“People don’t acknowledge this process enough”: An In-Depth Investigation into Transition from Sport Programs for College Athletes

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**Recommended Citation**
Kloetzer, Hannah and Taylor, Elizabeth (2023) "“People don’t acknowledge this process enough”: An In-Depth Investigation into Transition from Sport Programs for College Athletes," *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*: Vol. 16, Article 2.  
Available at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/jiia/vol16/iss1/2](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/jiia/vol16/iss1/2)

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"People don’t acknowledge this process enough”: An In-Depth Investigation into Transition from Sport Programs for College Athletes

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Scholars have pointed to numerous struggles retiring college athletes face as they transition out of sport (e.g., anxiety, isolation, body image issues). Though research has explored athletes’ transition experiences, what is missing is an investigation into existing programming offered by National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic departments and its impact on athletes’ biopsychosocial well-being. Utilizing Transition Theory (1981) as our theoretical framework, this sequential mixed-methods study involving survey and interview data collections, examines the experiences of college athletes with respect to their preparation for (current athletes) and reflection of (former athletes) retirement from sport. Findings from this study provide insight into the impact current programming can have on athletes’ well-being, specifically areas of nutrition, physical activity, and alumni participation. However, more consideration needs to be given to distributing these types of programs across all three NCAA divisions.

Keywords: athlete well-being, college sport, transition theory
Scholars have pointed to numerous struggles retiring college athletes face as they transition out of sport including anxiety, isolation, body image issues (Kiefer et al., 2021; Lavallee et al., 1997; McKnight et al., 2009; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010; Papathomas et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). Many studies have reviewed different types of programming offered for retiring college athletes and report its benefit (Kiefer et al., 2021; Oshiro et al., 2023; Park et al., 2023). For example, Kiefer et al. (2021) explored programming offered in 206 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic departments, examining topics such as psychological help to nutrition. Findings indicated significantly more Division I departments offered programming when compared with Division II/III departments (Kiefer et al., 2021). Other research has examined different types of programming, such as athlete identity (Harry & Weight, 2021; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019), career transition (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004), physical activity (Reifsteck et al., 2016), and body image (Papathomas et al., 2018). However, much of the previous literature on this topic is qualitative in nature, which does not allow for generalization across the industry. As such, the purpose of this project is to holistically investigate the existing programming offered by NCAA athletic departments through both quantitative and qualitative methods to offer generalizability. An online survey, followed by interviews, with college athletes about to retire within the academic year (survey only), recently retired within the academic year, and retired for up to 5 years, were conducted. These instruments addressed availability of programming, the most impactful types of programs on college athletes’ transition preparedness, and areas of need in transition from college sport programming.

**Literature Review**

*Theoretical Framework*

**Transition Theory.** Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981) was used as the guiding framework for this study, which revolutionized the concept of transition as a period, rather than a singular moment in time (Kiefer et al., 2021). Further, this model categorized transition as an “event or nonevent resulting in change or assumption, change of social networks, and in growth or deterioration” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5).

Schlossberg (1981) argued the target result of transition is adaptation, or one’s ability to move through the transition. Factors affecting an individual’s adaptation include: the balance of an individual’s resources and deficits of (1) the perception of the transition, (2) characteristics of the environments, and (3) characteristics of the individual (Schlossberg, 1981). The perception of the transition includes characteristics such as gaining or losing a role, the ending affect (positive or negative), the source, the timing, the duration, and the degree of stress associated with the transition. Second, the characteristics of the environment involve internal support systems, institutional support and the physical setting of the transition. Lastly, the characteristics of the individual consider demographics such as sex, age, health, race, socioeconomic status, and previous experience with a similar transition. The level of adaptation is also dependent on the balance of an individual’s resources (situation, self, support, and strategies) and deficits as well as the differences in the three factors (i.e., perception, environment, individual) pre- and post-transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

Schlossberg’s model (1981) has been an integral part of college athletics retirement
research specifically, as this area of literature has grown over the past decade. Goodman and colleagues (2006) built upon this model, stating transition can be seen as three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out. Additionally, prominent research has utilized Schlossberg’s theory on transition (1981) such as Smith and Hardin (2020), whose findings support the moving in, moving through, and moving out phases of retirement, and Stokowski and colleagues (2019) who found college athletes have a negative reaction to adaptation of this transition. Thus, this model appropriate for the current study due not only to its current prominence in the literature, but also its specification (the second tenet) on the role of internal and institutional supports that impact a transition, the characteristics of the environment. Through the perception of retiring and retired college athletes, we use this tenet to better understand the current retirement experience for college athletes and areas of improvement.

**Transition of college athletes.** College athletes comprise an important demographic with regard to transition. The NCAA revealed that out of the 520,000 annual college athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2022b), only 2% continue their athletic careers in an elite or professional setting (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2022a), resulting in approximately 509,600 college athletes retiring from college sport and pursuing non-sport educational and professional opportunities following completion of their eligibility.

Existing literature on college sport transition reveals great knowledge surrounding the first factor of Schlossberg’s model (1981), the perception of the transition. In specific, transition research highlights the many struggles college athletes face when retiring from college sport. For example, Stokowski and colleagues (2019) illustrated that 57.3% of former athletes indicated a negative perception of their transition out of college sport. Specifically, themes of “what do I do now?”, a sense of loss, and a sentiment of not being ready for the next phase were found (Stokowski et al., 2019). Further, due to the commitment to athletics reported by college athletes (i.e., 34 hours per week on athletic-related activities; National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015), this group may have high levels of athletic identity, which can impact perceptions of self-worth and self-esteem (Kleiber et al., 2021). Due to time constraints, college athletes’ social circles tend to be small. Athletes’ schedules are filled with practice, class, games, travel, as well as other sport and school-related responsibilities. This leaves minimal time for exploration into other social circles outside of sport, putting great weight on their relationships with stakeholders in their sport (i.e., teammates, coaches, support staff; Cote et al., 2007; Hayward et al., 2016; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Thus, due to these time demands and small social circles, filled with other sport actors, one’s identity can become hyper focused on sport. Cumulatively, college athletes’ personal and social identities are ingrained in their sport over the course of their undergraduate career (Smith & Hardin, 2018). This exclusive identity was found to be especially high in African American, male former college athletes (Beamon, 2012; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003).

In addition, as college athletes transition out of sport, they are faced with navigating a variety of new spaces (Kiefer et al., 2021). Athletes must: find and start a career or pursue a graduate degree (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Lavallee et al., 2014; Park et al., 2013; Turick et al., 2019; Tyrance et al., 2013), expand their social system outside of their teammates (Park et al., 2013; Stambulova, 2003), learn how to manage their own finances (Park et al., 2013), adapt to a new workout schedule and learn how to fuel themselves to fit a new lifestyle (Oshiro et al., 2023). Therefore, examining college athletes’ transition from sport using Transition Theory (1981) is useful as it is a defined event (i.e., your last game) that marks the end of most college athletes’ careers and there is a large post-transition adaption needed as athletes leave both college and college sport.
College Sport Retirement Programming

Though the transition from college athletics can be challenging, retirement programming, according to Lavallee (2018), is an essential part of ensuring college athletes feel prepared to transition into life outside of college sport. This can include creating a sport retirement plan, joining support sessions, attending educational events or career fairs, talking with a member of one’s support system (i.e., one’s coach), as well as a variety of other types of programming (Lavallee, 2018; Oshiro et al., 2023; Park et al., 2023).

Athletes who participate in sport retirement programming have been found to experience higher levels of success when transitioning from sport (Lavallee, 2018). Lavallee (2018) explored this phenomenon through the context of observational study with rugby players from the National Rugby League in Australia and New Zealand (n = 632); a novel and important study given its exploration of transition from sport programming of a non-American, college sport context. Study findings suggested that those who participated in preretirement planning not only had higher levels of success when transitioning out of sport, but they also had better on-field performance.

Within college athletics, there are a few examples of structured programs. The College Athlete Retirement Education (CARE) program is an eight-week session designed to engage retired college athletes and help them build up strategies to cope with the transition from sport, as well as provide a support group to learn together (Beach 2020). Through a survey-based needs assessment (72 retiring and retired college athletes), Beach proposed this program to specifically fit the unfulfilled mental health needs of retiring college athletes. A pilot study on this program showcased that workshops such as this are feasible and aid in career exploration, identity development, and normalization of retirement from sport experiences (Beach, 2020); however, we have not yet seen this implemented.

There are also similar programs around college athlete retirement. In 2008, the NCAA created the Challenging Athletes’ Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS) program now known as the NCAA Life Skills (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015). The Life Skills program requires a personal and professional development program coordinator in each institution’s athletic department (Tyrance et al., 2013); however, it does not mandate a specific curriculum or provide uniform evaluations to determine effectiveness (Tyrance et al., 2013). Thus, what is offered to college athletes in regard to transition from sport programming, let alone professional development programming, varies by institution. This strategy is helpful in that an institution can cater to its specific college athlete population. However, equity problems arise when not only trying to develop and sustain programming, but also when it comes to how many and what kinds of programs can be offered at an institution.

Leonard and Schimmel’s (2016) work supports the lack of mandated retirement programs, through a three-round modified Delphi panel of academic advisors, sport psychologists, and counselors (n = 11). Their study emphasized how there is a lack of standardized approaches to assist college athletes in their transition out of college sport, in topics discussed for programs, skill and identity development via programs, and implementation of programs. They suggest four main areas of consideration when developing transition programs derived from the participants: future vocational skills, general academic information, transitional topics, and identity development (Leonard & Schimmel, 2016).

Kiefer et al. (2021) expanded on this study, through surveys from athletic department personnel, revealing that significantly more Division I institutions (73%) have implemented transition from sport programming than Division II or III institutions (27%); however, there are no significant differences in the curriculum of each. This work also found the lack of
programming was often a result of lack of funding or trained staff (Kiefer et al., 2021). Lastly, the degree of perceived responsibility of athletic departments to provide transition from sport programming did vary across division level, with Division I athletes rating a higher level of responsibility (Kiefer et al., 2021).

This previous work points to the importance of transition programming for college athletes, however, there is a dearth of research examining the characteristics of the environment (i.e., transition from college sport), which provide a distinct context to study transition (e.g., athletes’ high athletic identity, limited support while transitioning, managing multiple identities). Additionally, and as noted by Schlossberg (1981) and more recent publications from scholars within sport management (see Kiefer et al., 2021; Stokowski et al., 2019, for more detail), transitions should be considered a process instead of a singular time point. As such, we recognize the importance of gaining numerous, diverse perspectives (i.e., gender-identity, race/ethnicity, division, sport, etc.; Beamon, 2012; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Oshiro et al., 2023). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of college athletes with respect to their preparation for (current athletes) and reflection of (former athletes) retirement from sport using Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981). The following questions guided the study:

RQ 1: What types of programming, sponsored by athletic departments, are available and/or mandated for college athletes as they transition out of their sport(s)?
   a: How does the timing and frequency of the programming aid or detract from an athlete’s transition out of college sport?

RQ 2: How does programming offered by athletic departments differ and/or overlap with that offered by universities?
   a: What programs do college athletes find most impactful on their transition out of sport experience?
   b: Do college athletes prefer programming offered by the athletic department or the university?

RQ 3: What areas of transition from sport programming are underrepresented or absent from creating a fully supportive environment for athletes?

Methods

A sequential mixed methods approach was utilized to examine the research questions (Teddile & Tashakkori, 2009). Specifically, survey data were collected in January 2023 from current and former collegiate athletes on their perceptions of and experiences with transition from sport including an examination of available programming, perceptions of programming impact, and influence on well-being. Following analysis of survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted in February 2023 with former collegiate athlete participants from the same population. They consented to be contacted after survey completion. This approach was used as researchers have called for mixed method research in sport management since the 1990s (see Millington & Wilson, 2010; Olafoxon, 1990; Rudd & Johnson, 2010) and van der Roest et al. (2015) suggests the mixed method approach is still underutilized and poorly legitimized in the field. Early calls for a mixed method approach encouraged scholars within the field of sport management to “consider the use of more than a single data source” and “multiple data gathering methods” (Olafoxon, 1990, p. 117). As such, this approach was deemed appropriate as the research questions that guided the current study were interested in types and availability of
programming offered to athletes – questions better answered by quantitative methods – and questions on impact and preferences of programming – questions better answered by qualitative methods. Recent work within the *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* (i.e., Brougham et al., 2023) utilized similar methods on college sport athletes.

**Participants**

**Quantitative.** The sample consisted of 707 current and former collegiate athletes. Just over half (51.8%, n = 366) self-identified as men with 330 (46.7%) identifying as women and 11 (1.6%) identifying as non-binary. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 31 with an average age of 24.69 (SD = 2.90). Approximately 53.2% (n = 376) self-identified as white with 33% (n = 233) identifying as Black or African American and less than 10% identifying as each of Asian, Native American/Alaska Native, or other. All three divisions were represented. Participants’ retirement year ranged from before 2017-2018 to 2022-2023 to incorporate different periods of the retirement from sport transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). Almost one-third (31.3%) had an unplanned retirement (e.g., career ending injury). Participants played every NCAA sponsored sport except rifle, rowing, and skiing. See Table 1 for additional demographic information on survey participants.

**Qualitative.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 former college athletes. Within this interview sample, five participants were men, five were women, six were white, four were Black, all were domestic college athletes, and one had transferred institutions. Seven participants competed in Division I, one was from Division II, and two participants were from Division III institutions. One participant experienced an unplanned retirement. Seven NCAA varsity sports were represented: field hockey, football, rowing, soccer, track and field, volleyball, and water polo. Participants’ retirement years varied between the academic years of 2017-2018 and 2021-2022. These retirement years were chosen with the intention that former athletes could provide a better reflection of their experiences.

**Measures and Procedures**

Part 1 of the study utilized quantitative, survey methods for data collection. Qualtrics software was used to create an online survey, which was distributed via our social media platforms (Instagram and Twitter) as well as emailed to 60 selected athletic departments (e.g., the Senior Woman Administrator or Assistant Athletic Director), 20 randomly selected from each division. Questions examined availability of programming (e.g., nutrition, sport psychology consultants, exit interviews, graduate school information sessions, career development) offered through participants’ athletics departments and institutions, if the programs offered were mandatory, and how impactful participants found the available programming to be. A final open-ended question: “If you could offer suggestions to your athletic department on their transition from sport programming, what would it be?” was also asked.

Following sequential mixed methods procedures, results from the survey were utilized to formulate more specific interview questions (Cronholm & Hjalmarsson, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). For example, we noted the presence of both athletic department and institution-sponsored programming in the survey but wanted to greater understand athletes’ feelings and preferences towards these options prompting the question “Do you think programming should come from your athletic department, institution, or neither?” With every answer the interviewer asked specific follow-up questions, such as “Why do you want the
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Demographics</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American/Alaska Native</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g., multi-racial)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>International College Athlete</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transferred</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>80.9%</td>
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<td>Prefer not to say</td>
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<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduation Year</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Before 2017-2018</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020-2021</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021-2022</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022-2023</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 2022-2023</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post-Graduation Plans</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Work force</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate school</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical school</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Law school</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time off</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

athletic department to be in charge of retirement programming” or “If you were solely in charge, how would you want the layout of retirement programming to look?” This is noteworthy, as we did not want to lead participants’ responses with our questions and only utilized quantitative results to tailor interview questions to examine specific areas of interest. We view the ability to formulate specific questions based on results from our survey data collection as an “opportunity provided in sequential mixed methods” (Cronholm & Hjalmarsson, 2011, p. 91). Interviews
Transition From College Sport Programs consisted of 15 open-ended questions and focused on areas of need in transition from sport programming specifically as it relates to their environment (Schlossberg, 1981), (i.e., “Can you take me through your retirement experience?”; “What were certain areas you found you needed specific support in?”; “What were some feelings associated with this transition?”). Interviewees were randomly selected from the survey sample. At the end of the survey, participants could opt in to be contacted about interview participation. From this sample, 20 individuals were randomly selected to participate in the interview portion of this study, of which, 10 responded.

Analysis

Quantitative Analysis. Following completion of survey data collection, data were downloaded from Qualtrics and cleaned and analyzed using SPSS version 28. To assess RQ1, frequencies for availability of programming were conducted. Participants were asked what programming was available and which was mandated, therefore crosstabulations were utilized to determine how often available programming was mandated by athletic departments. To assess RQ2, frequencies for availability of programming and setting (i.e., athletic department or university sponsored) were analyzed. Further, to analyze research RQ2a, means and standard deviations were calculated to understand how impactful college athletes found the available programs (e.g., mental health programming, career development programming). Additionally, paired samples t-tests were conducted to understand if there were differences between programming in terms of level of impact.

Qualitative Analysis. At the conclusion of the interview and transcription process, the primary researcher coded each interview, extracting any important information and key quotes. Following the initial review, themes from all interviews were generated from the codes, incorporating any sub-themes or examples that were necessary (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). A total of two coding rounds were conducted. Specific attention was given to concepts covered questions RQ2a, b, and RQ3 throughout the interview and coding process. During the first coding round, “In Vivo” coding was utilized; data was coded using the participants’ words in order to keep the findings as unbiased and close to the participants’ language used as possible (Saldaña, 2015). Next, the primary researcher conducted pattern coding, grouping first-round codes into emerging categories (Saldaña, 2015). From these categories, themes were developed and interpreted through the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981). Additionally, the same coding process was used on the open-ended question of the survey. Round one of coding was conducted separately from the interview stage, while round two was conducted in conjunction with the interviews in order to generate one list of themes.

Results

The following section aims to answer the research questions of (1) retirement programming availability; (2) the difference and overlap of athletic department programming and institutional programming; and (3) areas of needed programming via mixed-method design. Special attention is given to how the current state of programming impacts an athlete’s retirement experience. Quantitative results are followed by qualitative.

Quantitative Results

Overall, access to a sport psychology consultant (40%) was the most offered resource.
Nutrition workshops were offered to 33.1% of respondents, career planning opportunities were offered to 31.7%, exercise (“working out”) workshops were offered to 28.7% of the respondents, exit interviews were offered to 25.6% of respondents, engagement with retired athletes (including panel discussions) were offered to 27.2% of respondents, guest speakers on topics of interest and NCAA programming were offered to 23.5% of respondents, and networking opportunities were offered to 21.2% of respondents. All other programming was offered to less than 20% of respondents. Notably, 5.7% of the respondents indicated their athletic department did not offer any programming.

We also examined what programming was mandated by athletic departments. Mandated programming is reported only for those individuals within the sample who said the program was offered within their department (i.e., individuals who were not offered nutrition workshops are not included in the mandated percentage). Nutrition workshops were most frequently mandated at 53.8%, with meetings with a sport psychology consultant being mandated 47.0% of the time when offered. Career planning programming was mandated 37.1% when offered, graduate school counseling was mandated 35.8% of the time when offered, exercising workshops were mandated 35.5% of the time when offered, and exit interviews were mandated 34.8% of the time when offered. Specific industry sessions (e.g., nursing, real estate) were mandated 26.5% of the time when offered, money management programming was mandated 22.7% of the time when offered, and networking opportunities were mandated 31.5% of the time when offered. All other programming was mandated less than 20% of the time when offered. See Table 2 for more details.

Participants indicated programming focusing on overall wellbeing was most impactful (M = 3.75, SD = 1.08), followed by career preparation planning (M = 3.58, SD = 1.11), mental health (M = 3.55, SD = 1.15), healthy lifestyles (M = 3.54, SD = 1.16), networking with alumni (M = 3.50, SD = 1.13), and nutrition (M = 3.44, SD = 1.17). Differences were found between overall wellbeing and mental health (t(705) = 4.79, p < .001), overall wellbeing and career preparation (t(705) = 3.78, p < .001), overall wellbeing and nutrition (t(705) = 7.24, p < .001), overall wellbeing and healthy lifestyles (t(705) = 4.77, p < .001), overall wellbeing and networking with alumni (t(705) = 5.43, p < .001), career preparation and nutrition (t(705) = 3.24, p < .001), mental health and nutrition (t(705) = 3.18, p = .002), and healthy lifestyles and nutrition (t(705) = 2.62, p = .009).

Qualitative Results

From the last open-ended question in the survey as well as the semi-structured interviews, seven themes were identified, specifically as they relate to the nature of supports from their environment and the complexity of the college athlete retirement experience: (1) more programming, marketing, and accessibility; (2) needed programming; (3) better preparation and a standard plan; (4) close contact with retiring athletes; (5) special attention to those with career-ending injuries; (6) stripped of identities; and (7) role of the team. The following sections will explore these themes in depth.

More Programming, Marketing, and Accessibility. Initially, the call for more marketing of programming arose. Participants clearly stated that not enough is/was provided for them, and if it was, no athletes knew about it or could access the programming. Calls for more programming did not offer specific suggestions for program content. Participants just needed more acknowledgment and effort to this part of their college athlete experience. In particular, this
Table 2
Frequencies of Available and Mandated Athletic Department Sponsored Programming

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programming</th>
<th>Athletic Dept. Offered</th>
<th>Athletic Dept. Mandated</th>
<th>Institution Offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to a sport psychology consultant</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition workshops</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career planning</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise workshops</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit interview</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement with retired athletes</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest speakers</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking opportunities</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate school counseling</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific industry sessions (e.g., nursing)</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grad school info sessions</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money management</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Athletic Dept. Mandated percentages indicate the percentage of mandated programming within the Athletic Dept. Offered programs.

participant wanted programming that was set up to occur every year,

I would ask them to add significantly more programming. Optional things would be fine, but they need to establish annual workshops, conversations, and information sessions for those anticipating the transition out of athletics. Especially as a Spring athlete, I saw my athletic career and time in college end at the same time. I would have appreciated programming preparing us for that major change before so many things came to an end all at once. [Women’s Softball, DIII, 2020-2021 Retirement]

Another participant stated that she would have liked to see the bare minimum from her athletic department:

DO ANYTHING. Have graduating seniors talk to alumni about transitioning out of college sports, how to go about working out and eating after retirement, what is a normal amount of exercise, how to rehab yourself without athletic trainers, etc. [Women’s Soccer, DIII, 2019-2020 Retirement]
Lastly, participants felt as if they had to take complete control of their retirement experience if they were expected to receive any help.

On the previous question with the sliding scale, I was conflicted about how to answer. I participated in some programming in those areas that did help me transition out of sport (in the earliest days of the Covid-19 pandemic), but they were not programs offered by my athletic department or university. They were things that I sought out on my own. Everything from books to documentaries to podcasts. I led my own transition out of sport without the assistance of my institution. [Women’s Rowing, DI, 2019-2020 Retirement]

These quotes represent just a few of the voices calling for more programming and acknowledgment of the difficulty of this process. Current and former college athletes want investment into quality programming. The last quote is particularly powerful in that respondents note how helpful programming could be, but there was nothing offered to them; they had to seek it out themselves.

Marketing of the limited programs available also presented issues through the eyes of participants:

I would suggest that the athletic department make the resources available to student athletes more known, generally. I would suggest activities for graduating seniors transitioning out of sports, too, so that we can continue to stay active and also try new things. [Women’s Swimming, DIII, 2022-2023 Retirement]

Athletes noted that greater communication is needed for events and trainings. As the previous quote suggests, even if programs are available, the majority of athletes don’t know about them. Even if they do, both survey and interview participants explain that a lot of time, these events are not for everyone (i.e., divided up by sport or major):

I do think they started to try, by my biggest issue was like every single networking event was very business oriented, and I never wanted to go into business like ever. So, I always felt very, like not excluded, but like I wish that they did a better job of inclusion. [Women’s Volleyball, DI, 2018-2019 Retirement]

Athletes offered a variety of reasons why they felt resources were not accessible to everyone. While all expressed the importance of events for specific groups, athletes wished that, overall, there was more programming for all athletes to participate in.

**Needed Programming.** Throughout both qualitative datasets, a clear message arose as to what types of programming are most desirable throughout the retirement process. They included healthy lifestyle (e.g., nutrition and working out education), mental health access, and alumni involvement.

With regards to a healthy lifestyle post-college athletics, retiring and retired athletes explained the difficulties of learning how to approach this area of life. When asked if they could provide any suggestions to their athletic department regarding transition from sport programming, survey respondents stated:
We need better counseling about what to do once we are retired. I was so used to working out every day with a team that solo workouts became brutal, and I stopped doing them. I wish I had known what to do and how to structure my workouts! [Women’s Cross Country, DIII, 2021-2022 Retirement]

This participant is calling on education to structure her post-retirement workouts. She felt as if she had no knowledge of how to work out without being an athlete. Another woman felt similarly, specifically when it comes to gym or field workouts:

We are so coddled on what to do in the gym and on the field that when we leave the athletic program, I have no idea what to do in the gym or on the field after. I know the right techniques and forms, but I feel completely lost on what to actually do as a non-athlete (specific exercises). [Women’s Soccer, DI, 2018-2019 Retirement]

Additionally, athletes noted that learning to work out and fuel themselves post-retirement takes time, and that any education could have helped expedited this process,

Sessions like the ones mentioned in this survey would be great during the transition. I am post-sports almost 4 years and still learning how to work out and properly nourish myself. [Women’s Rowing, DI, 2018-2019 Retirement]

Within these quotes, it is evident these athletes feel lost once they retire from college athletics on how to work out and nourish themselves in a sustainable way. The idea of educational opportunities to learn about healthy lifestyle exercises, body changes, and proper fueling resonated with athletes and were deemed necessary for any college athlete retiring. Additionally, connecting athletes with training groups and/or support groups to talk through these lifestyle changes were mentioned several times. The need for more support in this area is evident. Athletes need assistance in navigating what it means to work out and fuel themselves not as a college athlete, but as an average person.

Interviewees felt similar. Participants stressed the changes in their daily life habits, such as fueling and working out, post-college athletics. Along with these changes came the challenge of knowing how to properly take care of themselves outside of college sport, a challenge that participants noted came as a surprise for them:

What am I supposed to do, you know, even like more physical stuff of -- I am not working out 3 hours a day, so I am not hungry for 2 dinners, and my body is going to look different …I am not lifting the same numbers in the weight room because I am not a Division I athlete … It is like slowly making that transition even now 2 and a half, almost 3 years later, of like it is okay if I do not work out 6 days a week. [Women’s Rowing, DI, 2019-2020 Retirement]

This quote exemplifies that now, even over two years later, this participant struggles with shifting their athletic goals to be congruent with a sustainable, healthy lifestyle. Other participants noted the lack of knowledge they have around working out for the average person:

I definitely struggle a lot with like the body image stuff … and I guess it's not necessarily body image, but I'm not on a rigorous workout plan anymore, and I don't want to be. But I also realized, how healthy I was, and how much that structure of physical exercise with
lifting and practice also really helps my mental health, but I don't want to work out at that extreme level anymore. But that's how I know how to work out... and so it’s weird. I'm kind of intimidated by working out now because I have to find a new way to do it that is more appropriate for my lifestyle now. But I don't know much on that – it's just really weird to figure out. [Women’s Volleyball, DI, 2021-2022 Retirement]

This participant draws attention to her body image and relationship with working out. She explained that she loves the structure of lifting, and it helps her mental health, but she struggles with finding ways to work out that fit her current lifestyle. Another woman echoed this idea that their end-goal with working out has now changed,

Yeah, I think just like any sort of resources like nutrition and exercise, after all that lots of info throwing at you, but like it would have been nice. Even like our trainer – who I loved – it would have been cool if he could have given us a “you're not training for a sport, but you’re training to feel good, stay healthy kind of, 3 days a week at the gym” workout, as opposed to how we're going during the season. [Women’s Field Hockey, DIII, 2020-2021 Retirement]

From a different perspective, another participant shared his experience with his girlfriend around work out consistency. He noted that they have struggled with coming out with their own workouts post-retirement, and that this new freedom is daunting:

I’m not as consistent as I would like to be working out-wise. Me and my girlfriend – she played college basketball – we used to do that all the time. But like for us, it was like we had someone that did everything for us for so long [creating workouts]. And now that we have that freedom, it's like, “How do we figure it out?” I think that's a tough adjustment [Men’s Football, DII, 2017-2018 Retirement]

It is evident these participants have gone through periods of transition with working out and/or faced struggles when learning new workout schedules. All of these quotes reveal that further guidance on this topic would have proven beneficial.

Quantitative results support this claim by demonstrating the high impact that “healthy lifestyle” programs (e.g., nutrition workshops) have on athlete well-being; however, qualitative findings suggest that it is not widely available yet:

When it came to like, almost like grieving your loss of identity, or dealing with body image as a retired athlete, or finding your new identity, or anything like that, I would have liked to see more. Maybe I just missed the email, but to my knowledge, there wasn't as much of that. It wasn't visible. [Women’s Volleyball, DI, 2021-2022 Retirement]

In a similar sentiment, participants noted the need for greater access to mental health resources when they retire. The healthy lifestyle changes, amongst a variety of other factors, can prove to be tough, and further support is often needed to facilitate this process. Survey respondents expressed the impacts of stopping extreme work out regiments:

More about how the effect of stopping extreme workouts affects your mental and physical health. Some different options on how to figure out a new lifestyle. [Women’s Lacrosse, DIII, 2021-2022 Retirement]
Another participant stated that, when it comes to mental health services, they need someone who has a basic understanding of their experiences,

Offer something for those who are transitioning out of sport besides a grad student sport psychologist because it hard to talk to them especially if they weren’t collegiate athletes themselves. [Women’s Soccer, DIII, 2021-2022 Retirement]

These athletes stressed the need for accessible and consistent mental health access. They note the effect that stopping college sport can have on your mental health and ask that their psychologist understands this experience and can relate to college athletes.

Third, is the use of alumni to help guide this transition process. Survey participants stated that they would have liked to received:

Check-ins or other activities coordinated with alumni to keep us involved once our last season was over would have also helped the transition. [Women’s Swimming, DI, 2021-2022 Retirement]

Involvement with alumni to help jump-start their career or be able to talk to someone who understands was salient to these participants. Interviewees felt similar. All participants, in some capacity, mentioned the importance of talking to someone who has gone through this experience before (i.e., retiring from college sport). Seven participants specifically noted the term “alum” and the importance they think this network could have on college athletes who are about to retire:

I feel like it would be nice if they had a system or a program where they had alumni who had transitioned out of sport already. And maybe you could do something specific by team or whatever, but just have people who would be willing to be a resource for athletes who are also going through it [to share] things that they did, and how they made that transition. [Women’s Volleyball, DI, 2021-2022 Retirement]

This quote demonstrates the desire for programming involving alumni and the perceived benefit that this participant thinks alumni can bring for retiring college athletes. The participant below specified that this was a big area that he needed support in; he wanted to reach out to his former teammates:

Yes, yes, I needed support, like I need to talk to people who also played, and they have finished school. [Men’s Track & Field, DI, 2018-2019 Retirement]

In a similar vein, participants also noted their willingness to help, and how simple the programming could be for it to be effective:

Invite former alums back -- there are people who made this jump before, and for some reason, no one tells you about it until it happens, and you are like, “Oh, my gosh! What is going on here” … like I loved my experience, I would go back for [an alumni talk]. You do not have to pay me like I am more than happy to share this information with people who are in the shoes I once was in. [Women’s Rowing, DI, 2019-2020 Retirement]
Additionally, alum shared that they would be more than happy to participate in this programming for future class years,

I also like to like, pass off any tips from my experiences and stuff like that…I feel like sports have played a great role in my life. It has shaped me a lot. [Men’s Football, DII, 2017-2018 Retirement]

Across both quotes, participants stressed how important it is to have someone who has gone through this process before as a resource for retiring college athletes. They also stressed how they are willing to talk to current college athletes, pass down that information, and share their experiences.

This illuminates the findings provided by the survey. Programming that consisted of a panel of retired athletes posed a significant relationship with the impact on athletes’ well-being. By discussing this idea in further detail with participants, it is evident that programming can be presented in a variety of formats, but access to alumni is very important to them.

Lastly, when exploring needed programming, one survey participant mentioned the impact that having access to these opportunities could have had for her:

The list that was presented in this questionnaire a few questions back made me wonder if schools actually have counseling, nutrition specialists, maybe people who help with planning a normal workout routine for retired college athletes. I certainly didn’t have that where I went, but I wish I did. Maybe I would be better off now. [Women’s Swimming, DII, 2020-2021 Retirement]

This quote provides context to the gravity of these programs and the support needed, that is clearly not being provided to retiring and retired college athletes.

Close Contact with Retiring Athletes. Similarly, the third theme involves consistent contact with athletes, especially after their athletic careers. Participants noted that during their retirement process, they did not feel heard, specifically when they provided feedback on how to make retirement programming stronger, more personalized, and worthwhile for the next generation:

Take our constructive criticism seriously to make the next generation of the team the best it can be; keep in contact with us - keep us in the loop frequently via “personalized” emails; and strength coaches continue to send lift workouts for us. [Women’s Swimming, DI, 2020-2021 Retirement]

Additionally, survey respondents stressed the importance of keeping in touch with their retired athletes. They felt as if they were left out on their own after they retired; contact with athletes after retirement to check-in and make sure they are adjusting properly would have been beneficial:

Take care of your athletes even after their athletic careers are over. Oftentimes it is forgotten how much time and effort that has been put down to a sport. So having someone help you transition away from the sport would be very helpful. [Men’s Soccer, DI, 2021-2022 Retirement]
It is evident from this quote that athletes needed more care than they were given they felt forgotten. Further, support in the form of personalized contact or check-ins would have significantly aided this transition for them. Interviewees, again, felt similar. Firstly, they wanted the athletic department to recognize and acknowledge that this process was difficult for them:

I think a huge part of the fact is acknowledging that it is a difficult experience. People don't talk about it enough. I think that was a huge thing that I always tried to talk about, especially to the girls on the team. [Women’s Volleyball, DI, 2018-2019 Retirement]

By fully acknowledging what retired athletes may be going through, comes responsibility to alter their roles.

Lastly, as previously mentioned, interviewees wanted to be reached out to after retirement. Whether it was the whole college athlete body, or one mentioned a female athletes’ conversation, close contact with athletes to make sure they were doing ok and gain feedback, would have helped interviewees feel valued:

But yeah, like, it would have been nice to have people reaching out or services, or even like it after the fact. “What could we have done better?” survey come through. Because I understand it would have been really hard to implement that immediately [with regards to COVID-19], because they were already, you know, again, trying to get professors to transition to online and trying to just get the semester finished. But, after the fact it would have been nice to see. Of course, we know now that online learning and whatnot continued for a bit longer, and they probably could have learned something from those of us who only had to do it for a little bit but dealt with the shock of making that transition. [Women’s Rowing, DI, 2019-2020 Retirement]

**Better Preparation and a Standard Plan.** Fourth, is the organization required to help athletes feel prepared and fulfilled with content as they are retiring from sport. A plan, which could entail anything from multiple events their senior year, to a standard plan for their last two years of college, to post-retirement follow-ups, felt necessary to participants to ensure that programming was intentional, strategic, and provided content from professionals:

Actually, having a plan for retiring athletes and developing career building options for all sports not just football and basketball. Preparation for official retirement should be essential for the mental health and further development of athletes instead of just being “abandoned” and dumped into the real world to figure it out themselves. [Women’s Gymnastics, DI, 2019-2020 Retirement]

This woman noted how she felt abandoned by her athletic department once her contribution to her team was done. Additionally, another participant expressed how athletes don’t necessarily know what they need until after graduation, and a plan from the athletic department could get them a head start in this transition.

I would like my athletic department to make transition from sport programming more of a standard procedure for departing athletes. It felt like more of a bonus that only those who were trying to actively plan for the future attended. I think people often don't recognize their needs until they have already graduated, at which point contact with one's former athletic department is limited. [Men’s Swimming, DI, 2022-2023 Retirement]
From these programs, athletes want to leave college sports feeling prepared for their subsequent transition. These data do not present a certain plan that seems best to the entire college athlete population. What does seem to resonate with athletes is having a standard plan of resources for them to follow and access. Interviewees presented similar opinions, although there was a slightly different focus to emphasize how content should be presented:

The athlete, experience is different, so I feel like the University does not understand what athletes have to do in their schedules, and like they are not able to go, drop everything, go to a networking event on a Saturday, because you practice or are traveling. So, it is stuff like that where I think if the University tried to do it, it would not work. [Women’s Volleyball, DI, 2018-2019 Retirement]

Interviewees stress that programming should come from the athletic departments, as they are cognizant of an athlete’s many duties. That being said, partnerships with other departments on campus can be utilized to create the best plan for athletes, that happens at the best time for athletes, and are specific to their unique needs:

But, like you have a career center on campus, right? So just like utilize the existing resources, right? We have a multicultural center on campus, put together partnerships. You have a lot of different schools that your athletes are already in. So why not utilize those relationships there? … I get it. You’re definitely at a disadvantage when it comes to resources compared to bigger institutions and things like that. But, like, how are you doing that extra step to utilize the current resources that you have on campus. You got people pretty much paying to play a sport that they love and sacrificing their body to a platform that they love. But what are they at the end of the day like? What are they getting out of that other than you know, a ring? [Men’s Football, DII, 2017-2018 Retirement]

Special Attention to Those with Career-Ending Injuries. Fifth, is the importance of prioritizing attention to those who suffer career-ending injuries. Survey respondents with career-ending injuries noted how they did not feel like they were given the same attention as other athletes, and how their needs were different from other retiring athletes due to their injuries and timing:

To work with those having to retire early because of injury, I was not given the same treatment as the other retiring athletes and was essentially kicked out with no help. [Women’s Softball, DI, 2018-2019 Retirement Year]

This woman stated that she received a different level of retirement programming due to her necessity to retire early. Another athlete expressed that services for injured athletes need to be available and given in a timely manner,

Assist injured and retired athletes with professional psychological counseling services in a timely manner. [Men’s Basketball, DI, 2017-2018 Retirement Year]
Additionally, one interviewee suffered from a career-ending injury. A Division I water polo player who retired in 2019-2020 academic year, she talked through her experience with her support system as she got her diagnosis her sophomore year:

Nothing [could be done]. And I think that was the worst part, you know, the trainers were doing what they could before they got my diagnosis. They were like, “It's probably just some muscle imbalances” ... So yeah, I would go in. I would do my exercise with them. They would talk to me about the pain I was experiencing. I’d get the shock therapy stuff, or whatever... And then, like my coach, like he was like, “Oh, yeah, you can just do dry land while they [her team] practice and play”. And I was like, “Oh. Okay”, and he was like “You can just like sit on the pool deck and like watch them play and practice”.... I wouldn't be in the water, like I wasn't allowed to go in the water. Then, like lifting, they were like, yeah, like probably not best for you to do lift anymore. So, then I just stopped showing up to practice, and nobody like no coaches, no trainers, nobody checked on me. Like you just got like this life changing thing, but yeah, no, we're not going to check on you. We're not going to see what's up... It felt like they had just completely like, “oh, you mean nothing to us” Yeah. That was also really hard. ... They [the trainers] literally were like, “Yeah, go to this hospital at this time. We'll give you a driver, and they'll take you, and then somebody will be there to pick you up when you're done”... I understand. I'm an adult at this point. I do understand. But I was like, “Are you kidding me?” I was like, “I want somebody to hold my hand and tell me it's going to be okay because like my parents can't come!” And so, I was like, oh, like that was that was the one time that I was just like, “Damn okay, I'm kind of on my own with this”.

Through this quote, it is evident that she felt very alone and isolated as she was grappling with the news of this injury and having to retire from her sport. When asked what types of support she would have liked to have received, looking back, she stated:

I think just having this support would have helped a lot. Even just having somebody like, “Hey. We know you're going through this, have you thought about going and talking to somebody. You know we've got professionals here at the school like maybe that would help” I mean, like I said the trainers did a great job. They did what they could, you know. … I think having some sort of support system would have been the best thing. It didn't have to be me going into my coach's office every day, but, you know, just like, shoot a text here and there like, “How are you doing today? What's going through your mind today?” Or even coming up with some sort of modified practice for me. You know I didn't want to be the center of attention. I didn't care about that, but like something that would have been worth my time to go and still feel a part of the team – to do things with the team. … And then, you know, maybe my drinking would not have been that bad if somebody was actually like, “Are you okay? Let's figure something out.” So yeah, I do think that would have been the best thing in the situation, but unfortunately, they did not [provide that]. Just no care for you as a person and I was the only one at this time going through an injury.

Summarizing these quotes, it is clear that this participant was going through situations and feelings that were unique from her teammates. She needed different support to accommodate what she was going through, which from her, should have been from the coach. Additionally, this support did not need to be overtly out of the way but did need to be intentional and
Stripped of Identities. The last two themes are driven solely by the interview portion of the qualitative data. First, is the notion that athletes were stripped of their identities both as a student and an athlete, consecutively. Separately, and together, this brought about different challenges for participants that warranted different types of support. On being an athlete generally, participants spoke on how long they have committed to this one activity, and the transition of not having it at the same level anymore:

I always tell them [future class years] like, “It's not easy”, and just like acknowledging that the transition exists. And it's difficult, and it's harder than just like, “Oh, I'm not an athlete anymore”. It's like, “Okay. Well, then, how do I go to the doctor?” They don't know stuff like that, and nobody talks about how difficult it is. No one acknowledging that...To be a college athlete anywhere, you have to have been committed to this thing, probably for over half of your life by the time you're done. So, I started playing volleyball at 10, then played till 22, so 12 years – over half of my life. And you do not remember the first whatever years [of your life], so it has basically been your identity this entire time. So, you finish, and then what it is like, “Well, there goes my whole fun fact”. Every time I introduce myself to somebody, I was a Division I athlete. I play volleyball. So now what is your identity? You do not know --it is like this whole identity crisis. And then you can slip into a depression. It is very difficult, and nobody acknowledges it. [Women’s Volleyball, DI, 2018-2019 Retirement]

Similarly, another participant noted that retiring is a complete shock to the system and difficult to cope with:

I feel like that is something [retirement programming] that needs to happen, because it is a shock to the system like nobody knows how to cope with it sometimes. [Women’s Soccer, DIII, 2020-2021 Retirement]

These quotes exemplify that they were losing their sport, but also part of their identity. Additionally, participants were faced with trying to navigate new spaces that they would have known already if they were not a college athlete, such as going to the doctor. Secondly, participants spoke on having joint identities as a student and an athlete, and how those attributes presented unique transitions:

I even talked to some of my other friends that were not athletes, and they talked about their transition from a college student to an adult and like how they are like, “Yeah, that was hard”. I am like, “Yeah, imagine it with being an athlete. It is twice as hard!” So, like people are not acknowledging that. [Women’s Soccer, DIII, 2020-2021 Retirement]

In addition to having to transition out of college sports and college, another participant explained that an institution’s view on athletes has a large impact on their transition needs:

They could definitely make athletes feel a little more special in that place [her college], and I do not think it would be a bad thing. That their whole point was like you are a normal student. You are with everyone else. We are trying to make you not special. But we got that from so many different angles that it would have been nice – because yeah,
everyone's making the transition from being an undergrad to going to work different and it’s super weird and hard, but to throw on top of that, not having something that you spent at least 20 hours a week on is like, “Whoa! Where did my daily routine go? Where did my 40 best friends go right like What is happening here?” … You are just becoming a normal adult human who is not an elite athlete. [Women’s Rowing, DI, 2019-2020 Retirement]

Retiring college athletes are losing multiple identities at once. As the last quote suggests, one does not need to retire their identity as an athlete; however, when faced with losing the current status of multiple identities (i.e., a college athlete), it can be overwhelming.

**Role of the Team.** Lastly, is the impact their team had on participants’ retirement process. Participants expressed gratitude to their team for the experiences and the friends they have gained during their time in college. Even during the transition, their teammates were there to help them feel supported and valued:

I am so close to my teammates. I will say that like me and that surprise. One thing I take away from my whole experience is like, you know you spent 4 years in the middle of nowhere with these guys – like you become like family... that was definitely, really, really great. Also, being able to stay connected with the team, like I got to know the incoming class. [Men’s Football, DII, 2017-2018 Retirement]

Alongside appreciation for their team and teammates, interviewees noted the transition of going from working and having goals as a team, to doing that just for yourself,

Living in college was like, “I do not want it to end I just want to continue here and be among the people. It is like a business, and they are my colleagues. When I left college, I was thinking, how it is going to be very odd for me to kind of focus on all of my own [physical] activities. [Men’s Track and Field, DI, 2018-2019 Retirement]

In a similar vein, another male athlete spoke on the shift of working for his team to working for himself.

I kind of struggle with the feeling like I had to be that person for the team as opposed to being that person for myself. I'm still trying to figure it out. [Men’s Football, DII, 2017-2018 Retirement]

Lastly, one participant mentioned what it was like to watch her team after she was retired, specifically as they were succeeding:

My friends took a fifth year and won the conference title, which we hadn’t done in a long time. I feel like that added to what I look back at, and I'm like, “I didn't do a fifth”. And I don't know, like, it’s not that I wanted the team to do bad, I'm so happy that they won. It’s just like, “You guys. I couldn't just have like one year where you didn't do amazing.” [Women’s Soccer, DIII, 2020-2021 Retirement]

She explained how she wanted her team to do well, but it was hard to watch them do well without her.
Discussion and Implications

This research investigated the current status of transition from college sport programming across all three NCAA divisions, from the perspective of current and former college athletes. With a large sample size, findings demonstrate transition from sport programming can be beneficial for athletes’ well-being, yet more programming is needed. First, we asked what types of retirement from sport programming available to college athletes. Currently, most commonly available programs include access to a sport psychology consultant, nutrition workshops, and career planning opportunities. Most impactful are areas of programming around nutrition, working out, talking with alumni, and career planning. Our second research question examines if programming should originate from the athletic department or wider institution. Study findings suggest that programming around transitioning from sport should stem from the athletic department, and special consideration on mandating programming should be given to each individual area.

Additional qualitative findings illustrate the need for better preparation of athletes for retirement as well as close contact with athletes as they retire, as posed by the third research question. Results from this study indicated that support stops once a college athlete retires, posing a difficult period of adjustment to life after college sport, which may begin even before the athlete graduates. Indeed, participants noted the rapid change in identities they experience going from a college athlete, to a college student, to a college graduate within a couple of months. After being an athlete and a student for the majority of their lives, it is difficult to understand who they are without those identities.

Quantitative and qualitative findings from this study help advance our understanding of the transition process with two major contributions to the literature with respect to the characteristics of pretransition and post transition environments from Schlossberg’s (1981) Transition Theory. Namely, we extend the literature by illustrating how college athletic departments fail to support athletes post transition, which limits the success of athletes in their retirement from college sport. As such, findings from this study illustrate how athletes are forced to look outside their institutional (i.e., athletic department) and physical setting supports to find assistance. Further, we reveal the unique set-up of a back-to-back transition that college athletes experience as they retire from sport and graduate from college all within a few months. Based on the findings of this study, we argue that, due to these consecutive events, college athletes experience transition differently than other demographics, and require more support as they make life-altering transitions (i.e., losing their athlete identity and college student identity).

Theoretical Implications

Schlossberg’s (1981) Transition Theory was the guiding framework of the study, which considers the role of three factors: perception of the transition, the environment, and the individual’s characteristics, when understanding one’s transition experience. Overall, this research focused on college athletes, supports the importance of these factors. Further, our findings suggest, in the case of college athletics, we need to understand the unique experience of transition athletes endure. Specifically, this research focused on factor two, characteristics of the environment, as college sport provide a distinct context to study transitions. Additionally, this research incorporates Goodman’s and colleagues’ (2006) addition of time from the transition; we looked at college athletes as they are moving in, moving through, and moving out of college sport to better understand what athletes need throughout the transition process. This study showcases how and why athletes do not feel prepared for sport retirement or graduation from...
their current set of resources. Primarily, athletes explained the limited amount of programs offered to retiring athletes, the lack of accessibility to these resources, as well as the lack of acknowledgement of the difficulty of this transition process in general. Specific areas of need include nutrition, physical activity, and career planning programs. Importantly, participants noted how as soon as their sport participation was over, post transition support, an essential part of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981) was practically nonexistent. Specifically, participants noted the lack of contact and opportunities to participate in programming once they had retired, explaining how access to these programs would have significantly shifted their transition from college sport experience.

Relatedly, college athletes traditionally (i.e., no career-ending injury, a full, four-year college athletic career) are faced with back-to-back transitions of college sport retirement and college graduation, something that is not common to any other population. Each transition comes with a separate set of needs and supports that are necessary leading up to college sport retirement and lasting into a post-graduation lifestyle. From these results we argue that sport management scholars should consider an adaption to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981) to better represent the case of college athletes’ retirement: (1) their unique transition timeline, (2) and the nature of support (i.e., lack of) given during their retirement processes.

**Practical Implications.** College sport retirement research indicates that retirement programming can be successful and beneficial for athletes (Lavallee, 2018 & Oshiro et al., 2023). Consistent with Lavallee (2018) as well as Oshiro and colleagues (2023), our study results found that retirement programming is meaningful for athletes, but not enough programs exist.

Looking specifically into types of programming, current literature suggests that access to programming around career planning helps to ease the transition process for athletes (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; Park & Lavallee, 2015), yet knowledge of and availability to access these programs are limited (Brougham et al., 2023). Results in the current study parse out different types of career-based programming and suggest that mandated forms of career planning (e.g., resume workshops) do have a positive impact on athlete well-being. This exemplifies what athletes in this study were most focused on as they were getting ready to retire and, perhaps, what athletic departments emphasized the most. This critical information has, to the best of our knowledge, not been studied in this depth before. Further, these findings suggest that offering multiple tracks for college athletes to complete career planning programs (i.e., Plan 1: meet once every other month your senior year to discuss a variety of topics; Plan 2: meet twice during your junior year and twice during your senior year) could be beneficial as the sample reveals no preferred distribution method. These findings have the capacity to provide vital information that can help inform stakeholders in an athletic department and inform further research as these phenomena have not been studied in depth.

From a different lens, Oshiro and colleagues (2023) noted that there needs to be a greater emphasis on the education of physical activity after college athletes retire. This research confirms those findings and adds that, when available, workshops on working out after college are well received and produce a significant impact on athlete well-being. In a similar vein, recent literature suggests similar programming should be implemented in nutrition education (Oshiro et al., 2023; Papathomas et al., 2018). The current study suggests that similar to physical activity education, nutrition workshops on fueling yourself post-collegiate sport have significant positive impacts on athletes as they transition out of college sport, and currently, this type of education is lacking. Findings are distinctive in that we, with a large sample, explore a multitude of different types of programming through retiring and retired athletes’ perceptions and found that physical activity and nutrition education are deemed two of the most important types of programs to have
access to by college athletes. The current lack of proper education on these topics has a number of negative outcomes when we are thinking about the physical health of these former athletes long-term (i.e., eating disorders, mental health issues, injuries), and are revealed in this study.

With regard to retirement preparedness, Stokowski and colleagues (2019) posit that athletes feel unprepared to graduate college, which can, in return, lead to issues in various areas of mental health down the line. This research adds to this line of thought in that there is a current need for specific retirement programs so that athletes feel ready to make this transition. With feelings of unpreparedness also comes feelings of athletic identity foreclosure, as previous studies have alluded to (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Harry & Weight, 2021; Murphy et al., 1996; Smith & Hardin, 2018). The current study adds to this scholarship by confirming that athletes feel a sense of loss when it comes to their athletic identity, and struggle to move on from this identity. Not only that but results also showcase that a lack of acknowledgment revolving around the difficulty of retiring from college sport can exacerbate this process for athletes. Our findings reveal these identity issues have lasting impacts on former athletes, making their transitions to graduate school, work, a new social world, or their mental health difficult. Our participants, from all three divisions, state that access to different programs, specifically talks with alumni, as well as greater acknowledgement of the difficulty of this process from athletic department stakeholders (coaches, athletic trainers) would have had lasting, positive effects on their transition. Additionally, we found athletes who face career-ending injuries need their own specific type of care and attention as they make their transition out of sport, often at a different time then the rest of their teammates; an important and understudied storyline of college sport retirement.

The contributions of this study made to the various aspects of college sport retirement literature accentuate the need for specialization of the college athlete retirement process. The current pretransition supports are limited while the post transition support offerings are close to nonexistent across all divisions. College athletes need strength of supports both before, during, and after the transition event (Schlossberg, 1981). Further, this research adds to the literature around college athlete retirement by arguing that college athletes experience two transitions almost simultaneously, sport retirement and graduation, presenting an even greater need for specialization of transition supports in their environment.

**Managerial Implications**

We urge athletic departments alongside other support systems for college athletes (e.g., colleges and universities that sponsor athletics) to consider the unique situation college athletes are in when they retire: (1) their support immediately stops; (2) they go through a loss of their athlete identity as well as their identity as a student; and (3) their lack of preparation and access to resources post-graduation. Not only that, we also believe it is imperative for athletic departments to critically analyze how to best provide these resources to their athletes to yield smoother retirement processes.

From our research we understand that athletes find most forms of retirement programming to be beneficial to them. However, they want more (opportunities, access, and choices of) programs, specifically those that have a structured schedule (i.e., meet every other month as opposed to a one-time event) for areas around nutrition, physical activity, mental health, and career preparation.

Yet, it is important to note that transition from sport programming does not have to be expensive. Participants in this study noted simple tasks, such as acknowledging this process, or
bringing back a few alumni to talk about their experience, would have been very impactful in their own retirement process. This is important to consider in conversations around transition from sport programming because it, in its most basic form, can be accessible to implement for all athletic departments. There is a case of resource inequity with regards to how established programming can be, a topic that warrants further attention. However, athletes remark that any sort of programming, regardless of cost and specifically created by the athletic department, is better than nothing at all. Further, improvements to technology, specifically teleconferencing platforms such as WebEx and Zoom, make it easy to bring in guest speakers from around the country (or world) in the event that there is a lack of in person availability and/or program funding.

Additionally, the use of long-term programming should be considered. Athletes noted how better preparation for retirements starts on day one of their college athletics journey. While this may be less feasible, it is important to consider how the use of long-term programs, programs that meet on a regular basis as opposed to one time, and programs that have a clear objective, can better aid college athletes’ needs. While this might not be for every college athlete, as depicted in this study, needs are different for each individual, there is a large subpopulation of retiring athletes who find long-term and more developed programming to be largely beneficial.

Lastly, participants suggested utilizing current resources on campus to create programs for retiring athletes, such as the career center. This is another inexpensive way to create tailored programs for athletes while building strong, sustainable partnerships with other departments on campus.

Limitations and Future Research

Though this study provides important insights, there are limitations. First, the interview stage lacked participants who are about to retire within the academic school year. This could impact recommendations into areas of need, due to issues of planning programming around a college athlete’s schedule. Secondly, participants’ division information was collected, but missing is more information about their specific institution or current standing of their athletic department in their division (e.g., Power 5 institution, academically rigorous institution) and differences of program impacts by division. Inclusion of this demographic information in future research could better parse out the opportunities that athletes receive in transition from programming research.

Future research should focus on continuing to develop a transition model that caters to college athletes and the unique experience they face when they retire. By understanding the complexities and severity of college sport retirement, academics and practitioners can be better equipped to provide athletes with the support and resources needed for a smooth transition from college sport. Further, parsing out different types of mental health care and what services in particular are most helpful, is another way to better understand the needs of college athletes as they transition out of college sport.
References


