



CONCLUDING COLLEGE CAREERS: ATHLETE TRANSITIONS IN THE ACC

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[Video Link](#)

Abstract

Many student-athletes are not prepared to adapt to a life beyond sport; however, those who are prepared for sport retirement report an easier experience. Although research has focused on the experiences of athletes adapting to transition, few studies have been dedicated to understanding how institutions support athletes' transition out of intercollegiate sport. This study strived to understand how the ACC and ACC member institutions are preparing college athletes to transitioning out of their competitive careers. Through qualitative inquiry, 9 ACC institutions (as well as the ACC conference office) took part in semi-structured interviews. A multi-coder constant comparison analysis identified several themes related to policies and programming offered by ACC institutions as well as recommendations from individual career development staff. Throughout the interviews, athletic department staff emphasized student-athlete programming efforts at different development levels, but effectiveness in assisting student-athlete transition was found most commonly in the relationships built by student-athlete development staff and continual touch-points through the developmental phases that student-athletes follow in their path to finding their self and identity beyond sport. The results of this study may assist the ACC in providing resources and refining practices to ensure student-athletes experience an efficient transition out of sport.

Purpose and Introduction

Although greater attention has been given to ensuring athletes effectively transition out of sport (Navarro et al., 2020), athletic departments must be able to provide support and address issues that may arise at this critical juncture in an athlete's life. While the importance of athlete transitions and the experiences of athletes transitioning to a life beyond sport has been widely recognized in the research literature (e.g., Stokowski et al., 2019), the practices to support athletes transitioning out of collegiate sport lack understanding or precision (Navarro et al., 2020). Berg and Warner (2019) illustrated how instrumental athletic departments staff members are in holistically supporting college athletes, which was crucial to their overall well-being and athlete experience. A critical component of that holistic support would be assisting college athletes' preparation for the end of their competitive careers. Such planning not only enhances the long-term development of athletes beyond sport but also can improve an athlete's psychological and physical well-being (Martindale et al., 2005). College athletes seek to form desirable social identities and self-identities while at their university and will often look to important social influences, including athletic department personnel, to validate those identities (Berg & Warner, 2019). Taylor and Ogilvie (2001) explained that individuals who find



their identity almost entirely through their role as an athlete and are unprepared for the end of their competitive careers will likely have greater levels of stress and difficulty adapting to life beyond sport.

Socialization is the practice in which athletes are equipped to be effective members of their team or organization by learning the values, norms, knowledge, and skills deemed appropriate by members of that team or organization (e.g., Cranmer, 2018; Woolf et al., 2016). Effective socialization is essential for the benefits it provides both the athlete (e.g., reduced role ambiguity, increased perceptions of preparedness for life after athletics) and the athletic department (e.g., higher levels of commitment, increased retention rates) (Cranmer, 2018). Athletes' identities and motivations stemming from socialization experiences are not unwavering, but must continually be reinforced (Green, 2005). Thus, highlighting progress toward educational attainment, promoting skill and knowledge acquisition outside sport, fostering encouragement from important social influences, and mentoring are some of the processes that need to be intentionally coordinated by athletic department personnel (e.g., athletic directors, academic support staff, coaches). This will ensure that athletes are prepared for the transition out of their competitive careers, reduce ambiguity in identity, and increase acceptance of athletic department expectations (e.g., Cranmer, 2018).

Currently, there is little empirical evidence from the perspective of athletic department leadership and staff who work closely with student-athletes as their competitive sport careers conclude. The purpose of this study was to understand how the ACC and ACC member institutions are preparing college athletes to transitioning out of their competitive careers. As a result, resources and tools can be developed or refined to assist athletic departments in assisting the student-athlete population in a more efficient transitions out of sport.

Procedure

Through qualitative inquiry, researchers contacted Faculty Athletic Representatives (FAR) for their assistance in identifying and contacting athletic department staff at their institution. Using Zoom, each ACC university (and the conference office) were asked to take part in semi-structured interviews. Participants included athlete development staff, athletic academic support staff, and senior administration.

Researchers used a semi-structured question guide to facilitate the interviews to identify the policies and cultural practices within each of the nine participating institutions. NVivo software was employed for analyzing the transcript data in a three-step coding process by three coders (Braun & Clark, 2006). The three-step coding process (1) established initial preliminary codes, (2) grouped preliminary codes into related categories, and (3) allocated categories into distinct clusters to produce thematic dimensions. Several techniques were applied to fulfill methodological trustworthiness including triangulation, videotaping, verbatim transcription, member checking, peer debriefing, and intercoder reliability measures (Patton, 2002).

Results

Overall, "athletic programming" was a common theme utilized by ACC institutions to assist in transitioning student-athletes into sport retirement. Frequently noted areas were



freshman seminars, career fairs, resume building workshops, financial planning workshops, interview preparation, etiquette dinners, mentorship programs, and leadership programs. The most common programmatic areas however were networking events with potential employers or former student-athletes and career development curriculum as part of a student-athlete academic coursework. These areas of programmatic offerings were most often offered based on class level (e.g., freshman, sophomore); however, two institutions varied the programmatic offerings by year and included all classes of student-athletes together. Several institutions indicated that they participated in cross-campus collaborative programming (e.g., graduation preparation series, internship assistance, career fairs, interview workshops). A majority of institutions benefited from a direct liaison in campus career services or an assigned advisor only for student-athletes. One specific example of cross collaboration included athletic student development funding the dinner for potential employers after a career fair, in order to open up an opportunity for additional time and emphasis on connecting with student-athletes.

Another common theme was related to the effectiveness of “various approaches” to assisting to student-athletes with concluding their college career. Engaging student-athletes or having multiple touch points was important, and most student-athlete development departments made themselves available to their student-athletes. However, half of the interviewees had pre-planned check-in policies to assist in ensuring that all student-athletes had a touch point at various points in their college careers. Other common sub-themes included meeting the student-athletes “where they are” (either physically, socially, or developmentally), creating organic and personal relationships, taking different approaches with different sports or individuals, creating a safe space with sincerity and authentic trust, and engaging student-athletes early but preparing them for the transition over time with small steps at a time. Another great example of an effective approach was connecting student-athletes either individually, through workshops, or panels with former student-athletes who had previously transitioned from their collegiate careers.

Overall, the interviews focused on distinct development stages for student-athletes in their transition. An exposure to multiple experiences, whether academically, socially or mentally were found to be necessary to assist with student-athletes finding their own identity. The idea that student-athletes are “not just athletes” and must transition through an exploration phase to understand their self and the world before proceeding to a developmental phase where they engage in conversations beyond sports or school was paramount. A majority of interviewees felt that student-athletes understanding of self (values, interest, skills) and how that aligns with the world was the pivotal point in their career transition. Ideas such as creating a community or getting involved in communities, suffering from failure and finding resilience, and shifting the student-athletes view of the world around them were important in the overall development of the student-athlete.

Resources were equally important for most interviewees. While the researchers found a large discrepancy in the various sizes of staffing for student-athlete development, interview responses mostly emphasized a strong need for support of student-athletes development and student-athletes holistic transition from athletics by coaches, administration, alumni and student-athlete families. An emphasis of coaches support in the area of student-athlete development and time allocations for student-athletes to participate in programmatic offerings



was important, as was featuring or including student-athlete development services during the recruiting process. Administrative support including a dedicated athletic division or area was emphasized as some institutions heavily utilize campus resources or don't adequately staff an internal department for the quantity of touch points that are felt necessary for student-athletes. Alumni support or networking was also seen as necessary to create opportunities and assist in helping student-athletes find their identity and discover the world around them. Also, the need for families of student-athletes to receive education either during the recruiting process or through the development stages of the student-athlete were commonly mentioned. Student-athletes need to feel supported by all the various parties to effectively grow and find themselves through their career transition.

While these support structures for student-athletes were most commonly mentioned to be available immediately, the emphasis was also placed on resources needing to be available constantly in order to assist student-athletes in transitioning to a life beyond sport. Additionally, most interviewees noted the need for sport psychology and mental health involvement in the process, a need to support student-athletes in athletics but also in other aspects of life, and that identity development can be viewed as a mourning process that requires support by all parties involved.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how the ACC and ACC member institutions are preparing college athletes to transitioning out of their competitive careers. The researchers found that while various differences exist between ACC member institutions, the programmatic offerings by most institutions was vast and emphasized the support of student-athletes in experiencing the necessary values, interest and skills to assist them in finding their self or creating their own identity. Resources and support for student-athlete development was found to be lacking some areas or requiring the most needs and large discrepancies in not only staff sizing but also understanding and support of the importance of student-athlete development areas was lacking at some institutions. Although this study demonstrated student-athlete development efforts existed throughout the conference, it should be noted that such efforts do not always align with best practices. For example, Navarro et al. (2020) demonstrated the importance for such programming to begin sophomore year (to ensure student-athletes have time to adjust to their respective institutions). Additionally, more of an emphasis should be placed on high impact practices (HIP) such as internships, practicums, and study abroad opportunities. ACC institutions should be commended on supporting their student-athletes and participating in cross-campus collaborative opportunities; however, due to the discrepancy in athlete development resources, perhaps the conference may consider programming grants or more conference wide collaboration to ensure ACC student-athletes have the necessary resources to ensure a positive transition to a life beyond sport.

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