



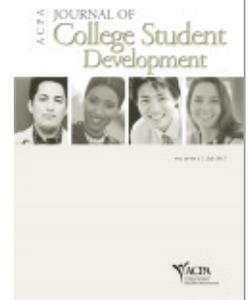
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An Examination of the Alignment of Student-Athletes' Undergraduate Major Choices and Career Field Aspirations in Life After Sports

Kristina M. Navarro

Today higher education student affairs professionals are charged with not only understanding the challenges and needs of a diverse student body, they must also prepare students for careers in life after college. For this empirical study I explored the undergraduate major choices and career aspirations of 29 senior student-athletes at a large, highly selective Division II Research I university to further understand how life experiences influence undergraduate major choice and the subsequent alignment of chosen major and future career aspirations. Framed from a constructivist epistemology, findings of this phenomenological study were guided by Savickas's (2002) career construction theory (CCT). Personal narratives for 29 student-athletes were collected via semistructured individual interviews and analyzed by employing pattern and process coding techniques. Findings suggest 3 overarching life experiences influence undergraduate major choice as well as the alignment of participants' undergraduate majors and future career aspirations. This article presents implications and recommendations for contemporary student affairs practitioners who work with student-athletes as they engage in processes of career exploration and major choice.

The current American labor force is often characterized by two prominent trends: rising unemployment rates and fierce competition for employment in a global economy (Savickas et al., 2009). As members of the skilled labor force increasingly compete for jobs, the need

for unique and targeted career preparation has reached a new level of importance across America (Savickas, 2002, 2005). Today's undergraduate students face a fiercely competitive economic environment, and as a result, the American higher education system has a heightened level of responsibility to prepare students for lifetime success and prosperity in their chosen fields (Savickas et al., 2009). To fulfill this responsibility, institutions of higher education must consider programmatic changes with respect to their approaches to career development. Moreover, student affairs professionals must work in concert with undergraduate academic programs on campuses not only to provide meaningful academic training in support of students' undergraduate academic major coursework, but also to assist students in fostering transferrable lifelong skill sets. This balance is imperative so that students can find and maintain employment opportunities in a volatile and unpredictable job market (Savickas, 2005). Student affairs professionals must revisit the challenges and needs of their students who today must not only adapt to college, but prepare to move from higher education institutions to a competitive workforce (Kidwell, 2005; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006).

STUDENT-ATHLETES AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Over the past 30 years, the highly commercialized world of intercollegiate athletics has increasingly influenced the way in which

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student-athletes, a subset of the higher education student body, formulate career plans in preparation for life after sports (Adler & Adler, 1987; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 2003; Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003). External influences such as multimillion dollar television contracts have heightened the commercialization of college sports, resulting in enhanced pressure for coaches and athletics administrators to produce winning teams (Croissant, 2001). In turn, media forums continue to depict large Division I athletic departments as systems which exploit student-athletes for their athletic prowess, but place little emphasis on meaningful career development during college (Fountain & Finley, 2011; Renick, 1974; Suggs, 2003; Thelin, 1994). These researchers suggest the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics has led to the perception that an undergraduate degree is merely a commodity to maintain eligibility, rather than a vehicle to prepare student-athletes for meaningful careers in life after sports. Due to this unfortunate reality, the selection of undergraduate majors that align with students' career aspirations is of heightened interest for student-athletes and academic affairs professionals who work with them.

Problems Facing Contemporary Students and Academic Affairs Practitioners

According to a study by the National Collegiate Athletics Association (2014) which estimated the probability of student-athletes pursuing professional sports, on average less than 3% of student-athletes competing at the intercollegiate level will pursue a professional career in their sport. Therefore, student and academic affairs professionals are charged to prepare the overwhelming majority of student-athletes for careers external to professional sports outlets through meaningful and relevant

undergraduate training. Further, researchers who study the student-athlete undergraduate experience (e.g., Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Danish et al., 1993; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Petitpas & Champagne, 1988) suggest student-athletes face unique challenges that influence their levels of campus-wide engagement and holistic development during college. Therefore, professionals who work with student-athletes at Division I/Research I schools are presented with additional challenges as they must work to balance the current and future needs of college student-athletes.

Today, there is scant exploration of the alignment between undergraduate major and career aspiration that considers the student-athlete voice. To address this gap in the current student development literature, this article draws on the personal reflections of 29 student-athletes at a large, highly selective Division I/Research I institution. The purpose of this article is twofold: to understand what life experiences influence the undergraduate major choices and to further explore how these undergraduate major choices align with individual career aspirations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Higher education scholars (e.g., Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981; Blann, 1985; Keup, 2007; Kidwell, 2005; Reason et al., 2006) posit that processes of identity development intensify for undergraduate students as they explore undergraduate majors, adjust to the demands of college life, and develop an enhanced understanding of their own personal strengths and passions. They suggest the foundational skill sets learned in college not only fuel one's sense of identity, but facilitate career decision-making processes in life after college. While the literature supports viewing the higher educational experience as a time of intense identity development for all students,

there has been little exploration of how the undergraduate student-athlete experience differs from the experiences of nonathlete students. The specialized needs of student-athletes must continue to be examined to discern how student affairs professionals can best prepare these individuals for life after both intercollegiate sports and college.

Career Development and Student-Athlete Campus Integration

Today student development scholars disagree whether student-athletes should be integrated into the general student body or be given separate developmental training to foster transferrable skill sets for life after college (Chartrand & Lent, 1987). Harrison et al. (2003) support the importance of offering specific career preparation programs for student-athletes and suggest separate development programs allow student-athletes to more fully engage as they are surrounded by individuals who share common schedules and challenges. In contrast, Broughton and Neyer (2001), and Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, and Hannah (2006) suggest social isolation, faculty isolation, and even isolation from peers is elevated for student-athletes during the college experience.

The Challenges of Role Conflict and Academic Clustering

Literature on the student-athlete experience suggests student-athletes face two additional challenges while developing a sense of career direction during college. These issues, student/athlete role conflict and academic clustering, further intensify the debate as to whether undergraduate students benefit from or are hindered by specialized academic and student affairs support services. Researchers continue to probe how current student affairs professionals may exacerbate these challenges for student-athletes.

Adler and Adler (1987), Baille and Danish (1992), Bell (2009), Comeaux and Harrison (2011), Harrison and Lawrence (2003), and Snyder (1983) address how Division I student-athletes often struggle to balance dual roles by associating more with their athletic than academic role, negatively influencing campus integration and student engagement (Gayles & Hu, 2009). This struggle to balance the roles of student and athlete can also lead to identity foreclosure, which in the context of this study is analogous to a committing to a major without adequate exploration of available opportunities (Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981). Moreover, these scholars posit that student-athletes who tend to focus primarily on their athletic role above all else struggle to engage in the major exploration processes that include long-range career planning.

Building on this, Case, Greer, and Brown (1987), Fountain and Finley (2009), and Knobler (2007) discuss how a student affairs practice in athletics known as *academic clustering*—a process by which practitioners advise student-athletes to pursue common undergraduate majors (Fountain & Finley, 2009)—may further impact career and identity development processes for the student-athlete population. This advice is often motivated by the institution's goals to maintain student-athlete eligibility rather than intentional consideration of the extent to which the suggested undergraduate degree path prepares the student-athlete for his/her desired career in life after sports (Fountain & Finley, 2011).

Since student-athletes may rely to a greater extent on support services internal to athletic departments, it is imperative to provide student and academic affairs professionals with empirical research related to career development and issues that may result from misalignment of students' undergraduate majors and career aspirations. The existing

literature suggests student-athletes face both internal (i.e., role conflict) and external (i.e., academic clustering) challenges during college and as they craft lifelong career plans. This, in turn, presents a greater need for strong academic and student affairs support for student-athletes, which requires a perspective with a critical understanding of how to best assist student-athletes as they prepare for life after sports in a competitive job market.

METHOD

To frame this study, I drew on the epistemological approach of *constructivism*: a worldview in which “all knowledge . . . is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction of human beings and their world” (Crotty, 2010, p. 42). This view posits meaning is not discovered, but rather is constructed as human beings make meaning from life experiences over the course of the life span. Moreover, as individuals engage with and experience the world as they know it, they are able to make sense of these lived experiences. Each experience is critical to the collective understanding of a phenomenon.

In the context of this study, I asked senior student-athletes to reflect on their personal experiences as they prepared for a career. I assumed each individual's experiences throughout a lifetime has shaped the way in which he or she constructed career plans. In the context of this specific study, I drew on the retrospective personal accounts of a cohort of student-athletes to understand which life experiences were most influential as they selected undergraduate majors and related these majors to future career aspirations.

Because the focus of this study required a methodology that considered individual decision-making patterns over the course of one's life span, I selected a qualitative, phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994).

Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) suggest a qualitative design allows the researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of the unique experiences of individuals. Since I was concerned with understanding what life experiences shaped the academic major choice decisions, I utilized a qualitative design to find detailed, personal responses for 29 individual cases.

Theoretical Framework

Crotty (1998) defines a *theoretical perspective* as “the philosophical stance lying behind a methodology” (p. 66). I framed this study utilizing an overarching interpretivism theoretical framework. Interpretive research uses human interpretation to develop knowledge about a phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). Throughout this study I relied on individuals to reflect on and interpret personal life experiences with respect to career decision-making processes. I sought to develop an enhanced understanding of how life experiences influenced their major selection processes.

I drew on Savickas's (2002) interpretive career construction theory (CCT) to guide my analysis. Moreover, I sought to understand how individuals selected an undergraduate major and subsequently considered the alignment of major choice with future career aspirations. This theory incorporates three main perspectives that position career construction as a differential, developmental, and dynamic process (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2013). As individuals develop over the course of the lifespan, Savickas posits different life experiences shape career decision-making processes. Since these experiences are highly individualized, each individual's career construction process is different. Next, he suggests career decision-making processes occur as individuals dynamically respond to factors of their environment and life transitions they endure. He posits these life experiences

inform one's development of a personal career identity. As individuals cope with life transitions and navigate life experiences, they construct and inform career plans.

In contemporary career development literature, CCT has frequently been utilized to further understand general population students and adult learners as they craft career plans (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2013); however, this theory has never been applied to student-athletes in higher education. Since previous literature suggests student-athletes face unique challenges as they transition to college and construct career plans, this guiding framework can provide a lens to further inform how these individuals not only cope with environmental challenges, but struggle to balance roles as students and athletes in their everyday higher education environments.

CCT provides a contemporary approach to Super's (1953) life-span, life-space theory. This modern, dynamic career theory has provided a framework which now guides practitioner-based career development facilitator training. The National Career Development Association (2013) has drawn from Savickas's guiding framework to develop specific learning outcomes for its Career Development Facilitator Training, an established national curriculum to become a certified career counselor; however, many present-day career counselors in athletics do not complete such training. In turn, it is essential to utilize this theoretical lens to further inform the work of student affairs professional who work with student-athletes as they navigate complex life transitions and balance student and athlete roles. Subsequently, CCT guides my analysis of data.

Position of the Researcher

As a former Division IA student-athlete, I personally experienced many of the internal psychosocial struggles to balance the roles of student and athlete charted throughout the

literature. In addition, as a former athletics academic advisor, I have observed how individuals are clustered into specific majors to ease eligibility concerns. Therefore, I approach this topic with a passion to understand how present student and academic affairs professionals can best assist these individuals as they navigate internal and external challenges to career decision making.

Sample Selection

To further understand how undergraduate student-athletes at a large, highly selective institution made career decisions, I selected study participants based on four main criteria. First, participants were required to attend the same large Research I/Division I University. Second, each participant was required to be a current/active student-athlete within the institution's athletic department in their final (fourth or fifth) year of studies. For this institution, a student-athlete was defined as a student who maintained active membership on the varsity roster throughout his/her undergraduate experience. Third, only student-athletes who completed a mandatory career strategies capstone course were included. Finally, transfer student-athletes were excluded to ensure the student-athlete experience was consistent. According to data supplied by Midwestern University's Office of Student-Athlete Academic Support Services, 34 student-athletes met all selection criteria. Of these 34, 29 agreed to participate in this study. All student-athletes who participated in this study granted permission for their narratives to be published.

Research Design and Data Collection

Because this study involved understanding the specific individual interpretations of student-athletes' life experiences to inform career related decisions, I employed a semistructured

individual interview design as the primary method of data collection. To contact student-athlete participants, I distributed an initial e-mail including a written consent form and outline of the study to an e-mail list provided by the Office of Student-Athlete Academic Support Services. This e-mail to all who met the selection criteria extended an invitation for participation in the study. Student-athletes who responded to the initial e-mail received a second e-mail listing potential dates and times for interviews. I provided a 1-week time frame for potential student-athlete participants to respond. To obtain a greater response rate, I sent two additional e-mail reminders.

From this recruitment process, 29 students agreed to participate. These individuals were slotted for 75-minute, semistructured, individual interviews. Audio recordings were made of the interviews. I distributed a short demographic survey to begin the session. Using this as a guide, I then employed a semistructured guiding interview protocol to frame each interview. Within this guiding protocol, I asked student-athletes to recall what they wanted to be when they grew up and how this changed over time. In addition, I asked participants to describe specific experiences they felt influenced their major selection. Finally, I asked all students to describe their process of selecting an undergraduate major and how they felt this major related to their future career visions. Participants were able to expound upon these guiding questions as they saw fit.

Data Analysis

Within this study, I bracketed my individual presumptions and knowledge of the field to allow only the perceptions of student-athletes to construct meaning (Crotty, 2010) and to allow life themes to emerge from detailed responses offered solely by the individual. I then utilized findings to develop a deeper

understanding of how individual student-athletes formulated major choices and career decisions.

Following all interviews, I utilized the assistance of a secure transcription service to transcribe all audio files. Final transcripts were sent to participants for approval prior to analysis. Once member checks were completed, I employed three analysis techniques including process coding, pattern coding, and analytic memoing. In the first round of coding, I used a technique to search for ongoing actions, interactions, or emotions in response to life experiences as individuals discussed their process of narrowing major choice alternatives (Saldaña, 2009). I assigned action-oriented “-ing” words to themes to produce an individual storyline for each participant. From these storylines, I developed a cognitive mind map for each individual that depicted how he or she interpreted the specific life events as influences on major choices. Next, I utilized a pattern coding technique to recognize themes across individual storylines (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and to identify codes across cases and develop collective themes in the data sets. These process and pattern codes facilitated the development of a theme-based chart to display data trends with respect to major choice and alignment of career aspirations.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the privacy and rights of all participants in this study, I reminded participants that participation was completely voluntary and had no bearing on athletic participation. Coaches were not informed of participation and the names of student-athletes were known only by the specific members of the university athletic academic support staff who assisted with the collection of sample population data. These individuals were asked to keep all information confidential. Next, within the actual reporting of themes, I removed

student-athletes' names and replaced these with pseudonyms to increase confidentiality. Furthermore, I did not ask individuals to identify themselves before speaking while the audio recorder was on. Finally, all interview protocols received IRB approval prior to any human subject interaction.

Limitations

While this study relied on member checking to enhance trustworthiness, findings must be considered within the context of a larger Division I/Research I institution. This study reflects the in-depth personal experiences of individuals attending a common university and findings cannot be widely generalized beyond the specific environment in which the study was conducted; however, findings can suggest areas for future inquiry at similar size institutions.

FINDINGS

This study drew on student-athletes' personal interpretations of experiences to further explore what life events most influenced their undergraduate major choices. Subsequently, these reflections provided a further understanding of how certain factors influenced the alignment of undergraduate major choices and career aspirations. Analysis of data presented 3 major life experiences that influenced student-athletes' undergraduate major selection processes: (a) interactions with academic/student affairs professionals across campus; (b) interactions with academic/student affairs professionals internal to athletics; and (c) the struggle to balance the roles of student and collegiate athlete. Interestingly, student-athletes discussed life events that occurred specifically during the undergraduate higher education experience as more influential to major choice.

Reflections demonstrated that the align-

ment of undergraduate major and career aspirations was influenced by a similar set of life experiences and was further influenced by gender and sport. Results are depicted in Table 1. Each individual table row represents a single study participant and includes the gender, sport, major, and career aspirations the participant cited in individual interviews. Individuals who specifically described that they felt their undergraduate major aligned with and/or prepared them for their cited career aspiration are identified in the last column.

Alignment of Major Choice and Career Aspirations: Men

As delineated in Table 1, 10 of the 16 male participants cited an undergraduate academic major that they articulated specifically related to their long-term career aspirations. Aaron discussed how he planned to utilize his undergraduate degree in international studies and Spanish to pursue a career in global security. He stated, "Well at first I wasn't real sure what I wanted to do, but I also liked foreign language and security stuff. I knew that's what I wanted to do, so once I got accepted into the international studies major I felt like I was set." Similarly, Cameron discussed how he intended to become an engineer, and therefore purposefully chose an undergraduate major in mechanical engineering to prepare him for this career pathway. In addition, Taylor (a political science major and aspiring lawyer), Zeb (a chemistry major and aspiring chemist), and Ben (a finance major and aspiring financial analyst) clearly highlighted in personal narratives how they intentionally chose majors that would prepare them for life after sports as they recognized they would not play professionally. Zeb articulated this theme best:

For me, I knew rowing wasn't something I was going to do after college. I knew it was something to do while I was in college

TABLE 1.
Alignment of Major Choice and Career Aspiration for Student-Athletes
(N = 29, Men n = 13, Women n = 16)

Pseudonym	Gender	Sport	Major	Career Aspiration	Influential ^a	Aligned
Kevin	M	Football	Sociology	Financial Representative / Business Manager	Athletics	
Aaron	M	Football	International Studies / Spanish	Global Security Officer	Athletics and Campus	Yes
Darius	M	Football	Zoology	Physical Therapist	Athletics	Yes
Jared	M	Football	Sociology / Religious Studies	Professor of Sociology	Athletics	Yes
Jonte	M	Football	Human Ecology	NFL / Paramedic / Mentor Program Coordinator	Athletics and Campus	Yes
Lamar	M	Football	Sociology	NFL / PE Teacher	Athletics	
John	M	Football	History / European Studies	Athletic Director	Athletics	
Terrance	M	Football	Human Ecology	NFL / Sports Marketing and PR Representative	Athletics	
Jamal	M	Basketball	Political Science	Coach/Lawyer	Athletics	Yes
Dan	M	Track and Field	Business Management	Sales and Public Relations / Coach	Athletics	Yes
Devin	M	Track and Field	Sociology	Sports Administrator	Athletics	
Karl	M	Track and Field	Sociology	Physical Therapist Assistant	Athletics	
Cameron	M	Swimming	Mechanical Engineering	Engineer	Campus	Yes
Taylor	M	Wrestling	Political Science / Communication Arts	Lawyer	Campus	Yes
Zeb	M	Rowing	Chemistry / History of Science	Researcher/Chemist	Campus	Yes
Ben	M	Tennis	Finance	Financial Analyst	Campus	Yes
Joy	W	Volleyball	Rehabilitation Psychology	Occupational Therapist	Athletics and Campus	Yes
Jenny	W	Volleyball	Human Development	Guidance Counselor / Athletics Director	Athletics and Campus	Yes
Abby	W	Volleyball	Elementary Education	Teacher / Athletics Director	Athletics and Campus	Yes
Amanda	W	Volleyball	Human Development	Early Childhood Education / Athletics Director	Athletics and Campus	Yes
Lucy	W	Soccer	Communications / Political Science	Public Relations / Athletics Director	Athletics and Campus	Yes
Anna	W	Softball	Sociology	Sports Marketing	Athletics	
Karla	W	Track and Field	Consumer Affairs / Certificate in Business	Sports Marketing	Athletics	Yes
Molly	W	Cross Country	Elementary Education / Anthropology	Teacher/Coach	Athletics and Campus	Yes
Rachel	W	Swimming	Sociology / Legal Studies	FBI Agent	Athletics	Yes
Amber	W	Swimming	Human Ecology	Human Resources / Sports Marketing	Athletics	
Andrea	W	Rowing	Sociology / Biology	Optometrist	Campus	Yes
Jayne	W	Tennis	Communication Arts	Athletic Director	Athletics	
Karen	W	Golf	Human Development	Speech Pathologist / Child Life Specialist	Campus	Yes

^a Student/Academic Affairs Professional Cited as Influential.

preparing for a career. For me, chemistry was what led me to school and rowing was an added bonus. I knew since I was a kid I wanted to get into chemistry.

Each of these individuals discussed how they had known early in life what they wanted to pursue and tended to rely most heavily on campus-based student affairs professionals rather than athletics-based support staff.

Of the 10 men in Table 1 who cited alignment of undergraduate major and career aspirations, 5 of these represented sports considered by the university as “revenue generating” (football and basketball), while the other 5 represented sports defined by the university as “Olympic” or “non-revenue generating” (track and field, swimming, wrestling, rowing, tennis). This suggests participants in both revenue and nonrevenue sports did select undergraduate majors that they perceived to align with future career aspirations. Of most interest, student-athletes who participated in nonrevenue sports articulated they relied most heavily on campus-based student affairs professionals while student-athletes who participated in revenue sports cited they relied most heavily on students affairs professionals internal to athletics for undergraduate major decisions. Jared (football) best illustrated this perspective of revenue-generating participants relying on athletics department support staff:

I knew I was interested in teaching, but I didn't really have time to focus on an education degree. My athletics advisor and I would talk after study table, and I started to realize maybe I could teach, but go at it a different way. I didn't have a ton of time to go check out majors on campus, so [I] kind of decided that I liked Sociology; and I could always go back later to get a master's degree or certification if I wanted to teach at a high school. Sociology just kind of worked with my schedule and it seemed like a good option given my other commitments.

While time commitments clearly led Jared to rely heavily on athletics support staff, Ben described a much different major choice support system external to athletics:

I knew I wanted to pursue finance. My dad is in finance and I was always good at math. It seemed like the athletics advisors mainly worked with the big sports here, so I just decided to kinda do my own plan and sought out my campus advisor I got assigned when I got accepted.

Jared and Ben best highlighted the differences in approach student-athletes who competed in larger revenue sports and smaller nonrevenue sports took with respect to advising support and career counsel.

Finally, of additional interest, Kevin, Lamar, John, Terrance, Devin, and Karl did not articulate how their undergraduate majors would prepare them for life after sports in their aspired fields. Lamar described this misalignment: “I really had no idea what I wanted to do outside of the league [NFL]. I knew I needed a backup plan, but it was just that: a backup plan.” Interestingly, the majority of participants who failed to describe how their undergraduate major would prepare them for their aspired career were sociology majors. In addition, the majority of participants who noted a misalignment of undergraduate major and career aspirations were concentrated in revenue-generating sports.

Alignment of Major Choice and Career Aspirations: Women

As shown in Table 1, 10 of 13 women participants articulated they felt their undergraduate majors aligned well with their future career aspirations. For example, Joy discussed how her undergraduate major in rehabilitation psychology would prepare her for a career as an occupational therapist working in a school setting. In addition, Karen posited how her undergraduate major in human development

and family studies would position her well for employment in the public schools as a speech pathologist and child life specialist. Overall, a greater percentage of females (77%, $n = 10$) than males (63%, $n = 10$) expressed their undergraduate major choices aligned well with their future career aspirations.

Of specific interest, 5 of the 13 women—Jenny, Abby, Amanda, Lucy, and Molly—discussed aspirations to work in the field of education with secondary aspirations to serve as athletics administrators or coaches. These individuals discussed three different undergraduate majors they felt prepared them as educators: rehabilitation psychology, human development and family studies, and elementary education. Interestingly, these individuals described how experiences as a student-athlete rather than studies in their chosen major best prepared them to serve in roles as coaches or athletics administrators. Jenny best articulated this theme:

I knew I wanted to work with people in a rehab-type setting, but really with volleyball [I] couldn't commit to the practicum hours. I figured the lessons I learned as an athlete would help me work with people experiencing challenges. It seemed to me I learned more as a student-athlete than I could in a practicum setting anyway.

Like Jenny, the other 4 female participants who desired to work in education or as athletics directors felt they could prepare for careers simply due to their student-athlete experiences.

Three of the female participants—Anna, Amber, and Jayne—cited they pursued academic majors that had little alignment with their projected career aspirations. Of specific interest, all three of these individuals discussed ultimate career aspirations to work in sports-related fields. For example, Anna, a sociology major, and Amber, a human ecology major, discussed career goals to work as sports

marketing representatives; however, both described experiences as a student-athlete, and not academics in their major, best prepared them for their desired fields. Anna stated: "I have been around sports all my life, it's just part of me. I want to help emphasize the sport to others . . . kind of give back to something that gave me so much. . . . My degree will help make me credible. . . . I mean I have a degree, but not sure how what I have learned in sociology transfers to sports marketing." In addition, Jayne also struggled to articulate how her communication arts major would prepare her for a career as an athletics director. While these individuals felt prepared to pursue careers related to their experience as student-athletes and athletics-based roles, they tended to view the undergraduate degree as a necessary credential. Moreover, their undergraduate major was not of heightened importance for these participants.

Influence of Athletics-Based Student/Academic Affairs Professionals

Across gender and sport, one of three major life experiences cited as influential to undergraduate major choice was the influence of student/academic affairs professionals internal to athletics. As illustrated in Table 1, the majority of participants (79%, $n = 23$) discussed their interactions with athletics-based student or academic affairs professionals as influential to undergraduate major choice.

Rachel commented on how she felt the convenience and broad-base knowledge of the campus system that athletics-based student support services possessed was most beneficial to her undergraduate major choice decision: "It was more convenient to rely on my athletics advisor, since I was so busy with practice and lifting and games. . . . I relied on her when I picked a major, because I knew she would help me get all my credits done and still consider eligibility." She echoes a common

theme among the majority of participants who cited athletic advisors as being more convenient, accessible, and savvy of NCAA eligibility standards than general academic or campus advisors.

While Rachel shares the opinion of a majority of student-athletes who sought the expertise of an athletics advisor to consider NCAA eligibility, many also noted the urgency athletics advisors displayed to choose a major not only based on personal interest level, but to maintain eligibility. Anna noted, "My athletic advisor was like, 'You need to pick a major that you have interest in, you can get requirements done, and . . . have a certain percentage to be eligible for softball'; and sociology sounded good." This narrative is representative of the majority of individuals who chose broad field majors to maintain eligibility and still make adequate progress toward a degree. Overall, while students cited the importance of relying on athletics student support staff due to their knowledge of NCAA eligibility standards, the majority expressed feelings of pressure to choose a major to easily maintain eligibility.

Influence of Campus Student/ Academic Affairs Professionals

As depicted in Table 1, fewer participants discussed their interactions with campus-based student or academic affairs professionals as influential to undergraduate major choice (48%, $n = 14$). Those students who did discuss relying heavily on the student and academic support services external to athletics described how they felt advising, career development, and networking opportunities campus-wide best addressed their developmental needs and how they relied on these resources to purposefully choose an academic major which complemented career aspirations.

Cameron, a mechanical engineering major and aspiring engineer, discussed how interactions and experiences with his campus-

based academic advisor were more influential to his undergraduate major choice process than student support staff based in athletics:

I really depended on my campus advisor to provide the specific information I needed to know to choose my major and prepare me for when I graduate. I didn't always feel like I was able to get that level of detail with what I really needed to know with athletics staff. They could help me choose classes, but I needed to find someone that would prepare me and help me to, you know, network with people in my field, since . . . not many pursue this type of degree that are also doing a sport.

Cameron highlighted a major theme of the desire to rely on student affairs professionals campus-wide to network with other students and professionals in their potential career field, clarify their major choice, and ensure goodness of fit. Ben, a finance major, echoed this theme:

I was always really good at math, so I figured I would always go into something like that. It really kind of sunk in though when I took some of my general classes the first year and people in that department really helped me figure out how to go about it, you know, figure out how to take the right classes and what area would set me up best for later on.

Overall, student-athletes who discussed campus-based student affairs professional as influential noted the benefit of networking with students and professionals outside of athletics to clarify goodness of fit. Of specific interest, the majority of male student-athletes who cited campus-based student and academic affairs professionals as influential participated in nonrevenue sports.

Influence of Role Conflict

Finally, all study participants discussed life experiences of balancing roles of student and athlete as influential to their undergraduate

major choice. The vast majority of participants cited time commitment required of their athletic role as most influential to major choice. Participants in certain sports felt time constraints differentiated them from the general student body and often had remorse for their major decision. These individuals felt angry they were not being afforded flexibility in major choice like their nonathlete peers. Finally, others focused on how time constraints of balancing roles as both students and athletes forced them to entertain the idea of career choice during the off season of their sport.

Kevin, a football student-athlete and sociology major best encapsulated how time constraints due to athletics roles seemed to dictate major choice:

I'm not the strongest person in math, so I was like really struggling in those [classes] to pass, especially with all the football curriculum and everything to learn. Like I needed more time, so that's when I realized that the sciences wouldn't work really for me, and I decided I would choose sociology.

He continued to note how he felt his sociology course work had little alignment with his career aspirations to become a financial analyst.

Darius, another football student-athlete, echoed a similar theme of time constraints dictating his major choice. He desired to pursue a kinesiology major, but came to the realization a degree in zoology was more realistic: "I'm still taking classes that relate to what I want to do but in zoology and not in kinesiology, because the scheduling [of kinesiology classes] didn't really work out with my practice time." Lucy cited a similar struggle to complete a major in kinesiology due to time constraints of being a student-athlete:

I came in[to college] wanting to do kinesiology, but my math classes didn't work out that well and [I] realized that

I was going to have to take some other harder classes. I'm not a bad student, but I just didn't feel like my heart was in those classes, so I switched to communications.

Aaron, Darius, and Lucy illustrate a major theme of time constraints not only determining major choice, but indirectly influencing career choice. This theme appeared to reoccur for individuals who desired undergraduate majors in kinesiology and engineering.

Along the lines of time constraints dictating major choice, individuals in certain sports expressed remorse for a major choice which they felt was dictated by their athletics time commitments. This theme was prevalent in football players, like John: "It's just hard being an athlete, so like trying to take certain classes doesn't work—especially football, because it's so time consuming. . . . I always felt like I could've done an engineering major if I was just a general student." Across gender and sport, student-athletes readily cited numerous challenges, such as eligibility, time, role balance, that were integral to their higher education experience with respect to selecting an undergraduate major choice.

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to develop an enhanced understanding of what life experiences influence student-athletes as they select undergraduate majors. Subsequently, I sought to understand factors that influence undergraduate major selection and the alignment of major choice with future career aspirations. Analysis of data demonstrated that student-athletes cited interactions with campus as well as athletics student support practitioners as influential to their major selection processes. In addition, all participants cited the struggle to balance student and athlete roles as influential to major choice.

Role Conflict and Academic Clustering

This study supports previous literature by Case, Greer, and Brown (1987), Fountain and Finley (2011), and Suggs (2003) that athletic eligibility implicates undergraduate major choices. Extending upon these previous arguments, these results demonstrate that student-athletes have a great concern for selecting undergraduate majors that facilitate eligibility, which appears to influence the alignment of student-athletes' academic undergraduate majors and career aspirations in life after sports.

Within this study, multiple participants cited an understanding of the importance of earning an undergraduate degree, but failed to articulate the correlation between their major choice and future career aspirations. Moreover, students who demonstrated little alignment between undergraduate major and career aspirations expressed they viewed the undergraduate degree as a commodity to obtain for credential purposes rather than as a critical tool to prepare for a specific career. This suggests a fundamental issue for student affairs professionals both internal to athletics and campus-wide.

Findings also appear to support previous literature (e.g., Bell, 2009; Danish et al., 1993) that suggests student-athletes may submit to identity foreclosure at greater rates than their nonathlete peers. In this study multiple student-athletes cited aspirations to work in sports-related fields; however, these individuals felt their experience as a student-athlete was preparation enough to pursue a career in sports. These individuals failed to grasp arguments in career development literature (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981; Savickas 2002, 2005; Savickas et al., 2009) that position the higher education experience and undergraduate major as paramount to preparation for careers. This

presents another fundamental issue for both athletics and campus-wide student affairs professionals to address.

Importance of Campus Integration

Current student development literature (e.g., Gayles & Hu, 2009) centers on the importance of student engagement to foster transferrable skill sets for success in life after higher education. Supporting this notion, findings suggest student-athletes tend to view campus-based student affairs professionals and resources as media to assess a major's goodness of fit and to network with individuals outside of sports who share common career interests. Student-athletes in nonrevenue sports tended to pursue opportunities external to campus most readily.

This study furthers knowledge of how student-athletes view and utilize campus-based programming as they engage in undergraduate major decisions. Findings demonstrate themes in both specific sports and majors with respect to seeking campus support. Students who desired to pursue careers primarily in sports-related fields or represented undergraduate majors of sociology, communication arts, or human ecology discussed a heavy reliance on student affairs professionals internal to the athletics department structure. In contrast, individuals who expressed career aspirations to enter fields in education, engineering, finance, or medicine discussed the importance of enhanced engagement with and reliance on student affairs professionals who were external to athletics. Additionally, student-athletes who sought out campus-wide academic and student support outlets appeared to demonstrate a stronger balance between student and athlete roles (Adler & Adler, 1987; Danish et al., 1993). These students demonstrated an enhanced understanding of the importance of career preparation in addition to athletics preparation during college.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Today the American labor force faces additional challenges to find and sustain jobs in a time of economic instability (Savickas, 2005). As a result, individuals must place a greater emphasis on preparing for a highly competitive job market (Savickas, 2002; Savickas et al., 2009). To this end, this study specifically focused on how student-athletes, a specific subset of the student body in higher education, approach preparation for life after sports via undergraduate majors while maintaining their roles as both students and athletes.

Savickas et al. (2009) posit career construction is a lifelong, complex process informed by salient life experiences and transitions. This theory informs how student affairs practitioners can best assist 21st-century job seekers. In the context of this study, this theoretical framework further exposes the unique challenges student-athletes face as they explore career alternatives and choose undergraduate majors. These challenges heard throughout the personal narratives suggest student affairs practitioners must continue to hone career facilitation methods internal to intercollegiate athletics.

First, participants in this study tended to support this framework that career construction is a lifelong process, yet narratives suggest being a student-athlete often limits this notion of lifelong career exploration. For example, student-athletes continued to discuss intense challenges to balance student and athlete roles. Their personal narratives suggest their processes of career exploration often end more prematurely than their nonathlete peers as NCAA eligibility requires them to select an undergraduate major by the sophomore year. While some did continue to pursue a second major or certificate that aligned more specifically with aspired goals in life after sports, they viewed major choice as more

defined or limited than the process is for their nonathlete peers.

Next, Savickas (2002) contends career construction is a differential, development, and dynamic process; however, findings tend to suggest student-athletes viewed career construction as a dynamic process only up until the sophomore year. In the context of this study, the pressure student-athletes felt to select a major by a certain point in their education seemed to slow this dynamic and fluid process of career construction. As a result, student-athletes who tended to associate more with their athletic role than their student role described a reliance on solely athletics-based support systems. These individuals discussed how time management, dedication, and teamwork skills developed as a student-athlete would assist them in any career; however, they often failed to articulate how their major choice would enable lifelong development in their aspired field. These findings suggest two shifts that must occur within current higher education and intercollegiate athletics student support systems to better prepare student-athletes for life after graduation.

Professional Development Training for Athletics-Based Student Affairs Professionals

Today NCAA Division I athletics departments consistently support student resources that not only assist student-athletes academically, but developmentally. Today members of the athletics-based student support not only serve as academic advisors, but as career development liaisons. Multiple job expectations, coupled with enhanced pressure for student-athletes to perform in the athletic arena at the Division I level, may potentially exacerbate student-athletes being placed in common majors to enhance eligibility. In addition, student-athletes who do not feel they find adequate support may have an enhanced

affinity to default to careers in sports due to lack of awareness of alternatives.

While this study suggests student-athletes rely heavily on athletics student affairs units and support staff for assistance as they construct career plans, little focus is seen from the NCAA to provide specialized professional development training to student support staff so they may better assist student-athletes. To date, the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) has made strides to support professional development for individuals who work specifically with student-athletes in a career development capacity through the inception of a mentorship program (N4A, 2013). This organization now formally pairs new athletics academic advisors with senior academic advisors through the association, citing the importance of meaningful undergraduate advising processes to prepare students for life after sports. Moving forward, athletics student support staff would potentially benefit from not only athletics-specific training, but also student affairs and higher education professional development opportunities.

Campus-Wide Collaboration

Current student affairs professionals must consider why the majority of student-athletes in this study and in the previous literature continue to pursue similar majors as teammates (i.e., academic clustering) and rely heavily on student affairs professionals internal to athletics. The onus to enhance career and

major exploration support now falls upon student affairs professionals both internal and external to athletics. Practitioners internal to athletics must focus on enhancing relationships with campus so that student-athletes are exposed to career fields they perhaps have never encountered. In this vein, student affairs practitioners in campus-wide settings must develop an enhanced understanding of the multiple pressures facing the student-athlete population nested within higher education to best serve this student body subset.

Future Research

Researchers and practitioners alike still struggle to clearly identify what pedagogical and curricular methods are most effective to prepare student-athletes for careers. Since relatively little is known about this phenomenon from the student-athlete perspective, findings from this study can inform the development of a quantitative survey-based study that would enable future researchers to capture the experiences of individuals across cohorts, schools, and conferences. As researchers commit to forge relationships with practitioners at both the campus-wide and association-wide levels, critical steps can be made to increase the quality of student-athlete career development programming and meet the needs of student-athletes.

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