whereas seven institutions partnered with career services to engage athletes in campus-wide career fairs. Each institution utilized institutional career services as well stressing the importance of professional preparedness and encouraging professional development. Partnerships and cross-campus collaboration were viewed as fundamental to providing the support necessary for collegiate athletes to successfully transition upon the conclusion of their athletic career. Such collaborative efforts are in line with best practices (Coffin et al., 2021).

Discussion and Implications

Given that collegiate athletes are often engulfed in an athletic role that adversely affects their post-athletic transition, athletic departments need to understand and implement programmatic structures to assist in both role cultivation and post-athletic transition. As indicated by the responses in this study, every institutional member occupies a significant role in a collegiate athletes' ability to successfully transition upon the conclusion of their athletic career. Accordingly, intra-institutional collaboration is necessary to ensure consistent and seamless messaging regarding post-athletic transition is communicated to athletes during their collegiate experience. Such collaboration is consistent with extant literature identifying positive social support structures as integral to successful collegiate athlete post-athletic transition (Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Kidd et al., 2018; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Given the relationship between athletic role engulfment and salient athletic identity formation (Kidd et al., 2018), athlete experience course development should consider components of identity *exploration* as part of their embedded curriculum. Such exploration serves as a valuable component to *preplanning* for athletic identity foreclosure (Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Murphy et al., 1996). As athlete experience courses were frequently mentioned by the participants of this study, such programmatic influence on identity exploration (i.e., life outside of athletics) through faculty-disseminated curriculum and coursework may be valuable to stimulate shifts in identity ideation (i.e., *more than an athlete*) and functionally contribute to post-athletic transition. However, as faculty occupy a role and job function outside the traditional purview of athletics, their ability to stimulate effectual change among a collegiate athlete population is inherently limited by their status outside the traditional roles and job functions of

athletic department institutional members. Whereas institutional faculty are a valuable factor in assisting collegiate athletes in their post-athletic transition, their *outsider status* necessitates the direct involvement of institutional members within the athletic department itself.

Accordingly, *insiders* (e.g., administrators, coaches, staff) occupy a primary role in the deconstruction of athletic identity and successful post-athletic transition. Such athletic identity, however, is stimulated by these very institutional members (Corr, Southall, & Nagel, 2020; Corr, Atwater, & Hall, 2022) and may be counterintuitive to the goals and priorities of some coaches and administrators. As athletic department institutional members are innately driven by athletics success, collegiate athlete engulfment in their athletic role may be of strategic value to the pursuit of such goals. The demand and pressure of competition in Power-5 athletics exacerbates the primary importance and emphasis placed on *winning* among many institutional members. Given the direct role that athletic administrators, coaches, and staff occupy in an athletes' ability to successfully transition upon the conclusion of their athletic career, institutional members need consider the breadth of their responsibilities and distinct impact on collegiate athletes outside of athletics. Future research examining the perceptions of Division I coaches and team personnel relative to preparing collegiate athletes for personal, social, and professional success upon the conclusion of their athletic career would be valuable in further understanding the perceived role and responsibilities of coaches to provide positive social support structures and discuss preplanning for athletic identity foreclosure.

Given that athletes face difficulty *sensemaking* contradictory and competing logics within the institutional setting of college sport (Macaulay et al., 2022), additional research identifying the emergent perceptions of athletic department institutional members regarding their obligation to successful post-athletic transition may provide further insight to administrators seeking to implement systematic changes to athlete holistic development measures. Salary structures that reward coaches and staff for holistic athlete development and career placement upon graduation may incentivize the cultivation and construction of various identities unique to collegiate athletes (e.g., academic, social). As athletic department institutional members—specifically in the Power-5—are largely judged off their ability to field successful athletic teams (Holmes, 2011), such emphasis on holistic athlete development may be unreasonable given the pervasive logic that situates winning on the field as the primary value of athletics. Given the prevalence of *burnout* and high turnover rates in collegiate athletics, a focus shift from complete valuation of athletics success to a balanced approach would benefit collegiate athletes and institutional members. Such balance placing equivalent value on athletics success, educational attainment, and service to the community would stimulate the holistic development of collegiate athletes and assist in combating burnout relative to the stress of the demands of *winning* among athletic department institutional members (Stokowski et al., 2020). By communicating the importance of components such as educational attainment or community service, institutional members would organically signal the value of development outside of athletics.

Although the functions of institutional members with *insider status* are noteworthy, the role of former athletes in assisting current athletes during their post-athletic transition is a distinct finding reiterated throughout participants in this study. Given the experience unique to collegiate athletes, former collegiate athletes provide a valuable resource for relationship development through shared experiences and commonalities. Such connectivity through lived experiences positions former collegiate athletes as an increasingly valuable resource in the athletic identity deconstruction process and throughout the post-ath-

letic transition. Similar to other psychosocial interventions, collaborative efforts between current and former athletes should be considered by athletic departments as routine, systematically implemented components throughout an athletes' experience. The implementation of both in-person and virtual development series would cultivate the development of interpersonal relationships between current and former athletes. Athletic departments could engage former athletes across the breadth of their sport offerings and allocate the appropriate funds to create face-to-face interactions with current athletes. In addition, formulation of an athletic advisory board consistent of former athletes would enable institutional members to formulate appropriate responses and inventions to prepare and assist athletes in their post-athletic transition.

Conclusion

Although systematic and programmatic implementations are valuable, the societal glorification of sport and collegiate athletics participation are foundational components to athletic role engulfment and the development of a salient athletic identity. Athletic department institutional members are, and have been traditionally, instrumental in the cultivation of such societal glorification. Although administrators, coaches, and staff are unable to combat preconceived athletic role engulfment and athletic identity prior to an athlete's enrollment, these institutional members occupy a distinct role in the formative development of athletic role engulfment and a salient athletic identity during the recruiting process and upon enrollment. As extant literature has found that much of the recruiting process in college athletics glorifies the athletic experience and nurtures athletic role engulfment, coaches and recruiting staff should take note of the detrimental effects of such practices on collegiate athletes' ability to successfully transition upon conclusion of their athletic career. As indicated by the findings of this study, the integration of development staff and programming as embedded components of the recruiting process are beneficial to athletes' during their post-athletic transition. Such practices during the recruiting process effectively set an expectation and define *success* in terms of holistic development and life after athletics that is overtly valuable to successful post-athletic transition.

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