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## Life Skills Programming: A Case Study of DI Student-Athletes' Perceptions and Suggestions

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*The purpose of this case study was to better understand student-athletes' perceptions of life skills programming and to elicit their suggestions for more meaningful programming. "Life skills address whole person issues including psychological, emotional, personal, social, moral, and intellectual development" (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 144) and the vast majority of student-athlete academic support services focus on time management, tutoring, and class scheduling (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Yet, the question remains: what do student-athletes truly need as they begin their athletic and academic collegiate careers? Using qualitative methodology, 23 student-athlete focus group participants described their experiences with a required life skills program at a mid-major university in the southeastern U.S. Analysis of semi-structured interview data yielded the following themes and subthemes: 1) Frustrations with life skills programming (subthemes: convenience, questioning relevance, unsupportive academic staff); and 2) Suggested improvements for life skills programming (subthemes: mentorship from older athletes, classroom topic choice, programming for transitions later in college, obtaining academic credit). Results of the study will be beneficial to university athletic departments nationwide and will enhance both current and future life skills programs. Similar mid-major universities may find the results particularly useful as common challenges are often present across comparable athletic programs.*

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), nearly half a million student-athletes compete across the Division I, II, or III levels (DI, DII, DIII) (NCAA, n.d.-a). Student-athletes attend college with many of the same academic, emotional, and personal goals and concerns as non-athletes, but have unique experiences often requiring specialized attention (Ferrante et al., 2002). For example, college students are faced with challenges related to time management as they take ownership of their academic schedule for the first time in their lives. Student-athletes must do the same while managing two-a-day-practices, athletic related meetings, required study sessions, and travel for in-season competition. Adler and Adler (1987), influential scholars in student-athlete development literature, suggested student-athletes face intense challenges during the undergraduate experience to balance dual roles as both student and athlete, and this has been corroborated many times since their investigation (Bernhard & Bell, 2015; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Harrison et al., 2009; Nichols, et al., 2019). Though much has changed since their work, some aspects of the student-athlete experience remain the same. Student-athletes are still under immense pressure, if not more so, as they try to navigate balancing academic courses with rigorous practice, training, and competition schedules. For some student-athletes, competition lasts almost year-round. For instance, athletes such as collegiate distance runners may participate in cross country during the fall, indoor track and field in early spring, and outdoor track and field competition in late spring to early summer. Despite student-athletes' significant time investment into training and competition, most of these student-athletes will "go pro" in something other than their sport, as the NCAA has advertised for years.

Consequently, colleges and universities across the nation have implemented life skills programming within their athletic academic services departments in hopes of better preparing the student-athletes for success during their collegiate career and life after college (NCAA, n.d.-b.). Athletic academic support services departments and/or athletic departments will often explicitly highlight life skills programming within their mission statements. The University of Oklahoma (Norman, Oklahoma) Athletics Department mission statement reads, in part:

The mission of the University of Oklahoma Athletics Department is to inspire champions today and prepare leaders of tomorrow by providing opportunities and support for student-athletes to develop an appreciation for community service, skills for life and reach their highest academic potential. The academic, resident life, and student life units of the Athletics Department support student-athletes through assessment, counseling and skill development services so they may balance their academic and athletic responsibilities and maximize their potential (Oklahoma, n.d., para.1).

Like many athletic departments, the University of Oklahoma recognizes the pivotal role of effective athletic academic support programming. Articulated by Danish et al. (2004), life skills may be conceptualized as:

Those skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as school, home and in their neighborhoods. Life skills can be behavioral (communicating effectively with peers and adults) or cognitive (making effective decisions); interpersonal (being assertive) or intrapersonal (setting goals) (p. 40).

Broadly speaking, student development practices often encompass life skills development employing a holistic approach to improve student-athletes' overall well-being, mental health, and professional development.

Most student-athlete academic support services have traditionally focused on time management, tutoring, and class scheduling (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Forester and Holden (2018) found more recent themes centering on personal and whole person development as key goals among athletic academic services mission statements. Yet, the question remains: What do student-athletes truly need to best succeed in their athletic and academic careers? And further, what is needed for success while in college, and beyond? These questions motivated the current study. Navarro (2014) emphasized considering "the student-athlete voice" when developing courses with a focus on career development and life skills (p.233). As such, the student-athlete voice – their concerns, frustrations, and feedback – is the primary data set used to answer and explore this study's research questions. Using qualitative methodology, the researchers sought to better understand student-athletes' perceptions of the existing life skills and student development programming provided to them, and, consequently, to elicit their suggestions for more meaningful modifications to the programming. Gaining a better understanding from the viewpoint of student-athletes currently "in the trenches" as to what they believe would benefit them most should prove to be invaluable for practitioners and academics alike.

## Literature Review

Embedded within collegiate athletic departments across the U.S. are athletic academic support services, and while the program names may vary across institutions, their missions are bound by common threads. Leader development, personal development, and sport psychology are essential elements to student-athlete success and are often presented as part of athletic academic services' missions (DiPaolo, 2017). Other common elements central to student-athlete success include life skills, career development, whole-person development, mental and physical well-being, and assistance managing the NCAA's assorted eligibility requirements (Chan et al., 2018; Pierce et al., 2016; Sudano et al., 2017). Navarro and Malvaso (2015) contend there are four main tenets of a robust student-athlete development program: academic, leadership, personal, and career development. A program which highlights these four main components arguably has the potential to assist student-athletes with the challenges they face.

Student-athlete success in academics is one of the main goals of all athletic academic support programs. In fact, the NCAA mandates all member institutions provide student-athletes with academic advising and support. Historically, athletic academic services focused on one goal concerning student-athletes' academic success – athlete eligibility (Gerdy, 1997). While athlete eligibility is still an important concern, current academic support services have more depth and reach in their mission. Now, advising often goes beyond academic issues to include forms of counseling which add focus to social and personal issues (Kuhn, 2008).

Student-athletes' leadership development is a second component and is perhaps best highlighted by the NCAA's leadership development program and leadership forum (NCAA, n.d.-c). Under this program, a select number of student-athletes each year are provided with life skills and career development training which focuses on personal and professional success. NCAA member institutions also recognize the value of leadership training, with many having created "leadership academies" within their athletic academic support departments. Clemson University (Clemson, South Carolina), George Washington University (Washington, D.C.), and the

University of South Florida (Tampa, Florida) offer specific leadership training and academies for student-athletes, which aligns with contemporary research on its impact. In their longitudinal study, Fischer et al. (2015) determined long-term leadership programs have a positive effect on participants' leadership skills and capacity. Duguay et al., (2016) found volleyball and basketball players who participated in a season-long leadership development program were positively affected, and that the program was a worthwhile investment for both the participants and athletic departments.

Personal development is typically provided to student-athletes to improve their time during and post-athletics. While life skills could easily be represented in multiple capacities of student athlete development programs, most often they are included in personal development initiatives. Miller and Kerr (2002) stated, "Life skills address whole person issues including psychological, emotional, personal, social, moral, and intellectual development" (p. 144). As such, life skills fit well under the umbrella of personal development. Four fundamental elements should be incorporated into athletic academic programming seeking to promote personal development: student-athlete personal need assessment, involvement of student-athletes in programming opportunities, collaboration of campus and community resources in programming development, and evaluation measures (Ward, 1999). Relationship building is also a key component of personal development which may be enhanced through participation in organized athletics (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Roberts & McNeese, 2010) and according to Gayles (2009), students' overall personal development may be positively influenced with relationship building with other peers, faculty, student organizations, and assignment completion.

Personal development services should focus on common issues that athletes face, such as adjustment, emotional concerns, and psychological distress (Watson, 2005). This is especially important in the context that approximately 10-15% of student-athletes experience psychological issues which could warrant professional counseling (Hinkle, 1994; Murray, 1997; Parham, 1993). While programs designed to promote the overall well-being of student-athletes exist, there is little empirical research examining the effects of extra demands which are placed on student-athletes. Even fewer studies have sought to determine the efficacy of current wellness programs in meeting student-athletes' needs (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). On this subject, Watson and Kissinger (2007) found that non-athletes reported higher levels of wellness compared to student-athletes. Additionally, the non-athlete participants scored significantly higher in the factors of social self, essential self, and love than did their student-athlete contemporaries. As such, they suggested counselors would do well to consult with athletic personnel in developing holistic wellness programs to combat student-athletes' reluctance to seek counseling services external to the athletic department.

A final component consistently found in athletic academic support programming is career development. Keeping with the NCAA's claim that most collegiate athletes will "go pro" in something other than their sport, it stands to reason that legitimate athletic academic support service departments would include some aspect of career development specifically tailored for student-athletes. Forester and Holden's (2018) qualitative content analysis of DI athletic academic support programs' mission statements revealed professional development, which includes career development, to be a common theme. Career development programming seeks to help student-athletes determine their "occupational interests, skills, abilities, values, and lifestyle preferences" (Carodine et al., 2001, p. 5). Stankovich (1998) studied the efficacy of a general career development program for student-athletes and found that they exhibited higher career maturity scores and lower athletic identity scores after just a three-month long program. Findings

indicate student-athletes were resultantly better equipped to make sound decisions regarding their future career options after engagement in a career development program. Other studies highlight the need for student-athletes' career development as student-athletes typically struggle, when compared to the non-athlete college students, in career readiness and preparation (Hook, 2012; Linnemeyer & Brown; 2010; Murphy et al., 1996).

Though not always evident in the eyes of students, time spent in higher education is a prime opportunity to explore, choose, and prepare for their future careers (Navarro, 2014). Specific to student-athletes, Navarro (2014) conducted a phenomenological qualitative study examining the life experiences of 29 DI student-athletes to determine which of those life experiences most dramatically impacted career exploration, choice, and preparation processes. Navarro was able to uncover six themes used to describe what life experiences impacted their career preparation: (1) completing a career development course; (2) practicing interviewing skills; (3) attending a resume/cover letter workshop; (4) engaging in networking opportunities; (5) completing a practicum/internship; and (6) being a student-athlete. The first three themes represent experiences of professional development delivered in a workshop or class setting, and the fourth having the capacity to be organized through a workshop or class. Career development class activities and athletic department career preparation courses were mentioned by the majority of participants as influential and beneficial in preparing for their careers post-athletics. Navarro (2014) emphasizes that, "Continued discussion and research is necessary to further identify how student affairs professionals can best assist Division I student-athletes as they explore career alternatives, craft career plans, and prepare for life after college" (p.220). The current study seeks to build on this body of knowledge by gaining a rich understanding of what current DI athletes think about their experiences in a mandatory life skills program, and, specifically, how they would like to see it improved.

### *Conceptual Framework*

Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) Conceptual Model of Academic Success for Student-Athletes is the guiding conceptual framework in the current study. The model was created out of a need to better distinguish between the many factors which influenced student-athletes' academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011) and was developed from Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student attrition/departure. Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Model of Institutional Departure includes six elements: a) pre-college attributes (family background, skills and abilities, and primary and secondary school experiences), b) initial/pre-college goals and commitments (educational and institutional), c) institutional experiences (academic and social systems), d) college integration (academic and social systems), e) post-college goals and commitments (educational and institutional), and f) the outcome (departure). Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) model contains the same six elements but adds specific components to better understand the DI student-athlete experience as it relates to academic success.

The first notable addition included in the Conceptual Model of Academic Success for Student-Athletes is sport commitment. Sport commitment is concerned with both the physical and psychological time and energy student-athletes devote to their sport(s) (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The second additional component is sport participation, positioned within the institutional experiences phase, which focuses on interactions with coaches and other individuals within the athletic department, such as athletic academic advisors and support staff. Lastly, while Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) model includes the outcome variable, academic departure, Comeaux

and Harrison's (2011) outcome variable is academic success determined by GPA, matriculation, intellectual development, and graduation.

Finally, Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) model incorporates two primary factors which play a vital role in student-athletes' academic success:

- (a) the individual characteristics of student-athletes, which include their precollege characteristics and evolving commitments to the institution, educational goals, and sport,
- and (b) the degrees and types of student-athletes' interactions with the college environment (identified in the model as the social and academic systems) (p. 239).

Because this conceptual model emphasizes the many unique aspects of the DI student-athlete experience, with particular emphasis on sport commitment and interactions with individuals in the athletic department, it is viewed as an appropriate framework for the current study. The model provides the breadth needed to more holistically capture the varying mixture of factors which may come into play during the student-athlete's collegiate experience. The factors at play for any individual student-athlete can be quite diverse, therefore a qualitative methodology is best suited to accurately depict their unique experiences.

## Methods

The current study investigated student-athletes' perceptions of life skills and developmental programming provided by the athletic department at their university. The researchers sought to identify and better understand the program content that should be offered based on participants' perceptions. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was employed to allow the participants to freely share their perceptions and experiences and give meaning to those experiences (Creswell, 2013). In addition, this is part of a larger study which sought to identify barriers to a more seamless transition from high school athletics to a DI athletic program. Focus group participants were interviewed following a semi-structured interview guide, which is provided as an appendix, and clarifies which questions pertain specifically to the life skills program. Utilization of a semi-structured interview format ensures consistency during data collection, while still allowing each interviewee to discuss their unique experiences in relation to the topic.

### *Participants and Procedures*

The researchers asked student-athletes, via email, at a mid-major DI university in the southeastern U.S. to participate in focus groups. Data collection began in August 2019 and ended in December 2019. Five focus groups were conducted ranging in size from four to seven participants. In total, researchers interviewed 23 (18 female, 5 male) participants, ranging in age from 18-22 (M=19.2 years old). Each focus group was conducted face-to-face and was 45 minutes to 90 minutes in duration. The semi-structured interview guide was followed for each focus group with deviation only when probing questions were deemed necessary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). All participants voluntarily signed a consent form and allowed the researchers to audio record the focus group interviews with the understanding that pseudonyms would be used to allow for full anonymity. Each focus group was conducted in a conference room on campus with the exception of one focus group which, for participant convenience, was held at the team

field house conference room. Participants in this study were current student-athletes at a DI mid-major university. Sport teams represented included softball, women's volleyball, men's and women's track and field, women's cross country, women's golf, and women's tennis. Focus group email requests were sent to other student-athletes of additional teams including football, men and women's basketball, and men's tennis but due to scheduling conflicts and/or non-responses additional participants were not included. Fourteen of the student-athlete participants were on full scholarship and nine were on partial scholarship.

To prevent ethical concerns, it was reiterated at the beginning of each focus group that participation was completely voluntary and participants may cease participation at any time and chose not to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable answering. Following Marshall and Rossman's (2016) guidelines for ethical management of data, focus group audio recordings were uploaded on a password protected computer. A transcription service was used to transcribe all focus group audio recordings verbatim. To add an additional layer of trustworthiness and accuracy, focus group transcriptions were read while the researchers simultaneously listened to the original audio recordings. Any transcription errors were then corrected. Audio recordings were stored and identified on a password protected computer after the transcription process and open coding procedures were complete. Only members of the research team had access to the audio recordings and transcriptions. To further protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms were used during transcription and data analysis.

To ensure trustworthiness of data, the researchers followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines which included establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Researchers established credibility by employing member checking and triangulation. Transferability was achieved as the researchers attempted to describe the observed phenomena with a detailed account. Dependability was addressed by conducting a dependability audit, as previously described regarding ethical data management. Lastly, confirmability, is concerned with researcher bias. Three of the four researchers in the current study were previously collegiate student-athletes. To ensure the coding process remained objective, the researchers made a deliberate effort to only code what was stated by participants without overgeneralizing or reliving past experiences. In addition, one of the four current researchers who was not a collegiate student-athlete at any time, served as a neutral party and completed a member-check of the data analysis to ensure objectivity.

### *Data Analysis*

Audio transcriptions from the focus group interviews were analyzed by the researchers. Student-athletes' responses to the broad, open ended interview questions, following the aforementioned interview guide, were open coded independently by each researcher using Nvivo software for data management and coding protocols. Coding or codifying is the process of formally categorizing data and thematic analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). As the codes were assigned within the transcripts, similarities and patterns of the data were observed and documented. Identifying findings and themes represents the last steps in the analysis process. Data was first analyzed independently and researchers then worked together to reach consensus on thematic identification (Krefting, 1991; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; White & Marsh, 2006). To substantiate thematic findings, the researchers included excerpts from the focus group data within the results.



## Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences DI student-athletes have participating in a mandatory life skills program and their perceptions on needed improvements. Two themes and subsequent subthemes emerged from the dataset: 1) Frustrations with life skills programming (subthemes: convenience, questioning relevance, unsupportive academic staff); and 2) Suggested improvements for life skills programming (subthemes: mentorship from older athletes, classroom topic choice, programming for transitions later in college, obtaining academic credit). The themes and their subsequent subthemes are explained below.

### *Frustrations with Life Skills Programming*

All 23 participants in this study voiced frustrations with the current life skills program. When participants were asked to describe their positives and negatives with the current life skills program, Jenna responded, “I didn’t like it.” She was further asked if she would recommend it to other students if the course was optional, she said “Absolutely not,” as she did not feel as though the course adequately prepared them for the academic challenges they would face, or how to balance their lives as student-athletes. Many of the other participants shared a similar distaste for the program. The three main frustrations voiced included: convenience of class, relevance, and having to work with an unsupportive academic staff.

**Convenience.** One of the biggest issues participants faced with the course was its mere convenience in terms of class location and time of day. These issues were of major concern to the participants, as the course (which is mandatory) did not give them adequate time to get from practice to class due to its time and location on campus. The course classroom is currently located on a part of campus that is away from the main academic buildings and athletic facilities and the course is held in the evening hours. This is problematic because many participants went to class straight from practice, forgoing dinner or snacks for fear of being late to the class (which they were penalized for). Audrey articulated this by stating: “...we always have to hurry after practice to get there on time because we should also eat right after practice or it’s basically a run into the café... And it’s just like we’re basically running late every week.” When asked if he would take the course if it was optional, Brandon echoed Audrey stating: “I wouldn’t take it. It’s so far away and it’s like, we seriously need to go to sleep at that time.” Alisha and her teammates would rather have the class once a month as opposed to every week, stating:

We are starving at night and need to eat, shower, and do our homework. The time is very inconvenient, also it is hard to get there because it is not actually on campus. You have to cross the big intersection or get someone who has a car to take you there.

Another participant agreed and made a comment that the class location was particularly difficult for international student-athletes to get to because very few of them have cars and have to walk, which is not only time consuming, but can be dangerous.

Another participant described an experience where she and a teammate tried to take the university transportation service from their apartment complex to the building in which the class is held and it took them over an hour to get to class. When they finally arrived to class, they were a few minutes late and because of this, the course instructor emailed their coach. The coach then

reprimanded them. This concern was echoed across the participants regardless if they were taking the class currently or if they had taken the class three years ago. As a frustration that appears to have been voiced for years by numerous athletes and logically, may have a quick fix, it is worth further exploration as to why it remains an unchanged factor.

*Relevance.* Many of the participants had trouble finding the “point” of the life skills course. One participant mentioned that as a junior, he does not remember anything he learned from the class and therefore could not recommend it as being beneficial. Rose stated:

Personally, like I understand why it's there. I think it's a good like that, like outside looking in, like it's a good idea to have a class like that. But I just feel like when I first went into their class in the first couple of weeks, like I already knew everything because they had taught me that at international orientation. So like it was like a crossover. So they actually, like I had already learned it, so then I was getting told it again. And I dunno. Sometimes I feel like, I have it tonight and I just am dreading going because it's, I don't know, it's not practical, well it is kind of practical stuff, but it's not like super practical. I don't know. It was really hard to explain. Well they could, like if they presented the information in a different way it probably would be better than, like just a standard PowerPoint at six o'clock at night when you're tired and you want to go home and shower...

Jenna further stated, “Basically like you're in there and you're just filling a desk for like an hour. It's literally a waste of time because I could be doing homework in study hall or something else besides sitting there.” Audrey additionally added:

I don't feel like we're going to that class with, like, the intention to learn something because we're just like, you have to be there. Yeah. We don't get credit for it. Yeah. Like people do their homework for other classes in there just because like it's, it's wasting time most of the time because, I, I will not remember that specific NCAA rule for my eligibility. I just have to look it up. Like if I, if I need, if I want to transfer or something I will have to look it up because I wouldn't remember... But like if you're talking to me about it for like an hour, I won't remember it and you're wasting your time and I'm wasting my time.

Many participants felt that the majority of the topics were not helping them progress as students or athletes, and that the course served more as a check mark for the university. The participants would much prefer to have an available resource to look up this information at a later date if needed (especially rules related to NCAA eligibility) and felt as though many of the topics served them no purpose in their current state as student-athletes.

*Unsupportive athletic academic staff.* The most alarming frustration reported was hearing experiences of student-athletes not receiving appropriate or helpful information from their assigned academic advisor. While academic advising is not directly embedded within the life skills course, it is part of the university's life skills programming and several of the participants voiced concerns about their interactions with student-athlete academic services. Miranda stated: “Academic advising is horrific. I literally went to meet with him today and he

didn't even show up." Another participant said that her academic advisor made her "feel stupid." One participant, who is an international student-athlete, mentioned feeling "behind" because her advisor never explained to her the process of picking a major, assuming that she either knew what a major was or how coursework at an American university worked. Rose, an international student-athlete who was also a transfer student, found athletic academic advising to be extremely confusing and no one was able to help her during her transition:

Cause when I came in as a transfer student, they like, they had to sort out what classes came over and what didn't and nobody really told me exactly what did work and what didn't work. And then they were like, Oh you're seeing this person. And they're like, Oh no, seeing this person. Oh and then you've got to go see your athletic advisor. And that kind of confused me cause when I went to [previous university], you just went to your athletic academic advisor and they did your whole class schedule because they knew exactly when you weren't supposed to be in class. And when you were and like, yeah, it was just so much easier.

Some of the participants discussed that they thought creating study groups and a study hall for student-athletes was beneficial, but when multiple teams go to study hall together, the academic athletic advisors stop enforcing the rules (i.e. no phones, no food). These participants got annoyed because many players would show up to study hall and it would become a "party" atmosphere and it would hinder their ability to actually study and get work done. One athlete wished the athletic academic advisors would either kick out disruptive athletes or overall, just be stricter, so that the athletes that want to study are able to do so.

### *Suggested Improvements for Life Skills Programming*

During the course of the interviews, participants explained the many flaws that exist within the current life skills programs, but also offered solutions and suggestions for how the university can strengthen the life skills program for future student athletes. Their main suggestions included: a mentorship program with older athletes, classroom topic choice, programming for transitions later in college, obtaining academic credit.

*Need for a Mentorship Program with Older Athletes.* Participants in this study voiced that one of the few reasons they were able to be successful during their early transition to a DI university was because of their teammates. Audrey mentioned that during her recruitment phases, she was not able to talk to any current players and she wished she had had the opportunity to do that as she thinks it would have given her some context in terms of what to expect upon her arrival to campus. Alisha further explained that "your teammates, everyone around, kind of teaches you the little things," referencing things like how to get around campus, forms that need to be signed, and day-to-day occurrences. Jenna shared an experience in which she felt that the upperclassman were "cancerous" and unsupportive when she was a freshman. She went on to say:

So now that I'm an upperclassman, I don't want to put any of my younger teammates through what I went through. So I'm kind of taking the reins of like trying to teach them

like, Hey, like take them under your wing when they come in and prevent that from happening...

John also said that mentorship is important, stating that people on his team really push to incorporate everyone, creating a very inclusive and welcoming environment. These athletes felt that having mentorship and support from older teammates helped them “learn the ropes” of the program and allowed them to be successful early on. While many of these experiences happened naturally due to being a part of the team, participants felt that they could benefit from having a more organized mentoring experience (e.g. weekly meetings or sharing meals together), especially international student-athletes, who voiced more unique needs.

*Classroom topic choice.* As voiced previously, many of the student-athletes in this study did not see the relevance of many of the topics covered in the life skills program and oftentimes felt that the topics covered were pointless. In terms of improvements, participants wished that they could have a voice in choosing the topics that are covered in class, or being able to get more classes on topics that were covered that they felt were actually helpful. For example, Caroline thought that incorporating more stress management discussions into the life skills program would be helpful. She explained that athletes experience stress differently than other university students, so receiving more information about coping and mental health in general would be very beneficial. Caroline suggested that bringing in someone like a sport psychology consultant or mental health counselor every so often could also be beneficial, as sometimes athletes just want to talk about the things they are trying to navigate as student-athletes:

...having someone that you can talk to that's not your coach, she's not an assistant coach, it's not your athletic trainer that's like, I don't know, a sport psychologist? ...maybe assign per team or per like a group of teams?

Participants voiced that incorporating mental skills building or stress management could help with their stress on and off the field. Another topic area that the participants felt excited about was bringing in a leadership consultant that discussed leadership practices and team dynamics. More topics like this seemed to be favored as they had a practical application to sport performance.

Surprisingly, the topic that participants wished they could receive more information about in a life skills course had nothing to do with athletics. The majority of the participants agreed that the life skills course would be helpful if they had someone come in and teach them how to cook. Participants explained that coaches and trainers talk to them about nutrition, but it is really difficult to find nutritious options in the cafeteria, so they could benefit from cooking lessons. In addition to cooking, they felt like learning other valuable life skills could be of importance, like budgeting, interviewing for jobs, how to write and pay taxes, and how to get a loan. For John, even teaching some people how to change a tire or check their oil could be helpful skills to know. Many of the participants also agreed that receiving information that was “sex” specific was a topic they really enjoyed. Elizabeth explained that one night the course instructor had the male and female athletes separate into two different classrooms and the females were able to talk about “lady issues.” Of the content covered over the course of the semester that was one topic of conversation that stuck with her. Kevin stated that the male version of this talk included a police

officer coming to talk discuss sexual assault, harassment, and on-campus safety, and he found the conversation interesting and worthwhile.

*Programming for transitions later in college.* Another suggested improvement to the current life skills program included information about how to transition *out* of college. This conversation about transition might include where to look for a job, how to apply for a job, how to use your major, and how to transition out of athletics. Elizabeth stated: "...I have some friends that have already graduated and like, they're not international but still like, they don't know what to do and like how to apply for jobs and like how to even use their major." When asked what athletic services could do to help after freshman year, Alisha stated: "We don't know where we want to go around here or what we can do. And jobs? How do we even search for jobs? Our resumes aren't good and we need help writing them." She also stated that she wished she had more help learning her options about graduate school programs and how to pay for them. Megan added that having someone help them with finding internships that would work in their schedules would also make a huge difference later in their academic careers. Another participant, Kevin, said that 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."

*Obtaining academic credit.* The last main improvement the participants would like to see with the life skills program is obtaining an academic credit for their participation in the course. Currently, the course is mandatory, but provides no academic credit. By and large, the students had a strong distaste towards this. When asked if the course made an impact on them as student-athletes, James said, "No it did not. Maybe it was just I was bitter about it being so late and not getting any credit" alluding to the notion that the course had such a negative connotation that his attitude going into each session primed him to not want to learn. When Rose was placed in the class, she was told that she had to take this class, but would not be given any credit. Her immediate response was:

...first of all, that's a turn off because why would I want to do that? And then you go there and then they're like, okay we're learning about this. And it's like, wait, what's the whole purpose of this class in the first place?

The majority of the participants did not understand why they were required to come to a 75-minute class once a week when they were not getting any credit for being there (yet they were reprimanded if they showed up late or skipped the class).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore student-athletes' perceptions of athletic departments' life skills and student development programming, the programming content, and identify areas for improvement. Using a phenomenological approach, study participants were free to discuss their perceptions and experiences and give meaning to those experiences (Creswell, 2013). Using Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) Conceptual Model of Academic Success for Student-Athletes as the theoretical lens by which data was analyzed, researchers focused on the unique aspects of the student-athletes' lived experiences. Findings from the study shed light on the perceived efficacy of student-development and life skills programming offered

by an athletic department from the unique perspective of collegiate student-athletes. Previous research has illuminated the need for student-development and life skills programs to assist student-athletes in their collegiate careers and beyond (Chan et al., 2018; Navarro & Malvosio, 2015; Pierce et al., 2016; Sudano et al., 2017). Adding to the extant literature, the current study supports past research while extrapolating ways in which athletic departments may improve their offerings to better improve the overall student-athlete experience.

Two primary themes, and associated subthemes, surfaced from the dataset. First, frustrations with the life skills programming (subthemes: convenience, questioning relevance, unsupportive academic staff) showed there are indeed areas of improvement in life skills and development programming. The second theme, suggested improvements for life skills programming (subthemes: mentorship from older athletes, classroom topic choice, programming for transitions later in college, obtaining academic credit), indicated student-athletes value life skills programming but they desire specific content to justify the time and effort spent participating in compulsory courses and programs.

Interestingly, all participants emphasized their frustrations with student-athlete life skills programming. As noted by previous research, (Harrison et al., 2009; Nichols, et al., 2019), student-athletes face many struggles exacerbated by a stressful schedule. It should come as no surprise that participants voiced concerns with mandatory attendance in life skills programming which they viewed as less than effective. Many of the issues highlighted in the emerging subthemes associated with student-athlete frustrations could feasibly be enhanced without the expenditure of additional athletic department resources. The issue of convenience and the actual physical location of the course classroom is one such example. Rather than causing undue hardship and stress on student-athletes, a simple solution would be to offer required life skills/development classes in a central location on the main campus. Freshman student-athletes are required to take the course and are also required to live in the university dorms, located in the main section of campus. At a minimum, holding the classes in an area on campus which does not require planning for transportation would alleviate at least some of the student-athletes' frustrations. As a frustration that appears to have been voiced for years by numerous athletes and logically, may have a quick fix, it is worth further exploration as to why it remains an unchanged factor.

The subthemes of class/content relevance and unsupportive academic staff are additional areas which could be altered, also with little or no expenditure of resources. Again, the majority of participants saw the intended value and purpose of a life skills course, but what was expected was perceived as mostly undelivered. Some athletes felt as if the course was "busy work" with no practical application, while others indicated the content being provided was simply not useful to ensure their success in both athletics and academics. The practical suggestion of better understanding mortgages and budgeting would make an impact, so that they can leave the program well-equipped to be successful outside of their sport. Huml et al.'s, (2019) recommendations align well with the current study results. They suggested courses should be designed for student-athletes based on the student-athlete experience allowing their specific needs to be addressed. Furthermore, Huml et al. (2019) emphasized the need for a summer bridge program for all first-year student-athletes. Effective summer bridge programs may help alleviate many of the frustrations highlighted by the participants in the current study.

Regardless of the course content presented however, some student-athlete participants were dissatisfied as they felt the classroom environment was not conducive to learning because the staff members were not willing to monitor the classroom effectively. Too often, athletic-

academic support staff were viewed as distant or unconcerned, which only increased student-athletes' frustrations. The student-athletes' dissatisfaction with athletic academic support staff/services highlights one of the key tenets of Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) conceptual model which posits the degree and type of interactions within social and academic systems impacts academic success. Previous researchers have reiterated the importance of athletic academic support staff and student-athlete success (Jackson et al., 2017) and student-athletes' in the current study further echoed the vital role athletic academic advisors should fill. Hazzaa et al., (2018) found similar results indicating both athletic academic support staff and facilities significantly impact student-athletes' satisfaction with the athletic academic services overall. Incorporating the current study's findings regarding what student-athletes deem as most important in a life skills course, the type of support they desire from athletic-academic staff members, and previous researchers' recommendations would substantially improve athletic academic services and likely ease participants' frustrations.

Currently, the NCAA is partnered with the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) to provide "daily oversight and operation of programming for student-athletes and life skills professionals at NCAA member institutions" (Leach, 2015, para. 1). NCAA life skills professionals (athletic academic advisors) are provided content, training, and programming to enhance the overall student-athletes' experience during their collegiate career and after. As members of the N4A, athletic academic advisors have access to best practices for life skill content development and may attend conferences and symposiums. Information is disseminated within this association to members and then implemented at the institutional level. Interestingly, collegiate athletic academic advisors are not required to be members of the N4A and further, NCAA member institutions are not required to pay the membership fees for athletic academic advisors who wish to join the N4A. This is of importance to note as athletic academic advisors would need to pay the \$395.00 yearly membership fee out of pocket for a service that ultimately would benefit the university athletics department as a whole. Additionally, athletic academic advisors could previously rely on the NCAA for grant opportunities, but due to the current impact of COVID-19, the NCAA has suspended funding initiatives. Thus, there are resources available to athletic academic advisors to aid in the implementation of quality life skills programs but due, in part, to financial constraints and uncontrollable circumstances, the resources remain out of reach for those who may need it the most. Athletic departments would do well to seek ways to secure funding for their athletic academic advisors to join the N4A.

The second theme was centered on improvements student-athletes perceived as beneficial to enhance life skills programming. Student-athletes have mentioned in previous studies that they desire services typically provided by athletic academic departments in addition to specific assistance in the areas of career development, on-campus events/activities, and a better understanding of intricacies associated with internships (Rubin & Moses, 2017). While some may question the effects of athletic academic support services on student-athletes' academic success (Huml et al., 2014), the current research provides specific examples, from the student-athletes' point of view, which may improve services offered.

Several participants indicated mentorship from older student-athletes was both useful and needed. A testament to the power of "team," most student-athletes mentioned their senior teammates voluntarily assisted with nearly every aspect of their transition into collegiate athletics. A more organized and structured mentoring program led by the athletic department could be a vital tool to alleviate stress associated with beginning a new life in DI athletics.

The three subthemes embedded in the second theme, classroom topic choice, programming for transitions later in college, and obtaining academic credit, represent areas of great concern for the student-athletes. While life skills programming is meant to serve student-athletes by providing NCAA rules and regulations, they also need to include practical applications that are directly transferable to sport and lifestyle settings before the student-athletes will deem them beneficial. Suggested examples included participants' request for stress management, mental skills training, and even cooking classes. With the NCAA's current emphasis on the mental aspects of participation in collegiate athletics, incorporating these suggested topics seems logical. Regardless of the topical areas included within course programming however, it seems all students want academic credit for participation. Obtaining some sort of credit or incentive would potentially make them more engaged and excited about the course, but for now, they feel like having to go to class is a punishment after having to attend classes, workouts, and practice during the day. With suggested changes incorporated, program content and services may be viewed more positively, but unless student-athletes receive academic credit for their efforts, the programming will continue to be viewed as subpar in their opinion.

Lastly, several studies have asserted athletic academic departments should provide avenues for career planning and investigation (Carodine et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 1996; Watt & Moore, 2001), which could arguably be incorporated in a formal class/instructional setting and/or as a stand-alone service. Indications from the current study support the notion that career services planning is both wanted and needed from the student-athletes' point of view, in addition to assistance in general as they transition into the workforce or begin to pursue a graduate degree. Participants in Huml et al.'s (2014) study reported similar experiences as they too expressed frustrations with career planning services. The participants reportedly became less satisfied with career planning and career exploration offerings as they more closely approached graduation, with senior student-athletes voicing concerns of career planning resources available to them (Huml et al., 2014). Career planning and efforts to ease the transition out of college appears to be particularly important for junior and senior level athletes who are unsure of their path post-athletics.

Several models currently in use at universities have the potential to meet the needs voiced by student-athletes in the case study. In one model used at Northern Vermont University-Johnson (Johnson, Vermont), first year student-athletes are paired with veteran student-athletes who may or may not be a member of the same team. The mentors assist first year student-athletes with athletic, academic, and/or social aspects as they navigate throughout their new collegiate career. Student-athletes begin their collegiate careers regularly meeting with a seasoned ally from within the athletic department. A program of this sort could easily be replicated at any university, provided sound guidelines are communicated to both the mentor and the mentee. Additionally, the program could be expanded, if need be, past the first-year experience.

Yet another mentor model incorporates professionals from the local university community. Belmont University (Nashville, Tennessee) and University of the Incarnate Word (San Antonio, Texas) both have formalized mentor programs for their student-athletes. Potential mentors must meet certain eligibility requirements, including a background check. The mentors may be university alumni or simply industry professionals in the local community, which could include individuals in the fields of law, medicine, and education for example. A synergistic relationship is built between the mentor and mentee. The mentee receives valuable life lessons to assist with career development while the mentor experiences intrinsic satisfaction in helping



young adults set and reach their professional goals. Again, this model could be replicated at other universities with minimal expense to the athletic department.

## Limitations and Future Directions

There are a few limitations to note. Because the focus groups were completed in a face-to-face manner and participants were present among their peers, it is possible that some of the participants chose to respond to the questions in a socially desirable way, biasing the responses. It is also important to consider the potential bias members of the research team had in interpreting the results, as three of the four team members were former collegiate student-athletes and shared similar experiences to many of the participants interviewed. While the researchers went through a series of checks and balances to ensure trustworthiness of the data, this is a potential limitation of the study. A third limitation to note is that of our sample. The majority of the participants in this sample were female and therefore, the responses may not be entirely generalizable to the male student-athlete population. Additionally, participants were all student-athletes at a mid-major university on the Gulf Coast and potentially may not realize the same transition experiences as student-athletes from DII, DIII, or larger DI universities, again, limiting generalizability.

This study provided a depth of information regarding the challenges and obstacles student-athletes at a DI mid-major university face when transitioning, and potential improvements that can be made to ease transitions for athletes moving forward. One area of interest that warrants further exploration is understanding more deeply the unique needs international student-athletes face during transition and how universities can better serve these individuals, as it appears their needs are not being met. Thus, future directions include delving further into the obstacles international student-athletes face, as well as creating tangible improvements that institutions can put in place to aid in a more seamless transition for these student-athletes. Additionally, future research will focus on how athletic academic services can be improved at universities so that resources are available at appropriate times and are meeting the needs of current student-athletes.

While all NCAA member institutions are required to conduct life skills programs, no parameters are provided to define what these programs should entail. NCAA Bylaw 16.3.1.2 reads, "An institution shall be required to conduct a life skills program on its campus" (NCAA, n.d.-d, para. 2). The freedom awarded to universities based on the bylaw language above explains why so many life skills program variations exist. There is no one-size-fits-all life skills program – and perhaps there should not be – but a source of best practices is needed for athletic academic advisors to access various curricular materials/models which could be tailored to meet the needs of their student-athletes. Moving forward, practitioners and academicians should work together to create an open-access database complete with lessons, materials, and other content ready to deliver student-athletes whose needs are still not being met.

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## Appendix

### *Interview Guide*

1. Describe your experience transition from a high school recruit to a DI student-athlete.
  - a. What obstacles did you face?
  - b. What was the hardest part of your transition from high school to college in the classroom?
  - c. What do you know now that you wish you would have known in your first few weeks or months as a DI athlete?
  - d. What did the athletic department do to help with your transition?
    - i. If they did not do anything, what do you wish would have been done?
  - e. What did your coaches (head/assistant/strength conditioning/volunteer) do to help with your transition, if anything?
    - i. If they did not do anything, what do you wish would have been done?
  - f. What did your teammates do to help with your transition?
    - i. If they did not do anything, what do you wish would have been done?
  - g. What was the most difficult part of the transition to college athletics?
  - h. What was the most difficult part of transitioning to college socially?
2. Do you feel you were prepared for college athletics? Why or why not?
  - a. Class/practice/travel schedule?
  - b. Stress coping mechanisms?
  - c. Alone for the first time in your life?
  - d. Support from coaches/faculty/staff?
  - e. Ease of navigating on campus?
3. Describe your experience with the life skills course offered through the athletic department.
  - a. What were the positives and negatives?
  - b. Did it prepare you appropriately for the upcoming semester/season?
  - c. If the course was optional, would you recommend it to other student-athletes? Why or why not?
4. If the athletic department was to develop a new life skills program for incoming freshman student-athletes, what would you want the program to include?
5. For student-athletes moving into their sophomore, junior, and senior seasons, what types of academic programming would be most beneficial for them?
  - a. Athletic?
  - b. Life Skills?
6. How would you describe your experience with student-athlete academic services?
  - a. In what ways is/has this department preparing/prepared you for success?
  - b. What could this department be doing differently?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience(s) with life skills programs?