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College Football Player Transitions Out of Their Sport:

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The processes of identity management and career transition from sport appear idiosyncratic. Previous research has shown that identity foreclosure and strong athletic identity can complicate transition out of sport (Park et al., 2013; Sparkes, 1998). The literature has shown that social support can make career transition more adaptive and cause less psychological strain for athletes (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Fuller, 2014; Park et al., 2013). It is the job of those in student-support services to help student-athletes prepare for a world after sport. High impact practices (HIP) are an empirically supported way to go about this. This study sought to understand the transition experiences of six former Division I football student-athletes and how their social support networks and athletic identity influenced their transition, using in-depth interview based-qualitative methods. Four key findings arose: (a) management of social support networks and transition experiences, (b) transition experiences and timing of career exploration, (c) personal value of athletic identity was related to environmental reinforcement, and (d) role conflict and identity management. Implications for researchers and practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: student-athlete support, transitions, internship, career development, identity formation

Transitioning out of sport differs from other career transitions as there are a wider variety of ways it can occur (e.g., injury, deselection, lack of eligibility). This transition usually occurs at a much younger age for athletes compared to workers in other careers. It is also a reality all athletes must face one day regardless of their competitive level. Athletes from various sports, skill levels, and countries have reported transition difficulties (Park et al., 2013). Some athletes report feelings of loss (Smith & Hardin, 2018), psychological distress (Lally, 2007; Wylleman et al., 2004) and disengagement (Grove et al., 1997). In the past 30 years, predictors related to the quality of transition from sport have been an extensively studied and discussed topic. Research shows that athletic identity, retirement preparation, support systems, and role exploration all can impact the quality of transition out of sport (Ronkainen et al., 2016; Beamon, 2012; Fuller, 2014; Grove et al., 1997; Murphy et al., 1996; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Theoretical Background

Although not originally intended to be used in sport contexts, Schlossberg's (1981) transition model has been used as a theoretical framework for multiple studies involving athletic retirement or withdrawal from sport (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stokowski et al., 2019; Swain, 1991). Schlossberg (1981) defines transition as an "event or non-event which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 4). Events are either anticipated, such as graduating college, or unanticipated, such as receiving a career-ending injury. Non-events are defined as transitions that one expected but did not occur, such as not being drafted to the NFL. According to this theory, the main things that influence an individual's ability to cope with transition are situation, self, support, and strategies – otherwise known as the 4 S's.

For many athletes, the situation will be the same – they are leaving sport – however, the timing and the degree to which one feels they could control the transition might affect how they cope with it. Self refers to individual characteristics such as demographics, identity, and worldview. Student-athletes already have competing identities that might impact their exploration behaviors and role commitments (Fuller, 2014; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Social support refers to the network of individuals who have supported the student-athlete through the transition. Athletes who asked their social networks for assistance during this time have reported smoother transitions out of sport (Petrie et al., 2014). Lastly, strategies refer to ways an individual can shape their transition and manage the stress. Though its less common with football, anticipation, and preparation for retirement can make the transition process easier (Fuller, 2014; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Of the four-factors that influence a student-athlete's ability to cope with transitions, strategies provide one of the best avenues for intervention on an organizational level.

High Impact Practices

High impact practices (HIPs) are a current strategy that many higher education professionals promote to increase student engagement and student success. High impact practices entail educational programming that are designed to supplement and enrich students education

(Kuh, 2008; McCormick et al., 2013). They facilitate peer and faculty interactions, provide students with feedback on their performances, and help students create and develop transferable skills, and broaden sense of self (Kuh, 2008). These practices can also provide student athletes with more diverse social networks to rely upon and help them develop post-sport strategies. Although some departments have reported difficulties implementing them (Ishaq & Bass, 2019), those who have been successful report great outcomes for their student athletes (Martens & Lee, 1998; Navarro et al., 2020; Sandoval, 2018).

Competing Identities

Identity is defined as "a self-structure – and internal self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives abilities, beliefs, and individual history" (Marcia, 1980, p. 109). Identity helps an individual define themselves personally, and it also helps one to determine where they fit in a social structure (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg et al., 1995; Stryker, 1980). Athletic identity is defined as "the degree to which an individual athlete identifies with the athletic role" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). If an individual has a high athletic identity, it means that they cognitively, affectively, behaviorally, and socially identify in this athletic way (Brewer et al., 1993). Athletic identity is negatively correlated with career planning pre-retirement (Grove et al., 1997; Park et al., 2013). Historically athletes who maintained a strong athletic identity at the time of retirement were more susceptible to career transition problems and lack of instrumental support (Grove et al., 1997).

High athletic identity in itself is not problematic, but in scholastic and collegiate contexts, issues arise for student-athletes who are unable to manage their dual identities (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). The social environment one is in can influence the emergence or suppression of different identities. For student-athletes, there is often a back and forth in identity salience where the student identity can be more prominent and reinforced in the classroom, but the athletic identity is reinforced on campus and in practice (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). The inability to properly balance the competing identities can lead to an overdevelopment of athletic identity (Miller & Kerr, 2003; Murphy et al., 1996). To promote continued success in their sport, many athletes will narrowly focus on their sport, which limits their potential to develop alternative roles (Chartrand & Lent, 1987) and explore academic opportunities (Kidd et al., 2018). This tunnel vision is a common experience for student-athletes who compete in revenue-producing sports such as football or basketball (Poux & Fry, 2015), and as a consequence, these student-athletes tend to have less career maturity compared to their peers in non-revenue producing sports (Murphy et al., 1996).

Transition from Sport

Football occupies this unique space where although the likelihood of becoming a professional is small, there still are a couple of professional options, and their visibility is quite large (e.g., NLF, AFL, CFL). For individuals who want to play at the professional level, a high probability of deselection is not always enough of a deterrent. The 2019 NFL draft had 6,490 Division I draft-eligible players but only had 254 draft picks, meaning the percentage of eligible players who were drafted was a little less than four percent (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020). Compared to other revenue-producing sports like baseball and basketball, football student-athletes statistically have the smallest chance of making it straight from college

to the NFL (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020). This statistic is concerning given that in Division I collegiate athletics, football, and men's basketball have some of the highest numbers of athletes who believe it is somewhat likely they will "go pro" (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015).

Many collegiate sports either do not have professional competitions beyond college, the selectivity of their sport is on the Olympic level, or the professional level of their sport does not have a competitive salary. Recognizing these constraints, many athletes in other sports will prepare for and acknowledge their retirement from sport (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Fuller, 2014). They will begin to explore different roles and acquire skills that help them develop other identities (e.g., future employee, nurse, teacher, coach). Individuals who score lower on athletic identity report a smoother transition from sport compared to the individuals who cling to the role of an athlete (Petrie et al., 2014). Failure to explore alternatives to a sport career leaves student-athletes at a disadvantage. If a professional career does not happen, and they did not develop their identities and roles outside of athletics, they may be hindered when it comes to joining the more traditional workforce (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010).

Knowing that football consumes a large amount of a student's time and many student-athletes face role conflict (Miller & Kerr, 2003; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014), learning how to incorporate and introduce high impact practices to student-development programming could help facilitate engagement (Ishaq & Bass, 2019) and hopefully identity and role exploration. High impact practices have been shown to positively impact learning (Kilgo et al., 2015) and the development of leadership skills (Soria & Johnson, 2017) for individuals of different backgrounds. Undergraduate research, internships, and service-learning are a few high impact practices that can be done on campus and incorporated into a student-athletes course schedule. This incorporation of HIPs into student programing and education can help address the barrier of not having enough time. College is a time for most students to explore jobs and prepare for the 'real world.' Having student-athletes participate in an internship, for example, creates a dedicated time in which they can get professional experience, explore careers with low risk, and diversify their social networks (Finley & McNair, 2013; O'Neill, 2010; Parker III et al., 2016). Additionally, participation in HIP activities broaden the social networks of student-athletes.

Social Support

Social support is essential for college students and emerging adults as it helps them to experience the challenges of adulthood while providing support to help them experiment with a range of potential career and personal identities in a constructive manner. Athletes who ask for assistance transitioning expand their circle of social support and make a smoother transition out of sport (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Petrie et al., 2014). Social support is broadly defined as "resources provided by other persons" (Cohen & Syme, 1985, p. 4). For athletes, seeking support can be troublesome for the following reasons: (1) Sport has a rugged-individualism culture – a thought process that one should be able to help oneself out – which leads towards a disinclination to ask for help (Brown et al., 2018; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990); (2) Networks of support are not very broad or diverse – the high time demands of athletics inadvertently causes a divide between student-athletes and traditional students. As a result, the social networks of many athletes consist primarily of other athletes (Martens & Lee, 1998; Wendling et al., 2018); (3) These homogeneous support networks strongly reinforce the athletic identity (Para, 2008); (4) If athletic involvement suddenly shifts or terminates, the support network may no longer provide

support or may lose interest or investment in the athlete, leaving the athlete isolated (Park et al., 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004); (5) Lastly, in some cases, student-athletes may not be encouraged (or even allowed) to expand their networks on a college campus in a way they see fit, as they may be more restricted relative to their non-athlete peers (Ishaq & Bass, 2019; Wendling et al., 2018).

To mitigate this, many athletic departments have emphasized life skills and student-athlete development. Student-athletes who are more satisfied in the departments academic services tend to report higher career decision making self-efficacy. Meaning these athletes were more confident in their ability to make future career decisions for themselves (Burns et al., 2013). Creating educational high impact enrichment opportunities inside the student-athlete setting is a unique task that athletic academic support staff have been tasked with. Especially given that student athletes schedules often make them miss out on college opportunities that are granted to traditional students.

Current Study

In the past ten years, more attention in research has been given to transition out of sport (Fuller, 2014; Park et al., 2013); however, there is a need in the literature for sport and level-specific transitions. Leaving sport, in the past, has been thought of as a traumatic experience filled with relinquishing roles and disengagement. When an athlete is ready to transition, though, resources such as proper social contacts and education can make the adjustment to a new role smoother (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Division I football student-athletes are at higher risk for unsuccessful transitions due to the unique intersection of high athletic identity, homogeneous social support structures, and lack of transition preparation due to the desire to pursue a professional football career. This study hopes to contribute to the literature offering insight into the nuanced experience of football players transition out of sport and how the management of their resources and identity influenced the quality of their transition.

Methods

The study aimed to explore the unique individual experiences of the participants. A content analysis approach was taken, and the interviews were examined using a social constructivist lens. Social constructivism is situated in the belief that two people can experience the same situation but perceive it differently, much as two athletes can have a similar university experience but leave with vastly different perceptions of that experience. As Patton (2014) notes, "what is perceived as real is real in its consequences" (Patton, 2014, p. 122).

Participants

For this study, a sample of six former Division I football players agreed to participate. They ranged in age from 24-39 years; five participants were Black, and one was White. This group of former athletes is not readily accessible, and the sample allowed the researcher to gain unique insights into identity formation and transition processes. These athletes played football on multiple levels and offered insights at each level.

The design of the study also allowed the participants to voice their opinions and share their stories. Table 1 lists participant demographics and pseudonyms. Football players were

selected because they historically have reported some of the highest percentages of Division I athletes who believe it is somewhat likely they will become professional athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015). The sample consisted only of former football players from the same school. The information gained from the study was used to help create a program at the university for former football players.

Procedure and Data Collection

To examine the transition experiences of former football student-athletes and management strategies of available resources, this study employed semi-structured interviews. After IRB approval was received, the research team began participant recruitment. To maximize response variance, a purposeful sampling method was used. Purposeful sampling allowed us to recruit specific individuals who had the lived experience and could provide rich details of their transition experience (Palinkas et al., 2015). A student-athlete advisor recommended a range of individuals who had different experiences leaving football, and the research team reached out to those individuals. In addition, snowball sampling was employed (Patton, 2014). For this study, a successful transition was conceptualized by the research team as an individual who had a less turbulent time transitioning out of sport compared to his peers, and a less successful transition was conceptualized as an individual who had a more of a turbulent or passive transition out of sport compared to their athletic peers. Schlosberg's adaptation model (1981) and Marcia's (1966) conceptualization of identity crisis and searching behaviors were used to guide this. This advisor and other staff members assisted in the solicitation of participants, and some participants referred new individuals to the study

The researchers developed an interview guide consisting of questions designed to solicit the participant's perceptions of their athletic identity, social support, and career transition experience. Athletic identity questions were created by referencing the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) and life factors that may have reinforced the development of one's athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). The research team followed a similar procedure as laid out in Beamon (2012). Participants' social networks and utilization of social networks were explored through questions about social support (Brandt & Weinert, 1981). In turn, questions about identity crisis and career exploration behaviors were loosely modeled after Marcia and Archer's (1993) scoring criteria.

The responses from the interviews were used to determine if the athletes engaged in vocational exploratory behaviors, when did they begin to do this, and what events may have started the behavior. If they did not engage in exploratory behaviors, the athletes were probed for what may have impeded their exploration. Lastly, demographics provided contextual details to interviews.

Individuals who agreed to participate in the study completed an informed consent form and consented to audio-recording of the interview. The first author conducted all interviews by phone or in a private room on the university campus, using a semi-structured interview process (Patton, 2014). The difference in locations was due to some participants being in different cities than the first author. Interviews lasted between 30 and 65 minutes. Participants had opportunities to ask questions throughout the interview. At the termination of the interview, each participant completed a basic demographic questionnaire. The researchers were the only ones who had access to the transcripts and the demographic questionnaire. Once the interviews were

transcribed, the audio files were deleted. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants

Data analysis and synthesis. The first author transcribed audio files of all interviews verbatim, then read each interview twice to gain comprehension and immersion. Notes and memos were made in the margin about first impressions. The first author then conducted a directed content analysis on each interview; this approach is appropriate for interviews guided by an existing theory about a phenomenon, is used to validate existing theory, or to show relationships between variables (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). While there were specific questions in mind, it was unknown how each participant would interpret and respond to those questions. In directed content analysis, previous research is used to develop the initial coding scheme (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The existing literature guided this study on barriers to successful transition (Fuller, 2014; Park et al., 2013). Each psychosocial variable (i.e., athletic identity, social support, career transition experiences) was used as a primary theme to guide manual coding of relevant passages of text (Patton, 2014). Meaningful passages that did not fit primary themes were coded for follow-up analysis, and new primary themes were created. Within primary themes, sub-themes were created to categorize the information better. This concluded the first round of content analysis.

After the first round of content analysis, the first author and the second author worked to create a working model of how the themes of social support, career transition experiences, and athletic identity interacted. This closely resembled the process laid out by Richards and Hemphill (2018). The authors individually coded the first transcript and then met to check the congruency of the codes. By this process the authors were able to create a working codebook. Once the codebook was established the first author coded the remaining five transcripts and the second author played a critical role in the debriefing of the data responses and analytical practices needed for qualitative data.

Limitations. Its deductive nature limits directed content analysis. The use of predetermined themes may cause the researchers to overlook other relevant data that do not fit into these themes either during the interview or data analysis phases. The researcher may look for data, by either probing a certain way in the interview or even during coding, that supports their initial claims, thus introducing bias (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). However, given that the study was grounded by understanding individual differences and generating solutions to problems of practice, this method was deemed appropriate. Themes that seemed of importance but not directly in support of the research questions were included in the final themes.

Although purposeful, another limitation of this study is that all the athletes came from the same athletic program, and they played the same sport. All the participants ended up in the same career field of athletics – which may have been a consequence of snowball sampling. The study did not ask about a few key demographics, such as if participants were first-generation college students', socioeconomic status at the time of transition, and if an injury caused their transition out of sport. Football has one of the highest percentages of first-generation students (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2016). First-generation student-athletes face the difficulty of navigating higher education and athletics at the same time. Socioeconomic status at the time of transition could affect the transition as an individual with the potential to earn a higher salary or with access to other financial resources after sport would have a different experience than someone who did not. There is less financial pressure. Lastly, injuries can come unexpectedly,

and the individual may not have had time to prepare for life after sport. Without planning, there may have been a lack of role exploration.

Trustworthiness. To combat bias and increase objectivity, multiple verification strategies were employed. First, an audit trail was kept to promote accurate recall of contextual details (Rodgers, 2008). The audit trail denoted the sequential process the researcher followed when coding interviews. Once codes were derived, the audit trail expanded to include the researcher's reasoning behind classifying the codes. Secondly, the research used peer debriefing. The second author served as an auditor to review the codebook and the accuracy of the themes and general workings of the data. The auditor would challenge the researcher, which resulted in the researcher defending or modifying their thought process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Thirdly, the researcher maximized the variance of a small sample by including former student-athletes who experienced more-successful and less-successful transitions. The transition type was determined by the advisor who knows them, their career exploration, according to Brewer et al. (1993) and type of transition, as identified by Schlossberg (1981). In addition, the sample was not homogenous regarding life experience. Lastly, the data collection and analysis occurred concurrently. This allowed the researcher to assess the effectiveness of their questions and determine if there were other phenomena to be explored (Mayan, 2016).

Researcher's Backgrounds

The primary investigator conducted all the interviews. She self-identifies as a Black woman who is interested in identity, educational environments, and athletic transitions out of sport. At three different universities, she has worked in student-athlete support services as an academic mentor for primarily football players. This data was collected while the primary investigator was a sport and exercise psychology master's student for her master's thesis.

The second author identifies as a white male with more than 15 years of coaching, teaching, and mentoring experience with diverse groups of student-athletes from various skill levels. The second author has a decade of experience with qualitative research methods, which provided expertise during question development, interview execution, and all phases of data analysis.

Results

Four themes emerged from the interviews. The four themes are: (a) management of social support networks and transition experiences, (b) transition experiences and timing of career exploration, (c) personal value of athletic identity was related to environmental reinforcement, and (d) role conflict and identity management. Implications for researchers and practitioners are discussed.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant	Race	Age	Marital Status	Highest Degree	College GPA	Profession or Work Industry	Transition Description
Alex	White	25	Living with Significant other	Master's	3.0	College Athletics	Successful
Bryan	Black	30	Single	Bachelor's	2.3	College Athletics	Initially difficult
Caleb	Black	26	Single	Bachelor's	2.4	Collegiate Athletics	Passive
David	Black	39	Married	Bachelor's [a]	*	Entrepreneur and Student	Successful
Eli	Black	25	Single	Bachelor's [a]	2.7	Athletics	Difficult
Felix	Black	24	Single	Master's	3.9	Education and Collegiate Athletics	Successful

[a]Degree in progress * Not Reported

Theme 1: Management of Social Support Networks and Transition Experiences

For the former football players who participated in this study, how they managed their social support structures made a difference in terms of the ease of their transition out of sport. Those who managed their support structures diversified them early on and utilized them actively during the transition.

Subtheme 1: Diverse social support structures. Diverse social support structures contained individuals outside of family and close friends that could provide support in different domains of life. Athletics provided a means to do this for most individuals in the study. However, three participants were able to diversify their social support structures though obtaining internships, joining organizations on campus, and entrepreneurial endeavors.

David was able to develop a diverse social support group during his time in the NFL, making contacts outside of football and through the business ventures he built with his wife. As a requirement of their master's programs, both Alex and Felix obtained internships while working on their degrees, which allowed them to expand their social network. Alex said he met new types of people all the time as a part of his internship. Felix was also involved in a fraternity, which expanded his social network beyond athletes and family. He had a large number of contacts, and he utilized them. He attributed his smooth transition out of sport to social support.

> I feel the transition for me because of my support system, my support base, family, people who I have made connections with they have set me up, so I don't have to go looking for a part-time job at McDonald's (Felix)

Among the athletes who did not have diverse social support groups, the transition was more difficult. Caleb did not have as diverse of a social support group, due to his reserved nature. Bryan did not have a diverse social support group because his focus was on athletics, and most of his time was spent with teammates and coaches. Even though Eli did not have a diverse social support group, he seemed to recognize the importance of establishing one and utilizing it. He believes

> there is no reason a student-athlete should leave school after you know... and not knowing what they want to do. There is an uncountable amount of people who want to help you. You just have to uh reach out to resources like alumni, advisors, your coaches. Reach out to everything; you don't know what kind of opportunities will [be] presented to you in the future (Eli)

Subtheme 2: Active utilization of support. There was a noticeable difference in transition between those who actively utilized their social support versus those who preferred to figure it out themselves. All the participants described that they rely on family and close friends when they need help figuring something out. Three participants – Alex, Felix, and David – reported that in addition to friends and family, they had coworkers, mentors, and supervisors to ask for support or assistance. It was these three individuals when compared to the other participants who had a smoother transition from football. The three shared that they had to overcome their natural tendency to try and just figure things out. They realized either during their athletic career or at the end of their athletic career that this extended network could help them make the next career move they needed to make – whether that be working on the business side of collegiate athletics, returning to school, or starting their own business. The distinguishing feature of these three's transition was that they had a plan in place or had begun to formulate a plan for life after football. They took an active role in this process.

Alex admitted he is an internal person and acknowledged his inner nature leads him to deal with most problems on his own; however, through working, he recognized he should reach out to others. He views his internship supervisor as a role model and when asked who he goes to most for advice, he says, "for like issues I go to my boss. We are pretty close". Through this experience with his supervisor, Alex realized sports management was a good path for him. Alex deems sports management as a place he can work with "high-level people who care about athletics and donate back to athletics as much as they can, so I chose that path."

David said that he had learned from his NFL days to nurture connections with the people he meets. He urges people to talk to others who may know people who are in the field you may want to go into. He implores people to ask their networks, "Can we talk about your business ventures? Do you have a contact for this other side of things I am looking at?" He also urges students to get in contact with their professors as they have a wealth of knowledge about opportunities students may be into.

Bryan and Caleb had a slightly more difficult time leaving sport. Both Bryan and Caleb have more of an 'up by the bootstraps mentality.' Bryan is highly self-reliant. He has a sound social support system that mainly consists of family. He knows he can go to his parents about anything, but he admits to not being a very open person. He wishes that in college, he had lowered his pride and asked for help more often. When he has a problem, he says his approach is to "Keep it to myself [and] try to figure things out because I don't really want to talk." Even

though he did not utilize his social support as much as he could have, Bryan's advice to future first-year students is to network and maintain positive relationships. He said, "Don't burn bridges, you never know who you might need or who might be in a position to help you... Nobody has ever gotten complete success all by themselves." Caleb is a reserved person, and if he is not familiar with someone, he is not going to approach them. He uses his mother and brother as social support because he trusts them and does not trust many people. Although he is reserved, he maintains those close relationships that he chose to build. He tries to handle most of his problems on his own and does not like to ask for assistance because "I don't want to be a burden on anyone."

Theme 2: Transition Experiences and Timing of Career Exploration

The second theme to arise was the timing in which an individual began to explore other career options. Smoother transitions were marked by those individuals who had engaged career exploration before transitioning out of collegiate football. Before trying out for the NFL, Alex had started his masters in his last year of eligibility and begun to explore the business side of sports. As a part of his master's program, he was required to obtain an internship. So when he did not make the NFL, he was already working on his backup plan and doubled down on his commitment to it. During his internship, he says, "I realized [it] was probably the best path for me you know working with high-level people who care about athletics and donate back to athletics as much as they can so I chose that path." Felix was another individual who began to explore career options before sport ended. He sought out an internship at a radio station – and even though this is not the career path he chose, it helped reaffirm his commitment to be in athletics and coach. After not getting drafted to the NFL, Felix says, "I set myself up [to] where I graduat[ed] with a degree, I started my masters, I made connections. I wanted to start coaching, so I started doing things towards that [goal]".

Caleb, on the other hand, had a passive transition out of sport. He knew that his time in sport was coming to an end, yet he was not actively searching for other career options. He was not sure what his future was, but he knew that he wanted to be involved in sports in some way – he just how to figure out how. Eli knew that football would not sustain him for the rest of his life, but he was still actively trying to make it to the professional leagues.

Theme 3: Personal Value of Athletic Identity and Athletic Identity Reinforcement

The third theme refers to how much athletic identity makes up one's self-concept. The current literature often talks about athletes having high athletic identities and how this leads to a rougher transition (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985); however, someone can have a high athletic identity and have other equally as well-developed identities that contribute to one's image of themselves (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). When asked if they still considered themselves an athlete or not, five of the six participants said 'yes,' with the sixth participant undecided if he would still consider himself an athlete. Their feeling towards being considered an athlete could best be seen by the way Felix describes it.

> Ohh yeah, it never dies. I don't care what anyone says, once an athlete always an athlete. It might not work or look or feel the way it did when I was younger but…you know I am still an athlete in my mind

The results from this study suggest that the environmental reinforcement of one's athletic identity over others may be a more important factor than a high athletic identity.

Felix, Eli, Caleb, and Bryan all describe ways in which their environments reinforced their athletic identities. Both Caleb and Bryan did not spend much time with traditional students, and most of their time was spent around teammates. Their conversations centered on sports and other sport-related issues. Felix mentions that football became a way for people to identify him.

"Once I started playing football, it became what I did, what people knew me by." Eli described how being a college athlete and then going professional shaped the way that other people interacted with him. It would take him off guard when strangers would congratulate him on a game or know his number and recognize him on the street. He said, "It's crazy how people start acting when they see you have an opportunity to make it to the NFL or pro level." He enjoyed the experience when it was with fellow students; however, he was turned off when distant family members began to treat him differently "It's weird how some of your family will start treating you like they are a fan and not your family member."

Theme 4: Role Conflict and Identity Management

All the participants shared the challenges of being both a student and a student-athlete. However, how well each participant could balance the demands of their academic role and their athletic role depended on what level of importance that identity had to the individual. Each participant discussed how time demands were difficult to adjust to and always a battle to keep up with. When asked what it was like to be a student-athlete, Felix said, "In my opinion, being a student-athlete is like double time, double work." A high athletic identity did not mean an individual would have difficulty balancing roles. Instead, a high attachment or high value placed upon their athletic identity was a better indicator of role balance struggles. Those who had smoother transitions placed equal, if not higher, importance on academic identity compared to athletic identity. The priority level of these identities led to the development of both.

Alex, David, and Felix might have been able to manage their dual roles better due to their experiences outside of football. Alex did not come to school on an athletic scholarship. To pay for school, he got a job and had to concentrate on his time management. Initially, he struggled with the demands of working, going to school, and playing football. Once he was put on scholarship, he was able to balance his roles, and the time demands better. He excelled in school, which led him to explore other roles. When he first started, "I got here as a walk-on, and I took the bare minimum, and once I got put on scholarship, I crushed school hard." David had always wanted to play two sports in college. He had done well academically and athletically in junior college, earning a 3.2 GPA. When he transferred, his grades initially suffered. He reported that during his first semester, he had a very low GPA. The next year, after much hard work, he succeeded in raising his GPA to above a 2.5. Once his grades were back up, he was able to try out for another intercollegiate sports team, and he made it. However, he ultimately turned it down. His reason being

> So now I'm thinking, this is the thing I always wanted to do. I love [this sport], I'm on a major stage, I wanted to pressure it out, but it's so risky. If I don't play, I can really just focus on my studies (David)

Felix chose this university because of its academics and its athletic reputation. Even though he aspired to play football professionally, he knew this dream might not come to fruition. He worked to prepare himself for the likely probability of a career outside of professional athletics. He was preparing for the days after football while playing.

> A lot of guys umm.. they put all their eggs in one basket, for me, you know it wasn't like that. I had a dream to play in the league, but not everyone gets that opportunity (Felix)

Due to time demands and long-term goals, Bryan and Caleb seemed to give preference to their athletic identity, as they placed a higher level of importance upon it. Eli originally wanted to major in engineering, but he felt that he could not keep up with football demands and engineering. He switched his major to something more manageable. He placed future possible career opportunities on hold for sport. During his interview, Bryan talked about the importance of maintaining his grades so that he could remain eligible. He was of the mindset, "to be able to do what you love, take care of academics."

Caleb, who had more of a passive transition, treated academics more as a means to an end. He did not put the importance of one identity over the other, but he ended up naturally developing his athletic identity more deeply. He reiterated this throughout the interview. In retrospect, he wished he had done things differently when he was in college. He focused on playing and getting a degree. While discussing his college major choice, he said, "I wish I had done something else, but that's what got me through." Caleb now advises future players to take both school and workout seriously as those were two things he did not do.

Discussion and Implications

Transitioning out of sport is an inevitable process each athlete will face one day. Given the fact that many athletes emotionally struggle with this transition, researchers have investigated factors that impact the quality of transition. The purpose of this study was to offer a nuanced examination of football players' transitions out of sport and how the management of their resources influenced the quality of their transition. The individuals who had a more positive transition experience explored other careers before football ended, they managed their social networks better, and they were able to manage their dual identities better.

In this study, the high impact practice of obtaining an internship positively affected two participants, Alex and Felix, and their transition quality. Internships contributed to their further development of identity outside of sport. They both realized playing professionally was not an option. As a result, they had already set a plan in motion to transition out successfully. Through their internships, Felix and Alex were also able to increase their career decision-making self-efficacy (Odio et al., 2014; Tsai et al., 2017) which is an issue many athletes of revenue producing sports face (Foster & Huml, 2017; Murphy et al., 1996). Even if the internships were still in athletics, learning how to coach or work in the front office allowed the athletes to see how sport operates as a business, and figure out what skills they have learned on the field that could transfer to their work sites (Bernes et al., 2009). Due to their internships and/or hands-on career exploration opportunities, Alex, David, and Felix were able to receive mentoring from individuals active in careers that might interest them. Often, when an individual recognizes they will transition out from sport, they will decrease their athletic identity (Fuller, 2014; Lally,

2007). Whether this was intentional or not, one could argue that internships helped play a role in transition preparation.

Some universities have already figured out how to create more internship opportunities for their student's athletes. Since 2015, Vanderbilt has established a summer internship program which pairs local Nashville businesses with student-athletes (Student-Athlete Summer Internship Program, n.d). University of Delaware has an internship and job-shadowing program (UD Athlete Internship Program, n.d). Recently, the University of Arizona has implemented a program that lets student athletes' intern within different areas of the athletics department (University of Arizona Athletics, 2019). Although the internship programs do not look the same, finding ways to incorporate these programs will greatly benefit athletes as they get ready to transition out of sport.

It should also be noted that Alex, David, and Felix managed role conflict the best because they had established identities out of sport and gave academics and athletics the same priority. When it came to transition, they relied upon their other identities to make the process smoother (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). As previously stated, Eli and Bryan had more attachment to their athletic identity, thus giving it priority over the academic identity. This finding supports the literature that says athletes attached to their athletic identity (Chartrand & Lent, 1987) and whose environment reinforced this attachment (Poux & Fry, 2015) were less likely to develop other skills (Kidd et al., 2018). Eli and Bryan relied more heavily on their athletic role, which leads to over-identification. This over-identification is a coping method to deal with the role conflict demands placed upon them (Miller & Kerr, 2003; Murphy et al., 1996; Petitpas & Champagne, 1988).

Due to time demands and energy constraints many athletes social network consists of other athletes (Martens & Lee, 1998; Wendling et al., 2018). Alex, David and Felix's networks consisted of friends, family, work supervisors, traditional students, business professionals, and people whom they had met from networking. Alex and Felix heavily diversified their social support groups during their collegiate athletic career, and David expanded his network during his professional playing days. The heterogeneity of the group meant these individuals had cultivated a rich resource for them to utilize and rely upon. Having diverse social networks aid in adaptive transition is supported by the literature (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Petrie et al., 2014). Their experience supports the findings that high impact practices can facilitate interactions with diverse groups of people (Kuh, 2008). Overall this experience led to them to have meaningful peer and staff interactions, they were provided feedback on their performances, and this practice helped them create and develop transferable skills

In addition, diverse networks make finding the four types of social support that House (1981) discusses more accessible. The types of social support (informational, appraisal, empathy, instrumental) may be received better if the person delivering the support is an expert or trusted source in that area. The athletes with diverse social support groups had more people to challenge their thinking patterns, and more people to offer them different forms of social support. Professionals and practitioners in student-athlete services should consider what specific types of support (informational, appraisal, emotional, and instrumental) they are offering and which form of support is being utilized the most (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Watt & Moore III, 2001). Although this is not a formal model, it is not uncommon practice for undergraduates to reach out to professors and conduct informational interviews. Sometimes the conversation can spark the beginning of a mentoring relationship. Professor mentoring has been shown to increase

undergraduate learning and success (McKinsey, 2016). This is often the way in which undergraduates are able to secure research opportunities.

The individuals who self-reported a harder time transitioning had a good social support system; however, their networks were homogeneous. Parental and peer social support greatly influence identity status (e.g., foreclosure), which can explain why none of the individuals were foreclosed but could also explain how some of their social circles may have placed more importance on one identity than another (Hall & Brassard, 2008; Para, 2008). The lack of diversity in a social support group can create an environment that reinforces one set of ideals and never challenges an individual's beliefs. Homogeneity of a social support group does not generally foster role exploration. One individual who was in a state of identity moratorium (i.e., low commitment to a career, but actively searching his options) did not have an issue asking for help from his siblings and cousins because he trusted them and looked up to them. However, they alone could probably only provide him empathy and appraisal support when he may have needed informational and instrumental support for his career transition.

One individual in particular, Caleb, had a passive transition. He knew with certainty that his athletic career was coming to an end when he did not attempt to play in the NFL. At first, he struggled with the loss of playing sports, but he overcame that disappointment. Contrary to the findings in Peitre, Deiters, and Harmison (2014), Caleb did not look into other roles. Eli and Bryan seemed to be going through an identity transformation. They had a low commitment to a vocation, but they demonstrated high exploratory behaviors. These two individuals placed a high value on their athletic identity. This attachment to their athletic identity may have been the cause of their less than a smooth transition. This can be explained by Chartrand and Lent's (1987) study in which many athletes think that their success in sports requires an exclusive focus on that domain. Consequently, they neglect to explore other domains.

Future Research

From this study, a few areas for future research arose. First, since social support had a strong relationship with identity status, it would be worthwhile to investigate an athlete's social support and how they use different forms of social support. This could be done with quantitative measurements that ask about perceived social support and satisfaction of social support, or this could be done qualitatively by asking how are individuals supported? When do they feel the most supported? What different people provide them various forms of social support? This information would help practitioners update student-athlete development models. Second, more research is needed to understand the role of financial security in the transition out of sport. After completing a successful career with the NFL (assuming the athlete built adequate savings and investments), do those athletes experience less external pressure to secure new work? Third, it would be essential to investigate what are some ways to foster role exploration to individuals who may be unmotivated to explore other domains outside of their individual's sport. This could be done by instituting high impact practices at the athletics department level, and investigating which practices are the most feasible and provide the most benefit to student athletes. Fourth, all the athletes had been out of sport for at least a season. In the future, it may be beneficial to do a longitudinal study of athletes as they are transitioning.

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