Empirical Article

Help Me Develop Me: College Athlete Career Development, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Practicum-Based Learning for College Athletes

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Abstract: The purpose of this case study was to assess the effectiveness of practicum-based learning in college athlete development programming at a Division I institution. This case study featured a social cognitive career theory (SCCT) approach to understanding the experiences of 19 Division I collegiate athletes who participated in athlete-centric conferences for the first time. Athletes were interviewed both before and after the conferences. After data collection, the authors conducted a narrative analysis of their experiences to determine how well the athlete's experiences fit within the SCCT model. The findings provide a case for developing a mandated policy for college athlete development frameworks featuring a practicum-based learning baseline and utilizing the SCCT framework for athlete development and advancement.

Keywords: College athlete development, practicum-based learning, college athletes, social cognitive career theory

The Commercial Conundrum of College Athletes

In contemporary sport, the growing National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) operates as a billion-dollar business. The challenges of college athletic departments being housed within higher education institutions have created tension regarding where the institutions spend their time and resources. Though freedoms related to name, image, and likeness (NIL) legislation are seen as a positive avenue for athletes to acquire wealth and brand equity while still in college, inadvertent commercialism can be problematic. The concept of personal endorsements and sponsorships for athletes strengthens the gravitational pull of intercollegiate athletics toward the world of commercialism that the amateurism model was originally designed to protect college athletes from. As commercialism has become normalized in athletic departments, the need has also increased for amicable programming to ensure the holistic development of collegiate athletes. The NCAA has mandated development programming since the 1990s, but there is no policy stating what the baseline of the programs and teaching must include. This has caused a negative impact on programming in a time of commercialization and budget cuts for many institutions. For that reason, the current analysis features a case study to support the notion that a policy should be created to mandate baseline components or models for college athlete development programs, and the policies should include practicum-based learning.

Previous research has explored the need for more effective college athlete development programming (Navarro & Malvaso, 2016) and outcome-based planning (Navarro & McCormick, 2017), but there remains a need for research investigating the social cognitive career process within the overall college athlete literature. Minimal research exists on practicum-based college athlete development programming, especially studies that focus on the frameworks and experiences of college athletes who attend athlete-centric professional development conferences as practicum-based learning.

Regarding the pragmatic addition to existing literature, the purpose of this study is twofold: (a) to amplify the voices of college athletes regarding their experiences within college athlete development programming and (b) to argue for the development of NCAA policies mandating college athlete development or life skills development with practicum-based learning at the core of curricula. The current research is designed to fulfill the call-to-action of the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (known as N4A) by applying successful strategies that previous success in college athlete development programming could aid in the overall development of a framework to be shared with all institutions. Nineteen semi-structured pre/post interviews of college athletes who attended athlete-centric professional development conferences were conducted. The findings inform the value of practicum-based learning experiences and the acquisition of experiential knowledge as part of their institutional college athlete development (CAD) programming. With that in mind, the current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the primary practicum-based learning benefits that college athletes attain from attending professional development conferences?
2. In what ways does social cognitive career theory help to explain how college athletes determine their career paths in development programs?
3. What experiences from athletes can inform the development of policies and practices for administrators to better serve their holistic development?

Review of Literature

Higher Education & American Amateurism

"Higher education has changed markedly since the mid-1960s, mainly due to its shift from being supported by the State to privatization" (Troiani & Dutson, 2021, p. 5). What began in America as a way for seminary teaching and the creation (and diffusion) of knowledge has now morphed into nearly four thousand institutions focused on educating the masses in various topical areas. Unfortunately, the business of colleges and universities has now grown to include various commercial factors in relation to their *educational* foundation, a feature many call the *neoliberal university* (King-White, 2018). In addition to the laden focus on education, many universities continually face challenges related to multi-billion-dollar endowments, revenue generation, enrollment, and recruitment dollars that lead them to operate as high-powered businesses more than higher education institutions (Goldin & Katz, 1999). With the rising trend of students as consumers and faculty as service providers (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017), universities operate more business-like than traditional institutions. This trend has a trickle-down effect when

considering the institutions of higher education that have athletic departments filled with college athletes.

In 1954, Walter Byers, the first executive director of the NCAA, implemented grant-in-aid scholarships and the *student-athlete* vernacular to solidify the American amateurism model of intercollegiate athletic competition (Byers & Hammer, 1995). Byers implemented this intentional verbiage to grow the NCAA and protect the organization from legal claims of workman's compensation (Branch, 2011). The amateurism model was also installed to emphasize the importance of education over-commercialization; hence, 'student' first and 'athlete' second regarding the 'student-athlete' terminology. The model avoids considering college athletes as employees by offering scholarships in exchange for athletic output, though recent advancements in the player unionization space could drastically change this (Sabin et al., 2024).

College athletes are tasked with living within the confines of the amateurism model. They face identical challenges shared by everyday students, adhere to NCAA policies for eligibility, and balance the responsibilities of a full-time student and full-time athlete (Hart & Brooks, 2016). Jenkins (2023), a former Division I college football player, spoke of a personal challenge related to being a college athlete:

> The responsibilities further multiply if the student also needs to make time out of their busy schedule for daily practice, film sessions, workouts, meetings, and time to properly take care of their body and mental health. That is precisely the life of a collegiate-level student-athlete, and it is far from easy to manage the rigor of such a schedule. (p. 2)

College athletes experience many more challenges than the average student because they must also navigate external stressors such as coaching changes, the unknown implications of inevitable sport injuries, and frequent travel to sport competitions that result in time away from campus and classrooms (Berg et al., 2021). College athletes face struggles that are exacerbated by the fact that their rampant schedule leaves little time for personal/professional development (Dashaun, 2020). When athletes do have free time that can be allocated to non-athletic and/or non-academic activities, they face the internal conflict of where to allocate their energy, a concept known as *role conflict* (Navarro, 2015).

The NCAA has academic standards that must be met, which ultimately impacts an athlete's eligibility for competition. It would be reasonable to believe that extra time is spent on tasks that improve academic or athletic performance. This, understandably, would be a priority since 57% of collegiate athletes are on athletic aid (Marsh, 2022) and will most likely spend 'free' time reinvesting into those spaces. The acknowledgment of these additional challenges is a stark reminder of the importance of effective programs to support athletes as they navigate the numerous stressors placed upon them, primarily because of their positionality as both full-time athletes and full-time students (Hart & Brooks, 2016; Huml et al., 2014).

Intercollegiate athletics remains one of the primary sites of hotly contested discussion relating to concepts of integrity, education, commercialism, and the nexus of existence for multi-million-dollar athletic departments that operate as part of higher education institutions. Within the media, these topics have become the primary content shared in headlines because the future of

college sport is continually wrapped around resource allocation and revenue distribution. Some of the primary issues include nine-figure media deals (Wright, 2024), the rising costs of coaching contracts (Lens, 2022), extravagant stadium renovations/constructions (Matheson, 2019), and even NIL deals that have been allowed on the heels of the *Alston v. NCAA* (decided in 2021) case (Taylor, 2022). Not only did the Alston finding allow for the pursuit of lucrative NIL deals, but it also intensified the impact of the transfer portal and re-opened the conversation of compensation for athletes who wish to participate in college video games. Though contemporary athletes will receive compensation for their NIL inclusion in the relaunch of video games due to the *Alston* findings, this comes as a result of ongoing legislation that most notably includes the *O'Bannon v. NCAA* case that originally nullified the use of player NIL without compensation (O'Bannon & McCann, 2018).

College athlete unionization has also become a major topic that has resurfaced in 2024 after the Dartmouth College men's basketball team voted to unionize (Sabin et al., 2024). Their unionization is a major point of contention for the landscape of college athletics. Additionally, Dartmouth has seemingly finished a recent battle that was most notably fought by the Northwestern football team in 2015 (Bartlett, 2022). In response to commercial changes in college sport, campus administrators are tasked with developing more effective CAD programs for the sake of holistically developing athletes beyond the playing field. Previous research has highlighted the troubles athletic departments have with maintaining an academic focus (Fountain & Finley, 2011); the emergence of academic clustering (Case et al., 1987), academic corruption (Smith & Willingham, 2019), neo-plantation connotations (Hawkins, 2010), and the apparent focus on generating revenue over generating graduates (Brown & Williams, 2019). The insertion and subsequent impact of NIL advancements have further complicated the intersection of athletics and academics at universities, which also means the need for CAD programming has intensified because athletes are tasked with adding another extenuating aspect of their experience to the rampant list of challenges that many of them currently struggle to balance (Jenkins, 2023).

Availability Heuristic

Due to the hyperpolarized and inadvertently convoluted nature of the aforementioned 'hot topics,' the NCAA (and corresponding media) has created an availability heuristic. This veil of distraction surrounds the decision-making and policy development of the NCAA and member institutions. The availability heuristic is a cognitive disposition that occurs when people base their focus of discussion and analysis on information that is most readily available and presented to them (Mullen et al., 1992). People become distracted by the framework of information presented to them, as opposed to the full landscape of relevant information and factors to be considered (Goffman, 1971). In the case of college athletics, major contributors such as the NCAA, member institutions, the media, and the general public have become hyper-fixated on items related to the commercial aspects of sport while losing sight of the academic portion of the college athlete experience. In other words, many are focused on commercialism and controlling who can harbor the most money. Yet, the original goal of the NCAA – on paper – is to foster fruitful academic experiences of college athletes and protect them from commercialism so they can focus on their education and preparation for careers beyond sports.

In order to shift the narrative from one of availability heuristic to one of holistic development for future leaders, it must be noted that not all athletes are focused on pursuing professional sports (Jenkins, 2023) or being an overt athlete (Singer, 2005). Furthermore, while some are interested in NIL and unionization, others are simply focused on career development and job readiness. Leaders and administrators would be unwise to focus the bulk of their attention on creating policies regarding the list of availability heuristic topics while ignoring the largest population of college athletes who need to develop career readiness skills and acquire a meaningful degree. An athlete noted, "He wishes the athletics department would build in some programming to be provided during junior or senior years that simply taught people 'how the real world would work'" (Forester et al., 2020, p. 339). Some athletes still believe in the power of the amateurism model and its theoretical focus on education, development, and mobility, which means that it is important that the NCAA and member institutions develop mandates, policies, and frameworks to support the holistic development of all college athletes (Navarro, 2015). In order for that to happen, a thorough understanding of the history of college athlete development programs must be conducted.

College Athlete Development (CAD) Programs

The NCAA Foundation and Division IA Athletics Directors' Association created the CHAMPS/Life Skills Program (Challenging Athletes' Minds for Personal Success) in 1991. However, the program was not introduced to the membership until 1994 (National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals, 2022). The program was founded on five key areas: academics, athletics, personal development, career development, and community service. Though these components are considered imperative, there is currently no standardization in the field to measure program success for members. Because college athlete development (similar to academic advising) is a core component of the athlete experience, the N4A and NCAA have come together to provide suggested guidelines to address program measurement and standardization. Deliverables have been brainstormed and proposed in white papers, but program implementation and curricula have varied widely at the campus level due to differences in staff size, responsibilities, athletics and campus resources, budget, and overall buy-in from the institutions and athletes alike.

Given the finite number of athletes granted the opportunity to compete at the professional level, an undergraduate degree in alignment with an athlete's career interest is critical to their transition into life after their playing days have concluded (Gill & Farrington, 2014). In order to achieve this goal, athletic departments have developed academic support and career development programs to assist college athletes in navigating their off-field responsibilities related to social skills development, career development, and mental health services (Gunn & Eddy, 1989). College athletes are typically introduced to their academic support staff during recruitment visits and preliminary meetings prior to enrollment, which usually includes academic advisors, learning specialists, and tutors (Rubin & Moses, 2017). This introduction is pivotal to the success of Division I athletic departments for many reasons, including (a) the academic support staff plays an integral role in the success of college athletes off the field; (b) many major universities recruit top athletic talent and offer conditional admission regardless of academic background; and (c) many incoming college athletes are academically unprepared for the rigor associated with Division

I institutions and require support to develop the skills necessary to successfully matriculate through undergraduate studies (Rubin & Moses, 2017).

The continued need for more effective academic support cannot be dismissed. To make matters more pressing, it is important to consider how college athletes also require effective career development in order to ensure their success in the workforce once they are finished competing. Due to their schedule congestion related to athletics and academics, college athletes typically miss opportunities to develop themselves in the professional sense (i.e., outside of their sport) and subsequently end up trying to 'figure it out' once they are no longer competing in athletics. The NCAA agrees that "many student-athletes lag behind their non-athlete peers with regard to career readiness, failing to recognize how sport-related skills are related to the world of work" (NCAA, n.d, para. 1). Furthermore, college athletes may lag behind their non-athlete peers in additional areas related to self-exploration, assessment of personal interests, career acquisition, and even dispositional qualities in preparation for their future careers (Van Raalte et al., 2017). Although the NCAA values leadership and career development (i.e., providing a minimal number of opportunities for current collegiate athletes and professionals in athlete development roles), CAD programming is not mandated nor funded by the NCAA. This has resulted in many athletics departments limiting the emphasis they place on this component of holistic development.

Unfortunately, most college athlete support programs tend to focus on time management, tutoring, and class scheduling, but athletes are missing the professional development component that places them on their desired career pathway (Forester et al., 2020). Furthermore, they miss practicum-based learning opportunities because they become used to athletic administrators and leaders doing menial tasks for them, which leads to a lack of soft-skill development. With a practicum-based approach, CAD programs can place a greater value on experiential learning to gain hands-on experience as part of the learning process. Practicum-based learning features a space where students can apply knowledge from class and life experiences in professional settings relevant to their desired career areas. They can then integrate all of their learned information into an overall approach when pursuing internships, fieldwork, practicums, and other opportunities that may arise. Though they are typically supervised by professionals, they are granted the space and opportunity to explore while receiving ample mentorship and feedback to maximize their learning experience. The overemphasis on revenue generation and commercialization has led to a decrease in programming for college athletes, even though it is understood that college athletes are typically better equipped to make career path decisions after participating in amicable career development programs as part of their holistic development. There remains a need to develop a policy that ensures that all athletes receive the proper development opportunities to confirm that they feel confident in their career path upon graduation, including components such as completing a career development course, practicing interviewing skills, attending a resume/cover letter workshop, engaging in networking opportunities, completing a practicum/internship, and being a student-athlete (Navarro, 2014).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

In alignment with the focus on practicum-based learning, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was utilized in this study. SCCT is a theoretical framework developed by Lent et al. (2002) and originated from the psychologist's desire to understand the interconnectedness of career

interests, choices, and outputs/performance. SCCT has been a useful theoretical framework to explain how individuals, e.g., students and athletes, discover particular career interests, make career-related decisions, and ultimately achieve career success in their chosen vocation. SCCT integrates principles from cognitive psychology and social learning theory to understand the role of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors in career development. Fortunately, SCCT is also considerate of the intersectional ways that the central, social, and cognitive variables of people operate; all variables operate in concert with the other aspects of a person, i.e., socioeconomic status, race, gender, education, ethnicity, etc. (Lent et al., 2002).

SCCT was inspired by the historical, theoretical entanglements regarding vocational psychology and the college athlete experience. Though esteemed scholars have utilized other theories and frameworks to interrogate the college athlete experience and the multifaceted nature of their development (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Forester et al., 2020; Navarro & Malvaso, 2016; Navarro & McCormick, 2017), this approach is seminal in the focus on practicum-based learning and its overall impact on increasing pragmatic career development for college athletes. Athletes are understood to be students first and athletes second by nature of their terminology and institutional positionality, but a common portion of their development that is largely overlooked is the development of the soft skills necessary for transitioning into the workforce. There are numerous transferable skills that athletes learn throughout their time of competition, i.e., socialization through sport, that lead to greater areas of success beyond the field of play. However, it is up to administrators, professors, mentors, and athletic leaders to help students learn how to put their skills to vocational use (Cranmer, 2017). In other words, college athletes develop the cognitive muscles/skills needed to be successful in their chosen vocation; they just require effective college athlete development programs to aid in learning how to exercise said muscles.

For most of their careers, athletes understand – or are told – that it is their physical skills that separate them from the population of traditional students. Unfortunately, it also means that much of their cognitive/affective/inspirational ambitions are placed second to their physical development simply because they are athletes. Through an SCCT lens, the focus can be returned to the college athlete experience – away from the availability heuristic of transfer portals and stadium deals back to one of academic integrity and career preparation. Hence, this research focuses on the idea of college athlete career development through a social cognitive lens. The analysis is synonymous with the overall goal of SCCT, especially when operating from "a position that attempts to trace some of the complex connections between persons and their career-related contexts, between cognitive and interpersonal factors, and between self-directed and externally imposed influences on career behavior" (Lent et al., 2002).

SCCT features three interlocking models that, when considered together, lead to successful career understandings and matriculation for students and athletes: (a) interest development, (b) choice, and (c) performance. First, SCCT makes use of *interest development*, where interests (career or otherwise) develop through a combination of factors related to the person, environment, and overall learning spaces that people are exposed to. Personality traits, values, cultural norms, role models, mentors, family, feedback, and socioeconomic status, to name a few, are pivotal in the generation of interests by people, especially college athletes who experience the world through a duality of student and athlete. Second, SCCT builds on the concept of *choice*, where the diversity of people, their contexts, and learning spaces influence their choice behaviors based on their

interests. Conceptually, SCCT scholars divide this process into three parts: the expression of a primary choice or goal; actions, such as choosing a sport or enrolling in a summer program; and performance attainments that form the feedback loop and shape future behaviors/choices (Lent et al., 2002). In the case of athletes, this means that they will have to intentionally choose their career trajectory, i.e., what major they select or career they decide to pursue, and subsequently decide which behaviors and actions might be necessary to complete their goal without being influenced by athletics to join clustered majors (Fountain & Finley, 2011). Lastly, SCCT focuses on *performance* and the level of accomplishments/pursuits that are interwoven with the ideas of ability, self-efficacy, expectations, and goals. Essentially, people set performance goals based on their previous choices, actions, options, and achievements. When considering their career path, people not only choose their focus and behaviors but also 'put them to the test' by exercising them and evaluating the successes and failures of their actions. Personal actions may include acquiring relevant skills and knowledge to progress, seeking out opportunities for career advancement, and persisting in the face of setbacks.

The major elements of the theory, though significant in their individuality, are meant to work together bidirectionally over time (Lent et al., 2002). SCCT research has been used in various psychological spaces related to diversity (Brown & Lent, 2017; Flores & O'Brien, 2002), personalities (Schaub & Tokar, 2005), and even computing (Lent et al., 2008), but few have applied SCCT to sport literature and none have employed SCCT to explain the value of practicum-based learning in college athlete development programs (Chan, 2023; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

Current issues in higher education, such as "support for financial aid, rapidly increasing tuition rates, diminishing appropriations, modified governance relationships, and a complex and global society that demands college graduates acquire more skills and capacities" (Chan, 2016, p. 2), appear to exacerbate the college experience for athletes. Consequently, "the holistic development (e.g., academic, mental, physical, social) of college athletes continues to receive ample consideration from both athletic department administrators and researchers" (Berg et al., 2021, p. 695). The time has come for athletic and academic leaders to develop a mandated baseline policy for college athlete development that includes practicum-based learning. The current study offers a research-informed rationale, through a SCCT lens, to show the value of practicum-based learning to highlight holistic development for college athletes. Authors of existing literature (Hextrum, 2020; Navarro & Malvaso, 2016) and leaders of organized groups (e.g., N4A) have noted the need for enhancing college athlete development programming – and the role of practicum-based learning as the best route forward.

Methodology

This qualitative research developed as a case study of original storytelling. "In the western canon, major thinkers have understood story as a technique for making sense of self, other, and world, as a device for communication, and hence, as a social practice that can be explored and theorized" (Rice & Mündel, 2018, p. 10). In this context, the current case study centered on the lived experiences of 19 college athletes at a Division I institution who successfully attended professional development conferences in conjunction with ongoing college athlete career development programming. The use of storytelling as a research method was highlighted for this case study because the lived experiences of college athletes participating in practicum-based

learning presented the most amicable way to gain experiential knowledge about the value of their inclusion in programming – and ultimate congruence with the SCCT framework.

Nineteen college athletes participated in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to examine the stories and subsequent value of attendance at athlete-centric professional development conferences as part of college athlete development because they feature a set of predetermined questions that are systematically designed to guide discussion while also offering opportunities for the interviewers to probe beyond the prepared question set (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014). Athletes were interviewed before and after their attendance at conferences in order to include a pre/post analysis of how their experience had collectively taken shape. Participants were first asked to reflect on their experiences as athletes and their desire to expand their horizons by attending conferences. Then, they were asked to reflect on their experience after they traveled to conferences and engaged with career development activities as part of their college athlete development program. Purposive sampling was utilized for this study, as the target population was composed of current college athletes who have successfully traveled to athlete-centric professional development conferences during their time as a college athlete. The target population was chosen because of their experience in attending conference events, as they are the primary population that can speak to the lived value of the conferences they attended. Prior to conducting interviews, the research team received Institutional Review Board approval to proceed with the study. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom software, which includes audio transcription as empirical findings in the study. Materials were also reviewed by each research team member to ensure accuracy.

After reviewing transcripts, the interview material was examined through narrative analysis to identify major themes. More specifically, the use of narrative analysis within qualitative methodology allowed the research team to center the lived experiences of college athletes to not only focus on the stories told during the interview but also highlight how their narratives added to the overall understanding of valued components of college athlete development programming (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). Narrative analysis is important in the way it centers the stories of the subjects, focusing on the ways that individuals present their accounts of themselves as both constructions and claims of identity (Burck, 2005). The analysis was pivotal to constructing a richer narrative related to the lived experience of college athletes participating in career development programming, specifically when focused on providing developmental experiences and allowing athletes to select the programs they feel most necessary for their growth and advancement. Additionally, narrative analysis is key to understanding how college athletes construct their self-accounts of experiences (Burck, 2005). Once the interviews were reviewed, the researchers selected the sequences of core narratives from college athlete self-accounts, examined their structures, and identified the three emergent thematic connections that linked the stories within the interviews (Labov, 1972).

The experiences, i.e., themes, of college athletes were analyzed through an SCCT lens to observe how the model would best explain their progression – and serve as a baseline model for future programs. Finally, the analysis also provides a voice to college athletes; it allows practitioners to gain a better understanding of skills that college athletes can acquire from effective career development programming for future athletes. Interview transcripts were reviewed by each

member of the research team, and each member was responsible for identifying themes in the transcripts. The collective themes and subsequent SCCT analysis are included below.

Results/Findings

The empirical materials from interviews were carefully reviewed in alignment with narrative analysis through an SCCT lens. Three emergent themes were identified from the interview materials, which were carefully aligned with the SCCT framework: interest development, choice, and performance. The current section will feature an exposition of each theme regarding the congruence with the SCCT framework and the value that college athletes garnered from their attendance at athlete-centric professional development conferences as part of their practicum-based learning.

Interest Development

One of the most valuable findings is how athletes enjoyed the ability to own their development and explore their natural interests. Previous research has noted that college athletes have a rampant dependence on athlete academic support staff, but the current findings suggest the need for more opportunities for athletes to think on their own and explore interests in practicum-based learning environments (Ridpath, 2010). For example, consider comments from Adilyn, who spoke of the value of freedom she was given. She said:

> I feel like also you guys knew that this space would be really valuable, and I also feel like you guys didn't push that too much. We all…I feel like really came to the same understanding through our own way, and it was really nice to be able to have that instead of being forced to believe that this space is super valuable, super important … you know what I'm saying? So, just kind of like the freedom to explore by ourselves, explore with our group, set up meetings with other people, administrators; you guys are pushing us to get outside of our box.

For many participants, traveling to athlete-centric professional development conferences was an experience they had not encountered prior to the study. This study focused on changing that narrative by exposing athletes to the world of athlete-centric professional development conferences, diversifying their experiences, and allowing them to explore their interests outside of the playing field. Subsequently, the exploration of interests was the most valuable asset mentioned. To begin, consider comments from Kevin (men's football), who said:

> So first, it felt like honoring to be a part of something like that. And in addition, the amount of resources there, and knowledge being spread that I didn't even know about, or knowledge that I know I should know about, was like, kinda… I don't know how to say it… It just made me think about a lot more about things that I should know about, considering where I'm headed in my adulthood, now that I'm coming to the end of college, entering adulthood soon, you know. There was a lot of great things [information shared] that came close to my life as a student athlete [topical salience]. Like, the biggest thing that I really liked was the Generational Health conversation. Of course, we all care for our family's health so stuff like that I just listened to, along with so many great people speaking

about so many great important things, and a lot of things that I didn't even know that I need to know about. So yeah, it was like, I just like … felt like a sponge, and my notebook was just going crazy jotting down everything that I could. It just felt great.

Kevin spoke directly about the exposure of new interests that he experienced in various aspects of this event, especially when referencing how many of the topics shared were "close to" his personal experience as an athlete. Participation in a practicum-based learning experience allows athletes like Kevin to experience the developmental value derived from interactions with people and stimuli that shape the brain (Bowman et al., 2018). Exposure to new interests is also important for college athletes because it helps to increase their awareness of professions they might not have thought to consider or may not have even known that they were interested in. Mateo (men's football) also discussed the value of exposing college athletes to the conference space and allowing them to own their development. He said:

> It would definitely have to be meeting other Black student-athletes. Even I fall in to the headspace of stereotyping people who look like me. It's amazing to see other people who have aspirations that look like me in this country, and in the same field; athletes, student athletes, in this particular instance. Hearing their stories, and then being like,… "I want to do this after sports … I want to do that … I want to be a doctor … I want to be an engineer … I want to start my own business." It's very, very amazing! In a couple of weeks, I'm going to start emailing elementary schools and high schools, and so on, to see if I could possibly have talks like that for kids who don't have parents or people to look up to because they don't know how to go about it like in, in terms of being so successful in life. Not necessarily having to go to college, or anything like that, but just setting themselves up for success. So, I think just seeing people that look like me, that go against the popular stereotype of … "Oh, they're going to school, the only reason why they're able to get into this school is because they're purely athletic" or whatever the case is. It was just very refreshing, and I think that was the most enjoyable part.

College athletes have longed for more effective development programs (Jenkins, 2023), and many contemporary athletes call for college athletic programs to be more intentional with their development programming. The time for college athletic departments to utilize practicum-based learning to expose athletes to exterior opportunities is afoot, and through effective guidance, perhaps there can be a shift in the pragmatic matriculation of college athletes to walk the stage and ultimately pursue professional employment in a job other than sports participation. In order for this to happen, athletes have to be allowed to pursue and develop their interests and make choices about how to proceed within the newly developed landscape of opportunities. For example, consider Lucas's experience (men's football) about the value of conference attendance:

> It was an experience like no other. I really enjoyed myself. I didn't really know what I was getting myself into with this conference, but I ended up finding out a lot more about myself and my peers around me. It was really cool hearing everybody else's stories. I think that was the biggest thing - hearing people's stories about how their life is, and how it was after sports. Hearing everybody's experiences, their paths, and their journeys really eased my mind a little bit and gave me confidence going forward with my career. It showed what their path was, and how they did it, setting goals and putting their mind to it. I've got that

roadmap for when I'm done with football and I know what to do.

Though Lucas mentioned that he did not know what to expect from the experience, he added that he learned about himself and was able to relax when hearing the stories of others who have embarked on the same road. He spoke directly to the "roadmap" that was afforded to him after connecting with others and being exposed to their stories, which helped to ease his mind and allowed him to define his goals in a way that felt attainable within the scope of his college athlete experience. Lastly, Lucas finished his comments with the power of certainty that he had a plan for what would happen in life after football, which was the value of interest development and the subsequent choice that he would be granted with the newfound information. Next, the value of choice as the second model/theme of SCCT for college athletes will be explored regarding practicum-based learning.

Choice

The second most prevalent theme extrapolated from athlete narratives was the continued emergence of confidence as a byproduct of exercising the choice to explore their interests and own their development. Initially, athletes in this study spoke of an underlying lack of confidence in themselves when navigating the conference space. Due to the scant nature of research targeting athlete experiences at athlete-centric conferences, it can be gathered that participants in this space may have lacked confidence in their abilities to network and connect with industry professionals because they have not been placed in scenarios that would allow them to explore their interests, grow their social skills, and choose their area of focus. For example, consider comments from Shannon (women's soccer), who spoke of the difficulty of networking with other athletes in the space. She said:

> Personally, I…I, for me, it was probably networking. It was hard for me to, like, get my name out there and kind of just, like… I feel intimidated because, obviously there's hundreds of other student athletes there so, I felt like I wouldn't be remembered, so I was like, what's the point?

Shannon mentioned that she experienced difficulty in networking with other college athletes in the same space because of the intimidation factor, along with the fact that there were hundreds of others who she perceived to be more memorable than her. Conceptually, her lack of confidence could speak to the SCCT model of choice, wherein she has never learned the skills to participate or compete in the networking space. She subsequently would not typically choose to be in those spaces for that reason.

In a similar nature, Mateo (men's track and field) mentioned the confidence factor about his choices as an athlete. He said:

> Personally, I think as student athletes there's obviously the athlete part of things which is very busy, and you're doing all that. And then, there's also the school that keeps you even more busy, and most of your life that is (for that duration) all you're doing is school stuff, and athlete stuff … and you don't have time to actually explore yourself, explore the people around you, or learn anything about anyone. So, you're stuck within this very limited

bubble that basically limits your expansion in life; after athletics, after school, whatever the case. So it was definitely an amazing opportunity in that sense because, as someone who was, at that time, preparing to leave school and go into the workforce, and going into this crazy a** country where I'm more exposed to regular citizens, and so on, I'm not protected by that label of being a student, or student-athlete. So now I'm just simply a citizen like another person. So, preparing for that I feel like I really needed that (conference) to basically open me up … in my mind and in my thoughts, and get me ready to interact with other people, knowing that they're people who look like me that have completely different ideas, too, right? It gets me ready for those complex conversations later on.

Mateo presents much data to unpack, starting with the nod to the role conflict of being a college athlete and battling the divide of time spent on athletics and academics. He then speaks of the additional layer of personal exploration that appears to be hindered by the college athlete role conflict. As an athlete approaching graduation, he mentions being 'stuck within this very limited bubble that basically limits your expansion in life,' which is a comment in stark contrast to the generalist narrative of expansive components related to the college athlete experience (Harris, 2018). Mateo then speaks to the value of the conference space and how it provided him with expansive choices and prepared him for the transition from college to the industry. As he said, the conference space increased his choices by opening his mind to the importance of choosing the people to interact with; he learned from their experiences while growing as a person.

Similar to Mateo's newfound expansion of mind, Noemi (women's cross country, track, and field) spoke of the surprise of enjoying networking and being able to explore choices of future possibilities. She said:

I didn't really think that I was gonna come in and actually just start talking to people that I kind of look up to, because they are where I wanna be at in life. I didn't think I was gonna be as comfortable with talking to them as I was, and I felt a lot of them were really trying to also reach out and help us. They were willing to give out their numbers and say if you need anything, "Please reach out to me." So, I thought that was a really great experience for me from that standpoint. They made us feel very comfortable with talking to them. So, my overall experience was great and I had tons of fun, and I love just meeting people and networking with them.

Ultimately, the conference afforded athletes like Noemi and Mateo a newfound awareness to choose their own development and pursue conversations of growth with the people present. It appears to have increased their confidence and comfortability in interacting with other athletes and industry professionals, which is a major part of the inherent value of conference spaces as sites of exploration and realization.

The confidence factor is important for the choices that college athletes make, especially when considering the behaviors they choose to employ and the networking activities they partake in. Confidence is necessary to know that their interests can be actualized, fueling future choices to indulge in continuous behaviors. In fact, Sam (men's football) spoke of a newfound confidence in himself and others in choosing to exercise the power of being a college athlete at the conference:

> One of the biggest takeaways I had was: I have a voice. I can create change and it's up to me; fellow athletes and I can come together to do that because we all can be very powerful. If we come together, especially with our foundations of being student athletes in all our different sports, we have a big voice and it's up to us to use it.

As Sam stated, it is important that college athletes understand that they have the power to create change through their voices. Many athletes don't realize that they have the power of voice and choice of when/how to use it. This will prove important going forward, as it will directly connect their decisions of choice and confidence with their subsequent performance development programs.

Performance

The final component of the SCCT framework of models, performance, is one of the most prominent themes for the athletes in the study. This is especially relevant when considering their continuous challenges in networking, testing approaches, and inadvertently navigating trial-and-error approaches to the conference space. Ninety-five percent of athletes had resumés, and eighty-four percent had LinkedIn profiles in preparation for the conference, demonstrating their laden desire to maximize their experiences and invite the best networking opportunities. Athletes appeared to understand the importance of resumés, LinkedIn profiles, and networking once they arrived at the conference and could see their preparation pay off when testing their skills. For example, consider comments from Megan (women's gymnastics), who spoke of the return on investment of her performance at the conference. She said:

> I just think that it opened a lot of doors for me, and just gave me a lot more opportunity, not only with learning how to utilize my LinkedIn and learning that it's important to follow up on emails and follow up on messaging, but also it's a good thing to reach out to people even if you aren't necessarily interested in their company, or in exactly what they're doing. It's still important to build a connection, because you never know who they know and who those people might know, and how it can just build from there. So … cause (before the conference) I never really reached out and didn't really think networking was that important, but after this event, I realized how important it was.

Here, Megan speaks to the importance of college athlete development practitioners developing pragmatic programs to ensure that athletes are prepared and feel empowered to 'perform' when they need to connect with industry professionals. Ultimately, practicum-based learning ensures that college athletes receive the support and development needed to connect with industry professionals and feel the self-efficacy necessary to amicably pursue the career they desire once their playing days conclude. For example, consider comments from Megan (women's gymnastics), who said:

> I think it opened a lot of doors for me, because I was able to meet with people from Lenovo to try and get my foot in the door to get sales experience, which is what I want to go into but like in a different field. So, I think that was really helpful, because I was able to connect with them on LinkedIn, and I started applying for jobs there already. So, I think it's just like setting me up for success after school. So, I'm not like, as lost.

Megan reminds us of the dangers of college athletes' lack of exposure and ability to perform when securing their future professional ventures. Some athletes may feel 'lost' if not granted opportunities to explore their interests outside their respective sports. Feeling lost highlights the important role of college administrators and their responsibility to increasingly expose athletes to the availability of career options. Furthermore, Megan spoke of how her exposure to the conference space expanded her horizons and allowed her to envision opportunities for success after school and intercollegiate athletics ends. The exposure to opportunities outside of athletics is ultimately how athletes can live up to the NCAA's mantra of "going pro in something other than sports." This aspect is important, especially because the mantra is a major selling point for the NCAA brand and its member institutions' operational mission.

Like Megan, Veronica (women's cross country, track, & field) was aware that her sporting days would eventually end and needed to explore/prepare for career options while still in school. When asked about the importance of attending this conference, she said:

> For me specifically I just know that my life is not a pro career. I'm not gonna go pro in track. I'm not about that life. And, I know I want to have a career, like, in corporate America, and, just dealing with all the things that the conference taught us about, and just learning how to network. Talking with people with different companies, it kind of helped me cancel out things I don't want to be a part of, and companies and organizations that I don't think would fit me. Yeah, it was important for me! The conference was a great start to my summer, and me getting into SAAC [Student-Athlete Advisory Committee] and just things that I want to be part of. It just made me realize you have to snap back into reality and realize you are more than just athletes, like, I have a lot more things to worry about outside of college and just my life right now. And, I think that really just kind of made it actually realistic.

Veronica directly mentions 'being realistic' about her future and having the ability to explore/expand the possibilities outside of her sport. The exposure granted by the conference space allowed her to learn how to network, talk to others in the industry, and determine which avenues she wasn't interested in. More importantly, it helped to solidify her understanding that she is more than an athlete and that she has much more to look forward to in her future career outside of sport. This gratitude of performance and confidence was shared by Virginia (women's soccer), who said:

> I feel like every time I call my mom now, I'm telling her, "Oh mom, I got an internship with Adobe," "Oh mom, I'm going to Texas for the [development conference]". She's like, "When are you going to stop doing things?" and I say that, "I don't know. They come to me. I can't say no. It's hard to say no often." So that's why I mean like for me the big difference is just, like, seeing opportunity is coming to me here; while in France I was chasing them. Now, I still chase some of them, but I can do it better.

Virginia spoke directly about the joy she felt when speaking to her mother about all the opportunities she had been given. Additionally, she noted how she felt as if life was granting her opportunities that would inadvertently lead to a promising career outside of soccer. Envisioning possibilities and exposure to alternative career avenues can be effective tools for college athletes when they realize that their sporting days will conclude and they must have other skills to rely on.

The expansion of career opportunities, i.e., performance, can also combat the growing concern about the mental health of college athletes (Johnson, 2022), which could undoubtedly include anxiety related to their transition out of sport and lack of self-efficacy in performing the necessary duties to secure an enjoyable career.

The current findings demonstrate how SCCT can be a helpful framework for explaining the value of practicum-based learning in college athlete development programs. It can be inferred that this case study serves as a foundation for progress toward a mandatory practicum-based learning component for CAD Ideally, the NCAA would create such policies. Member institutions currently follow the policies, boundaries, and guidelines set forth by the NCAA. Although the NCAA currently faces dozens of lawsuits over their lack of continuity and integrity with policies and enforcement, implementing a mandatory policy utilizing the SCCT framework could increase athlete development programming as college athletics becomes increasingly commercialized.

Discussion

The goal of this case study was to determine the primary practicum-based learning benefits that college athletes attained from attending professional development conferences. The SCCT framework was utilized to determine if the models of interest development, choice, and performance could explain (a) the value acquired from practicum-based learning as a part of college athlete development programming, and (b) how their experiences can inform the development of policies and practices that better support their holistic development. SCCT helps researchers understand the value that athletes receive by highlighting the importance of exposure to their evolving interests, the choice to engage in behaviors that may further their development, and the ultimate trial of their actions for the sake of growth. The experiences of the athletes in this study neatly fit within the existing framework of SCCT, which leads to three conclusions: (a) the SCCT framework can be used as a baseline to create holistic development frameworks for college athletes, (b) practicum-based learning is a necessary component of college athlete development, and (c) the NCAA should create a mandatory policy for the baseline framework of college athlete development instead of the mere requirement of programming without essential guidelines.

Much like the scope of the N4A white paper and subsequent call to action, the need for flexibility and equity with college athlete development programming varies from institution to institution. In other words, researchers are under no pretense that the same stringent framework for college athlete development would work effectively for all institutions because they have varying populations, demographics, students, and factors to consider. Conversely, the current study is simply a case to show the power of practicum-based learning through the voices of college athletes themselves. In this way, this study provides a voice to the lived experience of college athletes and allows them to own their development and take ownership in sharing their stories/experiences. It is not the intention of the researchers to speak for the athletes but rather to utilize a narrative analysis to present their stories in a way that can lead to policy change in their favor.

Various sub-themes appeared during the analysis, beginning with the recurring theme of the power of networking. The subtheme of networking connects with all three parts of the SCCT model because participants in this study appeared to struggle with the experience of 'putting

themselves out there' in the professional world and interacting with others in the space. Whether it was not knowing what to discuss, not knowing what they liked, or not understanding how to network, college athletes in this study utilized the concept of networking to develop their interests, choose who to connect with, and ultimately test their tactics. Granted, their overall apprehension is understandable, considering that they are typically asked to conduct tasks in relation to the sport or skill that they are confident in. They are typically taught to put the team before themselves and 'play for the person next to them,' so speaking on their own behalf and advocating for themselves may seem foreign to how they have been conditioned to operate.

From identifying athletic talent to receiving camp invites to evaluating skills and recruiting, the networking portion happens with little or no effort from the athlete. Their coaches, guardians, and leaders are typically those who advocate for athletes, which makes networking more challenging since they don't develop this skill for themselves until after they've entered college. This is why practicum-based learning is important to college athlete development and certainly the reason for this component as part of the mandatory programming framework. It is imperative that college athletes learn of their interests outside of the playing field, have a choice in how to pursue their interests, and have opportunities to practice the skills necessary for career success. A simple mandate for general programming does not suffice for college athlete development, as many athletes know they will not compete and be compensated professionally. They need career development, and it is important to understand that practicing the skills necessary to be proficient in their chosen careers is paramount to their success in life.

Networking is also an important component of practicum-based learning for college athlete development and advancement because it allows for exposure to their peers that they might not have otherwise known. Previous research (Hawkins et al., 2017; Steward, 2014) has indicated that many athletes feel siloed because they spend most of their time interacting with those on their team and do not experience much engagement with non-team members (Burton et al., 2021). Outside of that, many may not feel part of the campus community for various reasons, most often due to the difference in experience between the athlete and the typical college student (Navarro & McCormick, 2017). Their experience appears congruent with many athletic department professionals (Stewart, 2014) and college athlete academic advisors who have noted that they also feel as if athletics operates on its own island, which includes silos and the secular grouping of people (Harry et al., 2023). It is important that SCCT and practicum-based learning are utilized to decrease the siloed nature of the college athlete experience and instead increase opportunities for athletes to develop their interests and ultimately pursue their desired careers.

Implications for Students

The athletes in this study have shared the developmental value of attending conferences for practicum-based learning – and the power of their experience. Though SCCT themes have been discussed, the implications for future athletes must also be considered. Participants spoke of gaining a more futuristic scope of the realities of their lives and the importance of adapting their social identities while still competing in athletics. First, consider comments from Amelia, who spoke of the importance of LinkedIn and networking for the future:

Before the conference, like, I had a LinkedIn profile but never used it. I had maybe like a few connections, just from family, or close friends, or whatever. So, I never really thought, "Oh, I should start like reaching out to people and getting people to know who I am." So, I feel like this really built that profile and built the concept in my brain that I need to be putting my name out there and talking to the people that are in the line of work that I wanted to do and kind of get them to know me, so that I do have plans set up for the future.

It is important for athletes to continually plan for the future and understand that asking for help is paramount to effective leadership and investment from those around them. Thankfully, athletes like Noemi have learned this directly from her experience:

My biggest takeaway is to ask for help because so many people are willing to help you, and you might not even know. People might say no, but that's okay because there's a billion, well maybe not a billion, but there's plenty of other people who will be willing to help you, and to take that time to reach out and talk to you. And if they can't help you, they'll probably send you to someone else who can.

Though not all athletic departments operate the same way, part of the value of the SCCT framework rests in how the 'village' of people can develop the athlete and alleviate some of the pressures they face. There is a plethora of leaders, advisors, mentors, former athletes, etc., invested in assisting college athletes in their developmental process; it may be up to athletes to reach out and make their needs known.

Lastly, one of the most impactful implications for athletes are the realizations that they can connect with each other, share experiences, help each other through tough times, network with industry professionals, and even help develop policies for the future. Several participants spoke directly to this value, namely Joaquin (men's football), who said:

My biggest takeaway was…just strength in numbers. That's what I really reflected on, on the plane back, I was looking back, right … I remembered we're standing in a line for the, the taco trucks in the food court, and just seeing how many Black students were there, I was like, "This is crazy," and if we were all there to literally put our ideas into one basket, the kind of effect that we could have on an entire community or the NCAA, it'd be drastic. That's something that I really cherished while I was out there. I was looking around and noticing, "This is great. This is good work."

As a result of effective programming, Joaquin appears to have harnessed newfound confidence in the abilities afforded to him and others as athletes. This is especially relevant for owning one's development and collaborating with others to create the spaces most conducive to healthy learning for everyone. As he said, athletes have strength in numbers, and they would be wise to wield it to create policy change that benefits their development.

Implications for Athletic Departments

Given the experiences shared through the storytelling of athletes in this study, it is imperative that athletic departments consider major changes to ensure that their students feel they

are properly supported. Instead of allowing the pressures of the neoliberal university to cloud the judgment of officials who make policies based on heuristic availability, athletic department leaders would be wise to begin their processes by providing a space for athletes to share their voices and experiences related to their development. Civic paternalistic behaviors cannot suffice as leadership of college athletes, as many of them have varying experiences that need to be carefully addressed (Navarro & Malvaso, 2016). The best way for athletic department leaders to amicably support the athletes they serve is to allow them a forum to voice their likes, dislikes, points of contention, concerns, needs, and desires. From there, athletic departments would be wise not to wait on the NCAA to revamp their college athlete development practices. In alignment with the call to action from N4A, it is paramount that college athletic departments work diligently to develop policies and practices to support the holistic development of college athletes. Based on the findings of this study, the authors suggest that those policies include storytelling from athletes as the mandatory start to policy development, followed by operationalization of practicum-based learning and analysis through the utilization of the SCCT framework to access progress and areas for improvement.

Implications for the NCAA

The NCAA should create a mandatory policy for practicum-based learning as a part of college athlete development programming. In agreement with the call to action within the N4A white paper, it is clear that the existing Challenging Athletes' Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS) life skills program is of marginal importance to the overall operations of the NCAA and its member institutions. Mandating services without the necessary pillars to ensure holistic development for college athletes is unacceptable as the NCAA continues to secure nine-figure deals without properly developing/supporting its athletes. It is unethical for athletes from every major institution to miss experiencing practicum-based learning in a way that leads to a career impact akin to that of the participants in this study. Though it is understood that not all departments operate the same way and some have more resources than others, that does not mean that departments cannot use existing networks of alumni, supporters, donors, and stakeholders to create equally impactful programs for college athlete development. The NCAA should mandate practicum-based learning as a requirement for college athlete development because it serves the same practical purpose as college departments that uphold internship and external project requirements.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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The availability heuristic of NIL and the transfer portal have allowed the commercialization of college sports to overshadow the academic components and need for the holistic development of college athletes. As a result, there remains no policy that mandates the baseline components for an effective CAD framework, and thousands of athletes suffer the risk of completing their studies and playing careers without acquiring the soft skills necessary to define their career path before they graduate. The current case study offers a framework for essential components of effective practicum-based learning programming by implementing the SCCT framework. This case study features storytelling to explain the lived experiences of college athletes and offers policy development implications for the NCAA and member institutions. It is the hope of the authors that the findings will encourage a mandated framework for college athlete

development that includes an emphasis on practicum-based learning and an ability for athletes to own their development.

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