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The Disconnect Between Athletic Department Employees and Student-Athletes on Leadership Programming Initiatives

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There is limited research exploring leadership programming within intercollegiate athletic departments, despite the NCAA requiring member institutions to house Student-Athlete Advisory Committees (SAAC). This study explores the perceptions of leadership development training within athletic departments through a sequential mixed-method design, which used a combination of interviews (6 staff members, 8 student-athletes) and surveys (98 staff, 188 student-athletes). Themes constructed from the interviews for the athletic department employees were: flexibility, collaboration, intentional and directional programming, relationships, holistic development, and access. The following themes were found for student-athletes: time commitment, communication of programming, definition of leadership, and SAAC involvement in building the student-athlete community. Quantitative findings identified significant differences across the perceptions of available resources, as well as importance of skill development for post athletic-career success.

Keywords: Leadership development, College sports, Student-athlete perceptions, Employee perceptions

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The college experience is a time for individuals to learn and grow. For the traditional college student this time may be spent exploring different majors, joining various clubs, picking up a job, or joining an organization (Saenz, 1999; Kim & Bastedo, 2016). Each of these systems serve as enhancements to the college experience and allows for the individual to develop holistically while striving to accomplish their academic goals. However, the experience of student-athletes is known to be significantly different (Huml et al., 2019). For example, student-athletes have significantly different time demands than those of a non-athlete college student, largely due to balancing their academics with a 20-hour week or more training load, and the necessary care to remain fit, healthy, and eligible (Gomez et al., 2018). Because of these constraints, student-athletes are often unable to be part of campus wide organizations. Instead, athletic departments typically offer their own programming to student-athletes, intending to promote holistic development within this specific population (Ko et al., 2008).

Athletic department life skills programming is designed to prepare the athletes for life after college (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015) through resume building and cover letter writing workshops, as well as more integrative networking sessions with members of the community and alumni. While these types of services are also often available to the general college student population through university career centers (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014), creating in-house programming allows for scheduling around the student-athletes' availability and more specific education on how to leverage skills learned during their athletic career (e.g., time management, communication) post college (Martinelli, Jr., 2000). Further, scholarship indicates student-athletes expecting to play professional sports display higher athletic tendencies, resulting in less desire to explore career alternatives (Tyrance et al., 2013), therefore developing this programing within athletic departments affirms that all student-athletes will at least receive some information regarding alternative careers. Due to growing concerns surrounding athletes' expectations and preparation for life after graduation some institutions have spent significant time and money on building leadership institutes for their student-athletes. These leadership institutes exist in addition to the already required National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) programming. Specifically, the NCAA has required all institutions to house a Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) since 1995. SAAC provides a space for individuals to take on leadership positions and discuss pertinent issues within their athletic department and the NCAA, to establish necessary changes (NCAA, 2012).

While an increase in programming may theoretically better prepare student-athletes for post-graduation success, the additional programming takes time away from the individual's ability to eat, sleep, and/or study. Therefore, as athletic department programming evolves, research exploring the experiences of those involved can provide contextual information to aid in understanding how to best serve all individuals. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of the student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming set forth by the athletic departments through a mixed-method approach.

Student-Athlete Clause

The authors of this manuscript are aware of the history surrounding the term "student-athlete", however, due to the language used by interviewees - both employees and collegiate athletes - the research team has decided to utilize the term student-athlete throughout this manuscript to most accurately reflect participant experiences and perceptions.

Literature Review

Student-Athlete Development

Students traditionally enter higher education at an important time in their personal development. They are focused on completing their academic program of choice in hopes of turning their education into a long-term vocation upon graduation. As they progress through their college experience, their university is providing them with various experiences to both help them achieve their personal and career goals, but also support their growth in non-academic areas such as providing access to on-campus student clubs (Huang & Chang, 2004). Higher education institutions often have a department of student life to support student-led organizations and disseminate activities to the student body (Magolda, 2009). These activities are sporadically occurring throughout the academic year, with the hopes that students will have available time to attend the events most interesting to them at some point during the semester.

Student-athletes, however, may experience structural challenges compared to the rest of the student-body with respect to attending such events (Gayles, 2009). For example, student-athletes must adhere to NCAA guidelines for academic progress toward degree completion and graduation timelines (NCAA, 2022). These academic requirements can minimize student-athletes' abilities to change majors and/or transfer. Furthermore, student-athletes have rigid schedules and limited free time because of their varsity sport obligations, such as practice, film, workouts, and coaches meetings (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Their sport participation can be so time consuming it may be difficult to find the ideal combination of courses needed for graduation that do not conflict with sport-related obligations (McCormick & McCormick, 2006). Student-athletes may also have other obligations that limit their free time, such as travel for games and team-related activities or community service (Gaston-Gayles et al., 2012; Huml et al., 2018).

The time commitment for college sports and academics can strain the physical and mental health of student-athletes. Many student-athletes have openly discussed feeling overwhelmed balancing all their obligations (Clift & Mower, 2013; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). To compensate, student-athletes will prioritize their athletic responsibilities over other activities (Lally & Kerr, 2005). This decision-making process may be influenced by one's athletic identity, as student-athletes are so focused on athletic aspirations that non-athletic responsibilities are neglected (Foster & Huml, 2017; Houle & Kluck, 2015; Huml et al., 2019). The combination of (a) lack of time, (b) feeling overwhelmed, and (c) priority placed on athletics means that higher education institutions may struggle presenting the right mix of resources and support to their student-athletes to maximize their college experience.

Due to student-athletes' specific needs and busy schedules, athletic departments have created their own academic support structures (Berg et al., 2021). This support often includes stand-alone athletic advising offices and personnel who can meet with student-athletes regarding scheduling, career counseling, and other forms of academic support (Huml et al., 2014; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013). This structure also includes tutoring support, where athletes can request assistance to increase their success in currently-enrolled classes (Rubin & Moses, 2017). Athletic departments have also received academic departmental services at some institutions through course offerings exclusively for student-athletes (e.g., Weight & Huml, 2016), allowing them to earn college credit for learning about their upcoming or current higher education journey and important athletic-related social issues. Lastly, athletic departments have also prioritized offering life skills programming for their student-athletes (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). This programming was initially financially supported through the NCAA Life Skills program (e.g.,

Svensson et al., 2014), but has since become a greater priority for athletic departments to self-support. More resources have allowed athletic departments to seek out additional programming to support student-athlete needs, including topics on social justice, entrepreneurial, financial literacy, mental health, and more current topics, such as NIL (Bimper, 2015; Smith et al., 2021). Braunstein-Minkove et al. (2022) assessed the role of leadership with the integration of high impact practices for student-athlete development. Findings of this research suggest programing should be intentional, with an emphasis on high impact practices, rather than just an overload of basic programming. Similarly, Berg and Warner (2019) identified intentional programming as a critical component of student-athlete development. Though athletic departments have worked to create effective programming, there is limited research examining the perceptions of staff and administrators. Of note, recent work from Ishaq and Bass (2019) identified perceived barriers toward programming, including lack of resources, funding, student-athlete availability, and conflicts with coach attitudes toward these opportunities. Findings from the current study will provide useful insights into this understudied, yet important, area.

Student-athletes further indicate that the programming they participate in does not even meet their needs, as supported through research by Stokowski et al. (2019) who identified 57.3% of student-athletes had a negative transition experience. Work exploring student-athlete transition is important in the determination of programming effectiveness. Specifically, the intention of this programming is to better prepare student-athletes for life after college sports through developing knowledge in areas such as financial literacy. However, Smith and Hardin (2018) also identified that recent student-athlete graduates felt bewildered and a sense of loss upon graduation, while struggling to build an identity out of sport and build new routines.

Student-Athlete Leadership Programming

The NCAA promotes leadership development initiatives at member institutions by requiring all schools to house a Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC). This ruling has been in place since 1995, with the goal of promoting athletes' voices (NCAA, 2012). More recently institutions have included leadership academies (LAs). LAs tend to be larger programs that provide numerous development opportunities to student-athletes who opt in. Specifically, SAAC programs tend to be housed within LAs (Georgia Tech, 2023). The LA movement is traced back to the University of North Carolina who started their Carolina Leadership Academy in 2004 (Voight & Hickey, 2016). A main feature of these programs is their competitiveness in which to participate. While this ensures that the athletes who are attending these additional sessions are interested, it also means that a large portion of the student-athlete population misses out on educational experiences. Other departments have followed suit (e.g., Georgetown University, University of Tennessee), creating student-athlete leadership development initiatives that serve to prepare and develop individuals for success outside of athletics (Georgetown University Athletics, 2020; University of Tennessee Athletics, 2022). Similarly to UNC, this programming is more selective in nature and therefore cohort sizes remain small (15-30 participants). While Rubin and Nwosu (2021) identified that leadership academies are effective in achieving their leadership development goals, the impact may be limited due to these small cohort sizes.

To combat exclusivity challenges associated with LAs, athletic departments also house broader development programming for the whole student-athlete population. Athletic department development programming stemmed from the establishment of the NCAA CHAMPS/Life Skills program in 2014 (NCAA, 2014). This programming was modeled after the Total Person Program (Georgia Tech Athletics, 2023), which has four pillars; leadership development, professional

development, personal growth & wellness, and community engagement. To encourage growth in these areas, athletic departments established resume workshop opportunities, student-athlete career fairs, networking nights, internship opportunities, nutrition education, and community engagement opportunities (Georgia Tech Athletics, 2023). While the NCAA has rebranded its athlete development focus through partnering with the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A) in 2016 (NCAA, 2014), athletic departments have upheld the foundations of life skills programming.

Though the NCAA and member institutions have dedicated numerous resources to purposeful programming with respect to student-athlete development and leadership development there is also inherent leadership development through sport participation. Wright and Côté (2003) identified four primary areas of leadership development that are enhanced through sport: skill, work ethic, sport knowledge, and rapport with people. However, research by Extejt and Smith (2009) explored leadership skills amongst MBA students controlling for their seasons of sport team participation. ANOVA and Correlation analysis indicated no association between number of seasons played and leadership skills (Extejt & Smith, 2009), suggesting that specific leadership training is necessary even for those developing within sport. Gould and Voelker (2010) support specific training through their evaluation of a formal leadership educational experience for youth sport captains.

Research Questions

Though there has been an uptick in the presence of student-athlete development initiatives and leadership academies within athletic departments at NCAA institutions, there has been limited research into the effectiveness of programming or recommendations for best practices in programming creation. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming within athletic departments at NCAA institutions, by evaluating the perceptions of such by both employees and student-athletes. The study was formulated around the following research questions:

RQ 1: What student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming is available to student-athletes across NCAA institutions?

RQ 2: How are the student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming perceived by student-athletes and staff members?

Methods

A sequential mixed-method approach was utilized to examine the aforementioned research questions. First, interviews exploring the experiences of athletic department employees from four [NCAA Division I FBS conference] institutions who create and/or facilitate student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming within their Division I athletic department occurred. Utilizing initial themes from employee interviews, a survey was created to gather additional perspectives from a larger sample of athletic department employees and student-athletes. This method is in line with recent work from Merriam and Tisdell (2015) that suggests “simultaneous data collection and analysis” can occur (p. 197). To provide further depth to the surveys on the experiences of student-athletes interviews with student-athletes were conducted.

All employees and student-athletes were from institutions within a single NCAA Division I FBS conference. Schools within the conference are located within the great lakes, mid-east, and southeast regions of the United States. Departments ranged in size from just under 400 student-athletes to over 550 student-athletes with an average of 459 (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2023). Departments in the included conference averaged 17 sports. Departmental median revenues averaged $70 million and median expenses averaged $65 million (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2023).

Qualitative Methods

Participants

Interviews were conducted with six athletic department staff from four [NCAA Division I FBS conference] institutions. All employees worked within academics, life skills, and/or leadership/professional development areas. Three of the participants identified as male and three identified as female. Five of the participants identified as White with one identifying as Black. Tenure at their institution ranged from two to 11 years. Interviews were conducted with eight [NCAA Division I FBS conference] student-athletes from seven NCAA member institutions representing six different sports: football (2), women's soccer (1), men's and women's cross country (2), women's track and field (1), women's swimming (1), and women's field hockey (1).

Procedures

Semi-structured interviews (conducted via Zoom) were utilized for the qualitative data collection portion of the study. To ensure interviewees had experience with leadership programming and/or student-athlete development within their athletic department, participants were purposefully selected to participate in interviews from institutions with easily identifiable programming pages on their websites resulting in invitations to athletic department employees from five [NCAA Division I FBS conference] institutions. Employees from four institutions agreed to participate. Employee interviews were conducted by three co-authors and one non-author (paid researcher on a grant). Whereas one co-author conducted interviews with all the student-athlete participants. Interviews are a useful tool in qualitative data collection as they allow participants to share their inner thoughts and experiences (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, interviews allow for a more personal interaction with the participants, which enables and encourages participants to share more details (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

While previous research has explored athlete transitions including career planning and educational programming, research specifically investigating student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming and associated perceptions is scarce across all academic domains. Therefore, interview guides were developed to be exploratory in nature. Athletic department staff and student-athlete interviews focused on the availability of programming, types of programming, most effective programming, ways to improve programming, and COVID-19's impact on programming within their current institutions. Both groups were offered the opportunity to reflect on experiences at previous institutions as well. Athletic department staff were also asked about funding of programming and support from coaches and senior level administrators.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and formatted for analysis. Separate analysis was conducted for the employee and student-athlete samples. Transcriptions were reviewed and coded individually by three of the co-authors. Each of the co-authors read and reread each transcript multiple times to familiarize themselves with the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, as researchers reviewed the transcripts they jotted "notes, comments, observations, and queries in the margins" to begin the coding process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 204). A constant comparative analysis was used to code the data. During this process, codes of individual instances were continually compared with the rest of the data. The overall goal of constant comparative data analysis is to find patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Following individual coding by the three researchers, they then engaged in debriefing meetings with the entire research team to confirm and debate interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Specifically, the researchers engaged in four different debriefing meetings during the coding process. Two meetings were held for the staff interviews and then two for the student-athlete interviews. During these meetings, everyone would discuss their codes and any patterns that they identified from the transcripts. In rare situations conflicting codes were found. To resolve this, conflicting codes were discussed until agreement was made. Themes that were identified by all three researchers were deemed immediately acceptable findings for this study. After creating themes, the researchers then went through and selected quotes that illustrated each theme.

Qualitative Findings

Staff Qualitative Findings

Academic support and leadership initiative staff revealed five core themes that describe the nature of the student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming available for student-athletes: *flexibility, intentional and directional programming, relationships, holistic development,* and *access.*

Flexibility. All four institutions developed their student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming with an adaptable structure, allowing flexibility in content based on both feedback and current events. One staff member described tying social justice issues into their content during COVID-19 as a way to build real-world leadership skills:

> We focused kind of broadly and loosely on accountability and responsibility in the first year. And in that second year, we tied it in from more of a diversity and inclusion standpoint. So, in what--February, the spring of 2020, when we would have changed that, [we] added in some more specific conversations about social justice and race relations, and 'what is your responsibility as a leader within your team in the world.

Other interviews revealed their incorporation of NIL training into their required programming. Such as shared by this employee,

> We already do a big push on financial literacy, but now, you know, with the implications of NIL I think financial literacy is something we're focusing on even more. We implemented it into all of our summer leadership programs which we do, but we kind of stepped it up in that area. I think, so I think our student athletes are just going to have a

> lot more coming at them, have a lot more resources, a lot more, you know, and navigate what this means for them.

Finally, all staff described their shift to online formats during COVID as inevitable, yet this change provided them with more opportunities to get creative with their content.

Relationships. Interviews revealed that athletic departments at these institutions have approached their student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming with a relationship building mindset. Resources within the department such as coach input, athletic director input, and student-athlete feedback are utilized when creating and refining content. Additionally, through developing relationships, athletics staff can be more confident that their programming will reach a larger student-athlete audience. Sources outside of the department, such as alumni, professors, and other institutional staff members are also included, not only as a way to gain different perspectives, but also as a means to involve the greater community in athletics. One employee shared:

> I think coach buy-in is huge, because have you know if the coaches talked to their athletes about the importance of the programming we're putting on, I mean, it can make or break a program. So, we've really tried to keep the coaches informed on what kind of programming we're doing.

A different employee expanded on this by explaining,

> ... we invited alums, one male student--former student athlete and former female student athlete to come in and just speak on their experiences as student athletes, and then in life since leaving [institution].

Relationship building, specifically through alumni, is important not only for financial reasons, but also special skills and time:

> We've started with alumni. And that's kind of where we've found the most success. Finding alumni who are willing to do things for their institution, maybe at a discounted rate, or doing a gift in kind as a contribution for their time, their professional time, and what they've been able to do and kind of like, work as a consultant… We had success in finding, you know, donors who are interested in maybe a different side of the student-athlete development, so not necessarily the athletics and you know, winning games…there's also that side of donors who are more interested in the academic pursuits, and you know, the personal development of student athletes as well.

In addition, relationships with the larger university community allows for greater access to financial support. Finally, staff stressed the importance of not only building relationships, but finding meaningful ways to maintain these relationships for the success of their programming as illustrated by this quote,

> I'm actually--have a lot of emails drafted right now of reaching back out, you know, maintaining those relationships, reaching out to them, again, to see you know, what the fall and the spring look like, and how we can, you know, kind of collaborate on different initiatives, how we can help them if we can, if it's more just, you know, our groups

> observing, making sure that we're, you know, utilizing all of [NCAA Division I FBS conference], resources as well, because, you know, we do some great work, both in the community, and with our alumni.

Intentional and Directional Programming. Staff members described their focus on developing programming that is both intentional and directional to ensure that initiatives are successful in assisting student-athletes in developing their leadership skills. Specifically, the intentionality of the program relates to the specificity of issues and topics chosen to be covered, whereas the directional programing is curated in a way that will help progress the athletes toward future success through these learning experiences. Further, creating an environment where student-athletes are encouraged to apply these skills in the classroom and beyond is at the forefront of staff's goals with these programs. One staff member described the benefits as twofold: the student-athletes can practice their newfound skills in the larger student-athlete community while also recruiting their teammates for their programming:

> [We started] off with identity--emotional intelligence was one of the sessions we did, communication, conflict management, and then that accountability, responsibility, diversity, inclusion, all those things as they relate to leadership. And so moving through that space, having conversations with the student athletes, I mean, picture it like a classroom setting. And then at the end of it, they, the student-athletes, have the opportunity to build and create their own content and put on an event for their fellow student-athletes. So, it served as an active recruiting piece for us for the upcoming year, if they were people who were semi-interested in being a part of the academy.

Whereas a different employee shared,

> We've worked really hard at not increasing the number of mandatory things because we know their time is valuable and we're trying to find that sweet spot of 'what are the most impactful and so'? We're not just throwing a bunch of darts at the dart table right now. We're trying to be very intentional.

Holistic Development. Current student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming aims to create strong leaders off the field by leveraging the skills required of them on the field. Leadership initiatives provide student-athletes with greater opportunities to participate in training and focus on skills that they otherwise would not, such as conflict management. Further, as previously stated, these programs allow student-athletes to use these skills in real life situations. One employee shared,

> I think the communication one is key, and then getting young people and individuals to understand the value of listening, the value of giving and how to give good feedback. I think those things are helpful because I think a lot of students think–that was the other thing I think is important–to not lose sight of the value of the different manifestations of leadership, where you might not be the loudest person in the room, but everyone's watching you, and how to help empower those individuals to be successful and to feel confident in their leadership.

While a different employee stated,

> So, I can give you one example of the last networking event that we had, which was pre-COVID. But we use the personality assessment that we have, and we had students, juniors and seniors, instead of doing a traditional networking event, talking more about your communication skills, your strengths, some of the groundwork you've done towards, you know, developing your weaknesses in the companies actually selected instead of displaying their company name and what they were looking for, in recruiting, they actually selected traits that they were looking for.

Access. Finally, the majority of programming offered at these institutions are designed for and offered to specific groups of individuals (e.g., certain sports, an application-based leadership academy, etc.). Mandatory programming is also present; however, is limited in subject area. For example, many leadership academies offer content around emotional intelligence, collaboration, and communication, as well as a variety of other topics. However, mandatory programming would only cover resume workshops, due to time constraints. Athletic departments want to make programming more accessible, but also engaging for the entire student-athlete community. One employee shared,

> So, our student-athletes in SAAC have to interview, they have to apply, go through the interview process and be selected to be leaders from their team into the department leadership role.

Similarly, another employee also discussed the application process, sharing that they were:

> allowing some applications to roll into the fall semester, so that we had an opportunity to introduce what leadership was and not really just do that over zoom in the spring [during COVID].

Student-Athlete Qualitative Findings

Student-athlete participants positively reflected on athletic departments investment in providing prompt educational and training opportunities regarding NIL. With one student sharing,

> This summer we had the NIL thing--NIL clinic. Well actually we came back, we did that. It was like a workshop and we went like--I think it's like twice every month we had to go. We were--the first couple ones were required and then if you wanted to keep going good keep going.

Whereas another student-athlete stated,

> I think... NIL is honestly like - not to put us down - but it is the first thing that they probably adequately addressed, like since I've been here.

However, the positives of NIL initiatives were significantly overshadowed by the weaknesses of departmental programming identified by student-athletes. Specifically, student-athletes shared that other programming was hard to find, or communication occurred last minute, as well as

created an additional task that needed to be completed, placing added time stressors on the student-athletes. These sentiments, and more, are portrayed in greater depth through the four themes produced through the student-athlete interviews: *time commitment, communication of programming, definition of leadership,* and *COVID impacts on programming experience and community.*

Time Commitment. The top challenge student-athletes described that prevented them from attending programming was time. Balancing academic and athletic commitments has been found to be taxing on the well-being of student-athletes. Therefore, asking them to add additional events to their schedule is often impossible. Additionally, even if student-athletes have the gap in their schedule, it is often at the end of a long day, and they would rather take that time for themselves, as described below:

> Most of my friends don't have things late at night and I also live 30 minutes off campus. So, there's sometimes where there's an event and I ask my advisor like, 'I just got home from a long day at school and I just can't make it back to go to the event.'

A different student-athlete discussed how their academic plan impacts their ability to attend events saying, "I think a lot of leadership initiatives would take place over the summer or during breaks, and within the past couple of years, the inability to travel and all that stuff sort of just limited that. And I also don't have the easiest major to plan around since I'm a nursing major." Finally, a different student-athlete shared about their challenges with attending programming, saying,

> Well, I know there is two this semester. I think they're both Fridays. They're normally from like noon to four. Some of them are online, from what I can remember. And there's also career fairs that are put on by the university. So there are a lot of opportunities for me. I just haven't been able to make one yet.

Expanding time options for certain events and combining other events into already existing commitments is a helpful way to allow all student-athletes to attend these programs.

Communication of Programming. Interviews revealed that there is a gap in what athletic departments are offering to their student-athletes and what student-athletes perceive is available to them. One such participant suggests a comprehensive list as a potential improvement in leadership development initiatives; however, is unsure if one already exists:

> I think it would be easier if there was... I mean, maybe they sent this out to us, but I didn't see it. But just if there is some kind of comprehensive list…we just found the jobs guy. You're supposed to go to him before you graduate to talk about your job. And he will help you get a job after... Or before you graduate…And so I wish that we had just something more comprehensive because there are so many different platforms and they do email us a lot about the sessions that they're holding. But I definitely wish there was something just to add to the list of like, 'oh, this person is for this and this person is for this and this is a calendar.' I think there is a calendar of events. I just don't know where it is, but a list of all the events for the different grade levels and maybe just more information about them. But I would just say I need a document or I can just open it up

> and be like, ‘Oh, OK, here's who I need to contact or here's the sessions that are coming up.’

While another interviewee discussed that poor communication made it hard to fit the programming into their scheduling, such as “Yeah, that's pretty much what it is, and we really don't find out about it very often, like we'll get an email like, ‘oh, this is today and it's required’, like, ‘well, I had something scheduled during that time, I had no idea it was coming’.” It is unclear where the gap of knowledge lies, but it is evident that accurate and up-to-date information is not reaching the student-athletes, making them unaware of the extent of programming that is available to them.

Definition of Leadership. Student-athletes discussed how the programming they participated in helped them to expand their view of leadership. As athletes, some held a simplistic view that leadership was reflected through the captain position, such as this individual:

> I used to be a captain on my team at home, which was very, very different from the roles that I have here. So before being a leader here, I would have said it's sending out the right clothing schedules, making sure the team is at the right place at the right time.

However, through participation in student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming, student-athletes felt as though their views on leadership grew. Specifically, this same individual later shared,

> One of the meetings that I attended that really stood out to me was how to be a positive leader and how to be an influential leader.

While a different interviewee shared,

> We have the student Athlete Advisory committee and that like helps--I probably should have mentioned that one earlier, but that helps athletes become the leaders. And so through that program I've been able to see that, I guess, like student athletes can actually be leaders. So I guess like that's kind of how it's changed

In many cases, student-athletes had expanded their definition of “leadership”, making it applicable to their personal skill set. Sentiments across the board expressed that participants came into their institution believing that only a certain person could be a leader; however, through both programming and their experience on a team, they now understand that everyone can be a leader in their own unique way.

COVID Impacts on Programming Experience and Community. Lastly, student-athletes found the most enjoyment and benefit participating in in-person activities. As shared by this individual, “You know, even for me, I'm an in-person kind of person. I love to see people in person.” However, COVID minimized in-person interaction and this was something that student-athletes had to navigate, as discussed here:

> I mean it's really hard when we can't be in person and using zoom like with a team or with people at your university is kind of like really hard to--it's hard to do like leadership type stuff with it. ‘Cause like again, like, sometimes like being just behind a screen is a

> little scary. You can't get like the personal connection and like there are a lot of things that we just like couldn't do.

The issue of bringing student-athletes back together is an issue that is at the forefront of some individuals' minds. Specifically, this SAAC participant stated,

> I definitely think COVID has put a damper on our attendance and how many people we're able to reach. I think that's a challenge we're trying to work through. I'm sitting as Vice President of SAAC Committee right now, and that's a problem we're facing right now trying to get attendance, just people to get involved. That's one of our biggest problems.

Quantitative Methods

Participants

Survey responses (only completed surveys were included in analysis) were garnered from 98 [NCAA Division I FBS conference] member institution athletic department employees. The majority of the employees identified as white (80.6%), with 8.2% identifying as Black/African American and less than 5.0% identified as: Asian, Hispanic/Latino/a/x, or Biracial or more than one race. There was an almost even split across gender identity with 51.0% identifying as male and 48.0% identifying as female (1.0% preferred not to answer). Sample job titles of participants include: Academic advisor/tutor/learning specialist/coordinator/counselor, Assistant AD for compliance, Assistant AD/Director of professional readiness, Assistant AD/Director of sports medicine, Assistant coach, Associate AD/SWA, Coordinator for leadership and professional development, Head coach, Director of operations (multiple sports), Director of player personnel/development, Director of student-athlete development/life skills, Executive senior associate AD, Faculty Athletic Representative (FAR), Senior associate AD. Tenure at their current institution ranged from less than a year to 33 years. See Table 1 for full employee demographic information.

Survey responses were garnered from 188 [NCAA Division I FBS conference] student-athletes with representation across all academic classifications: first year (28.2%), second year (24.5%), third year (16.5%), fourth year (19.7%), fifth year senior (2.7%), and graduate students (8.5%). The majority of the student-athletes identified as white 71.8% with 11.7% identifying as Black/African American, 7.4% identifying as Hispanic/Latino/a/x, and less than 5% identifying as Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, Biracial, Multiracial, or Indian . Over two-thirds (78.2%) identified as female with 21.3% identifying as male. Sports represented include: baseball, men's and women's basketball, cross country/track and field, football, golf, women's lacrosse, women's rowing, men's and women's soccer, softball, swimming and diving, women's tennis, track and field, and women's volleyball. Student-athletes reported majors across numerous academic disciplines. See Table 2 for full student-athlete demographic information.

Procedures

Online surveys (housed within Qualtrics software) were used for quantitative data collection. The research team harvested email addresses from [NCAA Division I FBS conference] athletic department staff directory websites for employees within the following

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample - Employees

Demographic Variable	Percentage	Count
Race		
Asian	2.0	2
Black or African American	8.2	8
White	80.6	79
Hispanic/Latino/a/x	3.1	3
Biracial or more than one race	4.1	4
Prefer not to say	2.0	2
Gender		
Male	51	50
Female	48	47
Preferred not to answer	1	1
Department		
Academic counseling	18.4	18
Business operations	4.1	4
Event management	1.0	1
Facility management	1.0	1
Internal operations	4.1	4
Sports information	1.0	1
Sports medicine	2.0	2
Student-athlete development	11.2	11
Team operations	10.2	10
Ticketing	2.0	2
Head coach	14.3	14
Assistant coach	9.2	9
Compliance	10.2	10
Other	11.2	11

departments/categories: senior level administration, academic counseling/student-athlete development, compliance, coaching staffs, and team operations. These departments were selected as they likely have the closest contact with the student-athletes, specifically as it relates to student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming. Potential participants were initially emailed, with a follow up email sent one week later to those who did not complete the survey with the initial request. For student-athletes, the research team worked with senior level administrators to distribute the survey to student-athletes. Senior level administrators from all [NCAA Division I FBS conference] institutions were contacted and seven agreed to participate. Of the remaining three schools their administrators either declined to share our survey or never responded to our email requests.

The survey was populated with questions related to availability of leadership and professional development programming, perceptions of effectiveness of the programming, and perceptions of staff who plan, organize, and execute programming. Both groups were also given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question related to their overall experiences/impressions with the leadership and professional development programming offered at their institution. The research team was purposeful to ask athletic department staff and student-athletes the same general questions to allow intra-group comparisons. Additionally,

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample – Student-Athletes

Demographic Variable	Percentage	Count
Race		
Asian	3.2	6
American Indian/Alaska Native	.5	1
Black or African American	11.7	22
Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander	.5	1
White	71.8	135
Hispanic/Latino/a/x	7.4	14
Biracial	1.1	2
Multiracial	3.2	6
Indian	.5	1
Gender		
Male	21.3	40
Female	78.2	147
Preferred not to answer	.5	1
Academic Classifications		
First Year	28.2	53
Second Year	24.5	46
Third Year	16.5	31
Fourth Year	19.7	37
Fifth Year Senior	2.7	5
Graduate Student	8.5	16

student-athletes were asked about programming they wished was offered by their athletic department.

The survey is designed around two primary response types. The first being likert scales, where the researchers are investigating individuals perceptions of the importance of certain topics such as effective interpersonal leadership skills. Survey questions using a four-point Likert scale with the options of *Not Important, Neutral, Somewhat Important, Very Important* include: How important do you think the following are for the world of work? How important do you think the following academic foundations are for the world of work? The following four-point Likert scale used response options of *Very Weak Effect, Moderately Weak Effect, Moderately Strong Effect, and Very Strong Effect:* What is the extent of your college athletic department's contribution to student-athletes growth in the following areas? The following questions were measured on a five-point Likert scale with response options of *Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree*: How much do you view your athletic department's academic and professional development programs as?

The second portion of the survey explores individuals' perceptions of offerings from the department through yes or no responses. For example, individuals are asked about topics that they are educated on through their athletic departments including managing money, banking, investments, credit, insurance, and taxes, and are asked to provide a yes or no response to each topic.

Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS Version 27. T-tests were performed for likert scale design questions understanding the importance of skill development for post athletic-career success and Chi-squared analyses were conducted to examine the differences between perceptions of available resources.

Quantitative Results

Independent samples T-Tests (Table 3) were run to identify any significant differences between the perceptions of student-athletes and employees regarding leadership programming opportunities. The results of these t-tests indicate significant differences between individuals' perceptions of how important effective interpersonal leadership skills are, with student-athletes (M = 3.75, SD = .512) significantly underscoring employees (M = 3.84, SD = .367), t(219) = -1.444, p = .003. Similar results were identified when exploring perceptions toward basic foundations such as reading and writing are for the world of work, with student-athletes (M = 3.61, SD = .656) compared to employees (M = 3.78, SD = .416), with student-athletes significantly underscoring employees t(218) = -2.130, p = .001. An additional significant difference is the perception of the extent of college athletic departments contribution to student-athletes growth, specifically around civil involvement, with student-athletes (M = 3.71, SD = 1.33) compared to employees (M = 3.92, SD = 1.22), with student-athletes significantly underscoring employees t(192) = -1.123, p = .05. Student-athletes (M = 3.78, SD = .664) also felt their athletic department's contribution to communication skills was significantly less than employees (M = 4.26, SD = .992), t(121) = -2.895, p = .007.

Finally, a significant difference was identified between student-athletes and employees' perceptions of the athletic departments' professional development programs having adequate resources. Interestingly, here, student-athletes (M = 3.86, SD = .934) scored higher than employees (M = 3.18, SD = 1.104), t(187) = 4.519, p = .043.

Chi squared tests of independence were conducted to examine differences between student-athlete and employee perspectives on availability of academic and career related supports (e.g., resume writing, graduate school sessions). A (statistically significant) higher percentage of employees indicated each support was available as compared with the student-athlete sample: resume writing (x^2 (1) = 17.48, p < .001), cover letter writing (x^2 (1) = 25.12, p < .001), mock interviews (x^2 (1) = 33.25, p < .001), career mapping (x^2 (1) = 18.75, p < .001), access to an academic advisor (x^2 (1) = 7.43, p < .001), counseling on undergraduate majors (x^2 (1) = 22.38, p < .001), counseling on graduate school (x^2 (1) = 24.90, p < .001), graduate school information sessions (x^2 (1) = 14.35, p < .001), structured networking opportunities (x^2 (1) = 21.60, p < .001), specific industry information sessions (e.g., real estate; x^2 (1) = 7.67, p < .001). See Table 4 for full statistical information.

Discussion

By gaining insights, both qualitatively and quantitatively, from student-athletes and athletic department staff, our results extend the literature in three main areas of contribution. First, both student-athletes and administrators believed there is an intentional collaborative approach when creating and delivering the leadership programming. Second, both student-athletes and administrators acknowledge the resource dependency and disparity trying to host and attend leadership programming. Third, and perhaps most important, a gap exists between

Table 3
T-Test Exploring Differences Among Employees and Student-Athletes

	Student-Athlete		Employees				
	M	SD	M	SD	df	t	p
Managing one's personal resources	3.83	.516	3.80	.579	217	.217	.632
Effective interpersonal leadership skills	3.75	.512	3.84	.367	219	-1.444	**.003**
Ability to gather and manage information	3.72	.525	3.72	.479	219	-.001	.816
Understanding the inter-relatedness of various systems	3.49	.685	3.52	.633	219	-.379	.538
Use of technology	3.37	.744	3.33	.649	219	.381	.119
Basic skills (e.g. reading, writing, mathematics, communication)	3.61	.656	3.78	.416	218	-2.130	**.000**
Thinking skills (e.g. creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, knowing how to learn)	3.84	.424	3.89	.416	217	-.864	.121
Personal qualities (e.g. responsibility, self-esteem, social skills, honesty)	3.86	.427	3.85	.356	219	.044	.950
Personal values and moral development	3.98	1.137	4.26	.909	192	-1.792	.137
Intrapersonal development	4.06	1.028	3.97	.966	191	.582	.322
Social leadership and development	4.43	.883	4.37	.897	191	.449	.589
Civil involvement and awareness	3.71	1.333	3.92	1.222	192	-1.123	**.050**
Interpersonal/Intrapersonal life skills	3.54	.887	4.52	.805	121	-6.262	.287
Task specific skills	3.61	.827	4.27	.955	126	-4.065	.412
Cognitive skills	3.12	1.105	3.84	1.182	144	-3.832	.113
Communication skills	3.78	.664	4.26	.992	121	-2.895	**.007**
Department run by professionals	4.14	.833	3.99	.887	186	1.220	.465
Programs respected among students	4.03	.854	3.89	.858	186	1.039	.671
Program has a clear sense of purpose/mission	4.13	.871	3.91	.912	187	1.707	.637
Programs run smoothly	3.83	.855	3.62	.979	187	1.587	.143
Programs have adequate resources	3.86	.934	3.18	1.104	187	4.519	**.043**
Program has qualified staff and teachers	4.12	.810	3.93	.789	187	1.521	.521

Table 4
Cross-tabulations Exploring Differences Among Employees and Student-Athletes

Which of the following supports are offered by your athletic department		Support unavailable	Support available	Chi squared tests of independence
Resume writing				
	Student-athlete	118	88	x^2 (1) = 17.48,
	Employee	31	67	p < .001
Cover letter writing				
	Student-athlete	144	62	x^2 (1) = 25.12,
	Employee	39	59	p < .001
Mock interviews				
	Student-athlete	149	57	x^2 (1) = 33.25,
	Employee	37	61	p < .001
Career mapping				
	Student-athlete	138	68	x^2 (1) = 18.75,
	Employee	40	58	p < .001
Academic advisor				
	Student-athlete	88	118	x^2 (1) = 7.43,
	Employee	26	72	p < .001
Counseling on undergraduate majors				
	Student-athlete	127	79	x^2 (1) = 22.38,
	Employee	32	66	p < .001
Counseling on graduate school				
	Student-athlete	151	55	x^2 (1) = 24.90,
	Employee	43	55	p < .001
Graduation school information sessions				
	Student-athlete	161	45	x^2 (1) = 14.35,
	Employee	56	42	p < .001
Structured networking opportunities				
	Student-athlete	134	72	x^2 (1) = 21.60,
	Employee	36	62	p < .001
Specific industry information sessions (e.g., real estate)				
	Student-athlete	163	43	x^2 (1) = 7.67,
	Employee	63	35	p < .001

administrators' perceptions and the target audience (i.e., student-athletes) of the student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming

Similar to Berg and colleagues (2021), our findings reveal athletic departments are putting in large amounts of effort and money to create intentional and directional programming that holistically develops their student-athletes through the utilization of outside resources (e.g., alumni, consultants, etc.). Furthermore, we extend Berg et al.'s (2021) work to include student-athletes' perceptions and revealed athletic departments are investing heavily to create specific programming for even more selective groups (i.e., leadership academy); however, student-athletes are often unaware of the programming and opportunities that they have or feel as though they cannot make it due to other commitments. Interestingly, our qualitative findings identified that student-athletes felt positively toward the utilization of outside partnerships and thoroughly enjoyed the amount of training they have had for NIL, which extends the literature on athletic identity (Bell et al., 2018; Boyd et al., 2021). However, our quantitative findings indicated student-athletes undervalue the importance of effective leadership skills in the working world, as well as the importance of basic skills such as reading and writing. These findings suggest student-athletes remain unaware of the importance of identity exploration on future career success (Martens & Lee, 1998).

The data also revealed challenges experienced by student-athletes are still misunderstood by athletic department employees. Like Clift and Mower's (2013) research, student-athletes noted feeling overwhelmed balancing the demands of their obligations, and additionally having to prioritize their specialized leadership programming with their already busy athletic and academic commitments. As athletic departments expand their leadership programming they should be cognizant about the expectations and demands of student-athletes (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). Specifically, solely offering more activities for student-athletes to complete may not help develop leadership, especially if the athletes do not have the capacity to complete them.

Further, our quantitative results indicate statistically significant differences in the perceptions of availability across all academic and career related support, with student-athletes underscoring employees in each category. Qualitative findings provide further contextual information showing that student-athletes are unaware of the programming and support available to them, suggesting that athletic departments should spend more time marketing the resources that they have for the student-athletes. Similarly, Huml et al. (2014) identified that student-athletes had more preferable experiences with resources offered outside of the athletic department (e.g., academic advising) and senior students questioned the career planning resources available, supporting a disconnect between the programming provided by the department and the student-athletes perceptions.

Our findings provide insightful information regarding student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming, which is of importance as these programs are newly developed. Specifically noteworthy, the study gathered perceptions of both the student-athletes and administrators on student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming. While previous research has been completed on leadership programming in higher education, the application of this research to athletic departments identified significant areas of weakness within programming for student-athlete development initiatives and leadership at the intercollegiate level, thus expanding upon the leadership development literature. Additionally, though previous work within sport management has examined athlete experiences with respect to athlete identity (Smith & Hardin, 2018, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019) and career transition (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004), there has been limited work on experiences with and perceptions of student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming. As such, this work fills an important gap within the research and provides useful insights for practitioners.

Collectively, the use of quantitative and qualitative research methods establishes an informative picture. Specifically, as previously discussed our quantitative findings showed significant differences in perceptions of availability of programming (e.g., resume writing, mock interviews, access to advisors, etc.) between student-athletes and athletic department employees, in addition to significant differences between student-athletes and employees regarding the importance of different skills in their post-college career (e.g., leadership, reading, writing, etc.). These differences most commonly show that student-athletes feel that the programming is not accessible, while also undervaluing the importance of personal skills. As a benefit of the mixed method approach, through our interviews we were able to further understand these findings. For example, some student-athletes shared they were not informed of programming until the day of, meanwhile athletic department staff raised no concerns regarding the messaging of programming. Further, student-athletes discussed how the timing of programming could be problematic, either conflicting with practice or class, or overloading their schedules. While employees are cognizant of student-athletes schedules, a lack of understanding appears to have resulted in athletic departments increasing programming and therefore, the demands of student-athletes without evaluation of program effectiveness. Though these decisions may not be purposeful from employees (i.e., their intentions are simply to provide more opportunities), the lack of communication creates challenges for all parties.

Practically, findings from our study offer insights for student-athletes, administrators, and athletic departments. First, perception is reality, so even if organizations are providing several programs at times and spaces that meet their intended stakeholder group, if that stakeholder group is not aware of the offerings or does not value the offerings that becomes a barrier. For example, per NCAA guidelines Division I institutions must have an academic advisor to support student-athletes (Vaughn & Smith, 2018), however, only 57% of the student-athletes indicated they had access to an academic advisor. This illustrates how, despite requirements from the NCAA to provide these services, student-athletes may not recognize their availability. As such, further research is needed to better understand if the barrier is a marketing challenge, time challenge, communication challenge, or miscommunication challenge. The significant gap in perceptions between these internal stakeholders is an easy opportunity for athletic departments to improve and comes only at the cost of time spent on better marketing the resources. Second, athletic department staff and leadership may be able to utilize these themes as they consider how to elevate or create leadership programming. Third, as these student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programs gain traction and resources, they should be more centered within the mission and culture of individual athletic departments.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, there are limitations to address and future research to suggest. First, our high-level results did not pair the gaps by student-athlete, staff, and organization, so future researchers should expand the scope of the investigation to include specific pairings between student-athletes and staff at an organizational level to help organizations truly identify where their blind spots may be, so together they can help strategize some solutions. Additionally, because there are not previously utilized (and validated) survey instruments to measure perceptions and availability of student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programs, we were forced to create an instrument and assess items individually. Though this does increase the chance of Type I error, we felt it necessary to individually assess perceptions and availability of student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming to best understand the

experiences of student-athletes and athletic department staff. Future work could utilize our instrument to assess reliability and validity.

A second way to broaden the score of the research would be to focus the research on specific student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming provided by each class of students (i.e., first, second, third, fourth, graduate). With the majority of participants being first- or second-year students, we are left wondering if the general programming did not resonate with upper class students, so it would be helpful if future researchers examined if the specificity of the program offered has an effect on their perceptions. Third, we did not ask about resource allocation to each student-athlete development initiatives and leadership program, so with the ongoing resource disparity found across all NCAA levels and within levels, future researchers should investigate the effects of resource availability and allocation.

Conclusion

This research explores an important gap in the understanding of student-athlete development initiatives and leadership programming, specifically within intercollegiate athletics. While Rubin and Nwosu (2021) identified significant benefits to leadership academy participants, our research identified barriers to student-athlete involvement in the programming. Therefore, while this programming may be of benefit, its access prevents participation, emphasizing the need for better access to the resources provided. With our results indicating a significant difference in the perception of resources available to student-athletes, we can be confident that improvements can be made to benefit the overall experience of these individuals.

Finally, athletic departments are investing both time and money into the development of leadership programming opportunities, indicating that the success of student-athletes is important to the institutions. However, from our research, a disconnect between the programming and student-athletes exists, which minimizes the benefit to these individuals. Therefore, practically, this research suggests athletic departments ensure that their programming is aligned with the student-athlete population.

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