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Connected at the *HIP*: Exploring Quality Dimensions in First-Year Seminars for Student-Athletes

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First-year seminars have been identified as a high-impact practice resulting in heightened academic performance, retention, and skill attainment (Kuh, 2008). Many higher education institutions offer exclusive sections of this transition course to first-year student-athletes, but a lack of research exists about their curriculum and learning outcomes. As such, this study sought to examine the design of first-year seminars for student-athletes as it relates to their quality implementation. The review of syllabi and institutional websites revealed that first-year seminars address a wide range of student-athlete needs, and for the most part, meet the expectations of HIP quality dimensions. Yet, this study found that a more focused and intentional approach when designing these courses would be beneficial in producing desired high-impact educational outcomes. The study concludes with implications for practice as well as recommendations for future research. First-year seminar instructors can utilize this study as a guide on how to evaluate their curriculum design and implementation in terms of quality measures.

Keywords: first-year seminar, student-athletes, colleges/universities, high-impact practices

For many students, the first year of college can manifest as a stressful time during which they undergo various academic and social changes. In the 2017 National Survey of the First-Year Experience (NSFYE), 73.5% of colleges/universities reported offering some form of the first-year seminar (FYS) to support students during their transition to college (Young, 2019). FYS is considered one of 10 high-impact practices (HIP), which have been identified in fostering positive educational results such as increased academic performance, retention, and skill attainment (Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013); Kuh (2008) recommends that students participate in at least two HIPs during their college studies. FYS curriculum varies per program but may include activities to support academic success, connection with the institution, knowledge of campus resources, introduction to academic expectations, academic planning, and major exploration (Young, 2019). Course content depends on the type of seminar offered at each institution and which student populations are enrolled in those courses (Young & Hopp, 2014).

According to the NSFYE (2019), 33.7% of four-year institutions require student-athletes [used interchangeably with *athletes*] to participate in FYS. This finding is not surprising as scholars typically describe National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I student-athletes, the focus of this study, as a *non-traditional*, *special*, or *at-risk* group of students given they have unique experiences stemming from their dual role of student *and* athlete (e.g., Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gayles, 2009; Jolly, 2008; Navarro et al., 2020; Rubin, 2017). The experiences associated with this dual role has increased the call for research-based and data-driven practices in the student-athlete programming field (Comeaux, 2018; Navarro et al., 2020). A large gap in the literature currently exists regarding the nature of FYS offered exclusively to student-athletes and whether these courses meet HIP quality dimensions. As Finley and Kuh (2016) posited, "calling something a high-impact practice does not necessarily make it so. Intentional design and careful attention must be paid to how these practices are implemented to ensure that the label high impact also means high *quality*" (p. 12). With the needs of student-athletes in mind, this study sought to examine the design of FYS for student-athletes as it relates to their quality implementation.

Conceptual Framework: High-Impact Practices

The concept of student engagement frames the focus on HIPs (Ewell & Jones, 1996; Kuh, 2008; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013) as it is essential for educators who work with student-athletes to consider if they are effectively engaging them in learning. To help guide institutions in the development of programs to increase the likelihood of meaningful learning experiences, Kuh (2008) established that existing educational practices, such as FYS, have a higher tendency to engage learners than traditional lecture-based instruction because of the active learning environments they create for students. Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) further explained that certain pedagogical choices should be implemented in HIPs to ensure the practice significantly positively impacts learners. Furthermore, Finley and McNair (2013) discovered that, if done well, HIPs have compensatory effects for nontraditional students, meaning they are twice as likely to benefit from high-impact educational experiences than traditional college students.

Kuh (2008) defined HIPs as learning situations in which students are more likely to find personal connections to their educational experiences and persist to degree completion.

Typically, HIPs are facilitated through the university without much control of the athletic departments, and this programming does not take into consideration the needs of student-athletes (Ishaq & Bass, 2019). Some of the identified student experiences include FYS, learning communities, service or community-based learning, collaborative assignments, and projects, and ePortfolios (Center for Engaged Learning, 2016). However, to call an educational experience high-impact does not necessarily mean that it is high-impact, especially when considering the unique needs of student-athletes. Kuh and O'Donnell (2013, p. 8) established eight quality dimensions that increase the likelihood of student engagement. The qualities include, but are not limited to:

- Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels;
- Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time;
- Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters;
- Experiences with diversity;
- Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback;
- Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning;
- Opportunities to discover the relevance of learning through the real-world application; and
- Public demonstration of competence.

When educational initiatives are developed with these eight quality dimensions in mind, they have the potential to inspire students to make meaningful connections to their learning and challenge them to engage with learning processes rather than merely consume knowledge (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). It was the goal of the study to examine if FYS designed for NCAA Division I student-athletes are likely to embed the quality dimensions of HIPs within curriculums across the U.S. and meet the needs of student-athletes.

Literature Review

First-Year Seminars

Approximately, 73.5% of colleges and universities currently offer some version of FYS, and the nature of these courses varies largely (Young, 2019). Fundamentally, FYS is a HIP that is designed to elicit outcomes specific to first-year students' needs, and its central goal is to help students develop academically and socially while facilitating a successful transition to college (Hunter & Linder, 2005). FYS enrolls a small number of students who engage in discussions with peers and instructors to exchange ideas with the main goal of developing a community of learners (Hunter & Linder, 2005). The top reported objectives from the 2017 NSFYE for FYS are as follows: to help students develop connections to the institution, to provide an orientation to campus resources and services, and to help students develop academic skills (Young, 2019). Other potential course objectives include: to develop critical thinking skills, to create a common first-year experience, to develop study skills, to serve as a space for self-exploration or personal development, to develop a support network or friendships, to improve second-year return rates, to increase student and faculty interactions, and to develop writing skills (Young, 2019; Young & Hopp, 2014). Participation in FYS is correlated with student persistence to the second year; higher grade point averages; increased satisfaction with faculty, peers, and the institution;

increased use of campus resources; improved interaction with faculty; and the development of academic, interpersonal, and communication skills (Greenfield et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006).

FYS courses are taught by a wide variety of professionals including tenure-track faculty, full-time non-tenure-track faculty, student affairs professionals, adjunct faculty, other campus professionals, graduate students, and undergraduate students (Young, 2019). In 2017, 61% of FYS programs reported that undergraduates assist with the delivery of FYS in some way, such as implementing peer mentors (Young, 2019). Credit earned for FYS varies per institution ranging from 0 to 6 credits; 86% of FYS courses are letter-graded, with 57% of institutions counting the credit as part of the general education requirements (Young, 2019).

FYS courses are delivered in a variety of formats depending on the goals of the program or institution. FYS is often the "curricular anchor for other first-year initiatives," which often drive the content of the course (Greenfield et al., 2013, p. xxxv). According to the 2017 NSFYE, there are seven overarching types of FYS (Young, 2019). 47.6% of institutions offer an FYS course that is an extended orientation (Young, 2019). Academic seminars that cover various content are the next most frequent design at 33%, followed by academic seminars with uniform content at 33%, hybrid at 20.2%, pre-professional or discipline-linked at 16.5%, basic study skills at 15.2%, and other at 3.7% (Young, 2019). In other words, there is no universal model of FYS.

First-Year Seminars for Student-Athletes

Clearly, there is a "great deal of variety" (Graziano & Schmidt, 2016, p. xv) in FYS courses; some institutions offer sections for students sharing common traits (e.g., academic major, high risk of dropping out, or group membership) (Porter & Swing, 2006). According to the 2006 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (NSFYS), 8.4% of institutions teach special sections of FYS for student-athletes (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). The 2012-2013 NSFYS (Young & Hopp, 2014) and the 2017 NSFYE (Young, 2019) do not report on percentages of FYS courses offered specifically for student-athletes. Instead, special population FYS are lumped together with 39.1% of FYS offered to a group of "other" student populations (Young, 2019).

According to Weight and Huml's (2016) study examining academic courses designed for NCAA athletes, the majority of athlete-specific courses, or 68% respectively, offered by institutions are transition courses for first-year student-athletes. Yet little information is known about the design, curriculum, and learning outcomes of these special FYS courses. Existing research on student-athlete FYS focuses on the assessment of learning in a single section (Higbee & Schutz, 2012, 2013) or conceptually discusses the potential benefits of having student-athlete FYS (Eggleston & Mitchell, 2005). The gap in research in this area is surprising given the abundance of research on FYS design as well as the characteristics and needs of NCAA Division I college student-athletes, which comprise approximately 32% of all those within the NCAA (NCAA, n.d.-b).

First-Year Student-Athlete Characteristics and Needs

In many aspects, first-year student-athletes experience the same challenges as all other students when they begin their transition from high school to college, such as learning about

campus resources and building networks with faculty and peers (Kidwell, 2005). However, due to athletic involvement, student-athletes possess some unique needs; many of which are a result of high time demands associated with their sport (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1989; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; NCAA, 2017; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006; Rubin & Moses, 2017). Not surprisingly, such time commitments serve as a barrier to participation in HIPs on campus (Ishaq & Bass, 2019). NCAA Division I student-athletes, the focus of this study, face the highest time demands (NCAA, 2017). As the NCAA's study revealed, Division I student-athletes spend, on average, 37.3 hours on academics and 35.4 hours on athletics per week (NCAA, 2017).

Overall, first-year athletes need support in learning to adapt to heightened athletic expectations, more rigorous academics, and new social environments (Gayles & Baker, 2015). When time demands are not managed well, student-athletes may experience high levels of stress, burnout, anxiety, and/or depression (e.g., Cox et al., 2017; Fearon et al., 2011; Jolly, 2008; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; NCAA, 2014; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005; Wolanin et al., 2016). According to Davoren and Hwang (2014), 21% of male and 28% of female student-athletes reported experiencing depression within the previous 12 months. Moreover, 31% of male and 48% of female athletes reported suffering from anxiety (Davoren & Hwang, 2014). Subsequently, student-athletes need to develop and utilize positive coping skills to mitigate these stressors (Fogaca, 2019; Gabana et al., 2016; Surujlal et al., 2013). For example, programs teaching resiliency are particularly beneficial (Martin et al., 2019). Yet, due to stigma and lack of time, student-athletes seek mental health support at lower rates than non-athletes (Lopez & Levy, 2013; Moore, 2017; Wahto et al., 2016; Watson, 2005, 2006). Athletes from NCAA Division I are the least comfortable in seeking mental help services in comparison to athletes from Division II and III (Moore, 2017).

In addition to seeking mental health services at lower rates than their non-athlete peers, student-athletes are less likely to participate in general campus engagement activities (Astin, 1993; Clift & Mower, 2013; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Huml et al., 2014; Paule & Gilson, 2010). Researchers caution about isolating athletes from the rest of the campus community and limiting their opportunities to participate in effective educational practices, also known as student *integration* and *engagement* (e.g., Astin, 1977; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Huml et al., 2014; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Rubin & Moses, 2017; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). In contrast, some studies report that athletes have as many opportunities as their peers to participate in effective educational practices and have ample opportunities to interact with non-athlete peers and faculty (e.g., Aries et al., 2004; NCAA, 2015; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Umbach et al., 2006). Empirical conclusions are mixed on whether student-athlete experiences are negatively impacted by their athletic involvement.

On-campus student engagement is essential for first-year athletes who identify at varying degrees with their role as an athlete, also known as *athletic identity* (NCAA, 2013). Athletes with salient athletic identity may not display interest in exploring career options outside of their sport (Bell, 2009; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Menke, 2015; Navarro, 2013). However, as Higbee and Schultz (2013) found, athletes enrolled in a first-year experience course at an NCAA Division I university wanted to learn about academic- and career-related topics rather than those concerning athletics. The researchers concluded that the majority of athletes planned on pursuing future careers outside of professional sports (Higbee & Schultz, 2013).

Inclusion of topics such as major, career, and identity exploration in athlete FYS seems warranted given that student-athletes' experiences are different from regular students when it comes to these areas. However, all programming must be attuned to specific environments and

the intended student populations (Patton et al., 2016). To illustrate, the NCAA academic eligibility rules impact athletes' choices, especially when it comes to selecting an academic major. For example, the progress-toward-degree requirements may lock athletes into specific academic programs (Meyer, 2005). As Jolly (2018) summarized, athletes' schedules are highly structured and largely set by others around team practices and competitions. In other instances, athletes, especially those with strong athletic identities (Foster & Huml, 2017), intentionally opt to pursue less demanding majors to remain athletically eligible. Therefore, athletes encounter distinctive challenges, which must be recognized and addressed in athlete-specific programming such as in FYS for this population.

While athletic participation provides some challenges, it also brings many benefits. When balanced effectively with other demands, participation in athletics can ease the transition from high school to college and provide avenues for personal growth and development (Gayles & Baker, 2015). Athletic participation fosters community (Bendick, 2017; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2001), provides opportunities to interact with diverse populations from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Hirko, 2009; Pascarella et al., 1995; Wolf-Wendel al., 2008), and enhances student-athletes' sense of belonging, persistence intentions, and academic performance (Bendick, 2017; Fearon et al., 2011; NCAA, 2016; Sung et al., 2015). As Higbee and Schutz (2012) found, student-athletes described their first semester in college as "fun, busy, and stressful" (p. 258), which accurately summarizes the rich scholarly literature on their experiences.

Methods

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This qualitative study aimed to examine the design of FYS for student-athletes as it relates to their quality implementation. The study was exploratory in nature given the limited research on this topic. The research questions of this study were:

RQ 1: In what ways, if at all, do student-athlete FYS incorporate quality dimensions of HIPs?

RQ 2: In what respect, if any, does the curriculum of these courses address the needs of first-year athletes?

RQ 3: In what ways are student-athlete FYS structured in terms of course design and instruction?

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed *document analysis* as the method of data collection, which is a technique commonly utilized by qualitative researchers (Bowen, 2009). It is a systematic procedure employed in finding, reviewing, and evaluating data from printed and electronic documents. To examine data, researchers utilize a thematic analysis that entails recognizing patterns within data and then organizing them into categories and themes (Bowen, 2009; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). As Bowen (2009) posits, document analysis requires researchers to be

objective and sensitive when selecting the documents related to the research problem and analyzing the data within them. The goal is not to quantify data; rather, the goal of document analysis is to provide an overall picture regarding the studied phenomenon.

Collected Documents.

Course Syllabi. For this study, the syllabi of FYS from 10 universities were collected and analyzed. Most of them (*N*=8) were shared with the researchers by professional colleagues upon request; the remaining two documents were retrieved from public websites. Six of the syllabi were from Fall 2019, three were from Fall 2018, and one course was taught in Spring 2018. Syllabi function as a blueprint containing critical course information (Becker & Calhoon, 1999). According to Parkes and Harris (2002), syllabi functions vary; however, they typically serve three major roles: a contract between the professor and the student, a permanent record, and a learning tool. Typical syllabi outline student learning outcomes, the methods to accomplish and assess said outcomes (e.g., assignments and exams), and the expectations set for students and instructors in the learning process (Habanek, 2005; Jones, 2018). As Parkes and Harris (2002) summarized, "syllabus reflects the instructor's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about the subject matter as well as about the students in the class" (p. 59).

The document analysis intentionally focused only on NCAA Division I institutions as the experiences and subsequent needs of student-athletes vary among the divisions (NCAA, n.d.-c). NCAA Division I institutions provide the most challenges in terms of balancing academic and athletic demands (NCAA, n.d.-c). Most of the selected institutions (*N*=6) are members of a Power Five conference, which represent the most athletically competitive institutions across the nation and comprise the Football Bowl Subdivision. The remaining universities compete in lesser-known athletic conferences in the Football Championship Subdivision (*N*=3); one university does not sponsor football.

Additional Information Collected. In addition to syllabi, the authors analyzed the websites of the 10 institutions in the following areas: the FYS requirements/programming for all students; mission and vision of each institution; class schedules and enrollment reports; athletic department's services and programming initiatives; and staff/faculty directories and biographies. The information listed on the syllabi was cross-checked with data from the institutional and other websites to increase objectivity in the analyses.

Procedures

Before the commencement of the document analysis, the research team reviewed definitions and examples of the eight quality dimensions as detailed in Kuh and O'Donnell (2013). Additionally, they reviewed the literature on first-year athletes to familiarize themselves with the available research on this population. Next, the data collection stage was completed, with all the information compiled on a spreadsheet. Lastly, the authors examined the data via thematic analysis, which involved the recognition of patterns within the data and organizing them into categories and themes to be presented in the findings.

Findings

The document analysis led to many discoveries about the design of FYS for student-athletes as it relates to their quality implementation. Specifically, four themes emerged from the

data analysis: (1) *HIP Quality Dimension Integration,* (2) *Lofty Goals,* (3) *University Partnerships*, and (4) *Instructor Role.*

HIP Quality Dimension Integration

As the document analysis uncovered, many of the HIP quality dimensions were present in the curriculum design and delivery of the FYS for student-athletes. As an aggregate, the authors discovered all elements aside from *frequent and constructive feedback;* however, it was not feasible to spot this quality dimension through simple document analysis. In-class observations and/or interviews with the instructors and student-athletes would provide more insight. It is the authors' vision to collect data through these methods in future studies.

In contrast, the document analysis provided a general idea about the other seven HIP dimensions. FYS courses provided their athletes with *reflection and integration* opportunities by incorporating assignments such as weekly journals, essays with reflective writing (e.g., autobiography), and/or purpose maps. Many of the class sessions focused on the exploration and reflection of topics such as one's identity and personal values; interests and strengths as part of career development; and experiences with on-campus resources and activities.

In the areas of *interactions with faculty and staff*, *public demonstration of competence,* and *experiences with diversity,* many of the FYS courses met those quality dimensions. All these HIP dimensions were accomplished when instructors employed in-class discussions, activities over lectures, and collaborative learning among peers from diverse backgrounds. Emphasis on service learning and/or partnerships with on-campus and community stakeholders also enhanced the quality of curriculum within athlete FYS as student-athletes participated in a myriad of workshops and were exposed to differing viewpoints and experiences.

A large span of differences existed across the syllabi regarding *if, how many*, *and which* of the HIP dimensions were incorporated in the specific FYS. Notably, the dimensions of *significant investment of time and effort* (e.g., group projects completed in stages throughout the semester); *expectations set at appropriately high levels* (e.g., focus on critical thinking skills and a few challenging projects rather than an abundance of assignments that could be perceived as a busy work); and *relevance through real-world applications* (e.g., community service and engagement or opportunities to apply knowledge in a real-world setting) were represented in some of the courses (See Table 1).

The FYS that were studied averaged around 20-25 student-athletes per section and were comparable to the class sizes of FYS for non-athletes from the same institutions. Many of the universities offered several sections of the athlete FYS concurrently to guarantee this format; the largest FYS in our sample included 70 student-athletes, which was an exception in the data. The small class sizes allowed instructors to actively engage students in the learning process. The syllabi stressed the importance of active learning, in-class discussions, activities over lectures, and group work. Many of the courses also required students to present in front of their classmates.

Table 1
Overview of HIP Quality Dimension Presence in Syllabi of FYS

HIP Quality Dimension	Appearances in Syllabi	Comments/Examples
Expectations set at appropriately high levels	5/10	Assignments tied to specific learning goals, such as to develop critical thinking skills
Significant investment of time and effort	6/10	Research assignments, academic readings, semester-long projects
Interactions with faculty and peers	8/10	In-class discussion, group projects, interactive classroom environment, collaborative teaching
Experiences with diversity	7/10	Small group work and interaction, specific lesson topics on diversity and inclusion, exposure to views and opinions during in-class discussion
Frequent and constructive feedback	N/A	Not feasible to spot this quality dimension through simple document analysis
Periodic and structured opportunities for reflection and integration	8/10	Reflective writing, journals, autobiography assignments
Relevance through real-world applications	6/10	Community service/engagement, guest speakers, career summaries
Public demonstration of competence	8/10	In-class presentations, symposiums

Lofty Goals

The examination of student-athlete FYS syllabi revealed a large span of learning outcomes, course objectives, and lesson topics. Many of the syllabi listed assisting student-athletes' transition from high school to college as a major course goal. However, a plethora of other objectives were also frequently listed. Examples included: development of academic and personal skills; career exploration; enhancing critical thinking skills; identity development; and discovery and connection with campus resources. Most of the FYS that were analyzed appeared to be a hybrid of an extended orientation and academic/basic skills course.

While some overlap existed among the courses, it was apparent that FYS instructors identified and attempted to address a large array of first-year athletes' needs varying from institution to institution. The individual lesson topics consisted of the following broad categories: orientation to college, basic academic skills, reflection, wellness, career planning, prevention training, and general/other skills (See Table 2).

Table 2
Categories and Examples of FYS Lesson Topics

Category	Examples of FYS Lesson Topics			
Orientation to College (12)	History of University/ Mission	Visiting and/or Learning about Campus Resources	Class Schedules and Registration	Financial Literacy/ Budgeting
Basic Academic Skills (28)	Note Taking / Studying / Reading for Comprehension	Time Management	Goal Setting	Proper Communication
Reflection (24)	Identity and Purpose	Personal Values	Diversity and Inclusion	Character Development
Wellness (8)	Mental Health	Physical Health	Nutrition	Stress Management
Career Planning (15)	Resume	Major Exploration	Career Exploration	Strengths Assessment
Prevention Training (1)	Alcohol/Drugs	Sexual Violence/Title IX	Bystander Intervention	Hazing
General Skills / Other (13)	Leadership	Service Learning	Social Media	Personal Branding

Note: Categories of FYS lesson plans and how often they appeared in syllabi.

Given such a wide range of diversity in terms of curriculum, variations existed in the level of investment of time and effort required by student-athletes to excel in the courses. Some of the courses demanded the completion of many assignments in the form of reflections, journal entries, community service hours, exams, summaries of book chapters, reports about attended on-campus events, and/or presentations. In contrast, other FYS seemed less time-consuming and rigorous.

The courses also varied in credit-load, ranging from one to three credits. However, the analysis revealed a lack of consistent trends in terms of the number of objectives, course outcomes, and assignments for those courses with the same number of credit hours. The courses worth three credit hours had broader overarching objectives, such as what it means to be a member of a scholarly community or being a responsible citizen. In contrast, the courses offering a lower number of credit hours had more focused objectives and outcomes including developing academic skills and utilizing campus resources. Most of the courses had required texts, yet the number of in-class and out-of-class assignments varied greatly despite the number of credit hours. However, one clear trend was the weekly duration of class time, which is typically determined by each institution based on the credit hours of each course. The three-credit courses were typically held two or three times each week for a total of three hours, while the one-credit courses only met once or twice a week for a duration of 50-100 minutes.

Lofty goals implies that there is not a consistent template when designing these courses. In addition, the level of assumed rigor does not necessarily correlate with the number of credit hours offered. Overall, the analysis revealed that FYS instructors have long lists of student learning outcomes, expectations, and assignments.

University Partnerships

When designing their curriculum, instructors of student-athlete FYS relied on partnerships with other stakeholders committed to student-athlete success. Guest speakers and lecturers visited many of the courses throughout the semester, speaking to athletes about a wide array of topics. For example, in one of the courses, the staff from the writing center visited to talk about plagiarism. In another, the instructor invited a nationally-recognized individual from the sports industry to lead a class on the topic of character. In addition, student-athletes participated in a myriad of workshops, listened to educational and motivational presentations, and learned about campus resources directly from the staff who facilitated those on-campus services and programming. In some cases, the class sessions were held outside of the regular classroom, which provided an opportunity for athletes to become familiar with the campus. However, for the most part, the campus and community partners came to the FYS classroom to engage with the athletes.

The partnerships of athlete FYS crossed boundaries across the campuses in some instances. Some of the FYS required athletes to complete a service learning project or volunteer in the local community. Yet, it is important to note that while these partnerships strived to connect students and integrate athletes with the rest of the campus and/or community, the data from the document analysis implied that these efforts likely resulted in one-time connections. Specifically, a few of the FYS brought speaker after speaker to present to their classes, yet athletes only had one opportunity to engage with them and their topic/area of expertise during the semester.

Instructor Role

The last theme discovered pertained to the role of the instructor in FYS design and implementation. Largely, athletic department staff taught the FYS courses; only two institutions offered FYS for athletes who were solely taught by a full-time faculty member. The syllabi of the courses taught by the two faculty members were the most rigorous in terms of curriculum and exposed additional HIPs that were connected to the FYS, such as service learning and assigning portfolio projects. To provide an example, one course required student-athletes to present five times to fulfill five different assignments, such as a research analysis or a career plan. The syllabus of the other FYS taught by a faculty member referred to students enrolled in the course as *scholars*, utilized a required text with 250 pages along with four additional supplemental texts, and challenged students to think critically about a range of concepts that required higher-order reasoning. Interestingly, neither of these two courses relied on the inclusion of guest speakers, which was prevalent in the other FYS courses taught by athletic staff.

Among athletic department staff who taught FYS, the years of work experience ranged from zero up to 17 years spent specifically in the field of intercollegiate athletics. Some were senior administrators, while others had recently begun their professional careers in athletics as graduate assistants, interns, or first-time full-time employees. Regardless, each of the staff

members' primary job duties entailed athletically related responsibilities (e.g., administration, student-athlete development, athletic advising, and sport oversight), and teaching FYS was a secondary responsibility.

When the university offered FYS or learning communities for non-athletes, the syllabi of the athlete FYS usually reflected directives in terms of course curriculum, implementation, and/or assessment as directed by the department. In one instance, student-athletes presented projects at a public event for all sections of the university's FYS and learning communities. In this case, the athlete FYS followed, to some degree, the requirements of the department in charge of the first-year experience. This led to the staff of this unit becoming partners with the FYS instructors in the course design and learning process of the first-year student-athletes. In other instances, the athlete FYS required a text that was written for all first-year students at that university. The role of the instructor influenced and led the design and implementation of the course; moreover, the instructors who worked in the athletic department seemed to take advantage of any available support of non-athlete FYS colleagues when creating their curriculum.

Discussion and Findings

Student-Athlete FYS is High Quality

In search for the presence of quality dimensions in student-athlete FYS, the document analysis revealed a strong presence of each (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013) in the design and curriculum of athlete FYS. In fact, all but one dimension were present among the courses; the category of *frequent and constructive feedback* could not be detected through simple document analysis of syllabi. As well-established in scholarly literature, FYS participation is correlated to many positive outcomes including but not limited to heightened persistence to the second year of college, development of academic and interpersonal skills, and increased satisfaction and sense of belonging at the institution (Greenfield et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006). Overall, the high level of HIP quality dimension integration suggests athlete FYS are designed to elicit these outcomes and increase the likelihood of student engagement (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013).

At most of the institutions in this study, several sections of the same FYS were taught to ensure a relatively small class size. This format was likely one of the reasons why instructors were able to incorporate several HIPs as part of their FYS. Notably, many of the analyzed FYS courses combined multiple HIPs that included: FYS and ePortfolios, FYS and service-learning, or FYS and collaborative assignments and projects. As Finley and McNair (2013) posited, when non-traditional students participate in multiple HIPs, their likelihood of engagement and graduation increases. NCAA Division I student-athletes come from diverse backgrounds (Hirko, 2009; NCAA, 2018) and represent a non-traditional student group given their unique needs (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gayles, 2009; Jolly, 2008; Navarro et al., 2020; Rubin, 2017). Therefore, this study's discovery that some of the FYS connected two HIPs to their curriculum is noteworthy given the potentially wide range of benefits for student-athletes who typically tend to miss out on opportunities to participate in HIPs due to their high time demands (Ishaq & Bass, 2019).

Know Their Needs but Narrow the Scope

Through document analysis, the researchers discovered that the student-athlete FYS curriculum does in fact incorporate a multitude of practices to intentionally address the needs of first-year student-athletes. Largely, the topics found in the course syllabi were aligned with the literature on the needs of student-athletes in terms of identity development outside of the athletic role, major exploration, and career development (August, 2018; Bell, 2009; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Higbee & Schultz, 2013; Menke, 2015; Navarro, 2013; Navarro & Malvaso, 2016; Navarro, & McCormick, 2017; NCAA, 2013; Paule-Koba, 2019). Moreover, many of the instructors of FYS included lessons and/or activities for students to develop time management skills, positive coping skills, and various types of academic skills. Thus, the FYS were designed specifically for the needs of the student-athletes enrolled in these courses who experience high time demands (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1989; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; NCAA, 2017; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006; Rubin & Moses, 2017); more rigorous academics in comparison to high school (Gayles & Baker, 2015); and high levels of stress, burnout, anxiety, and/or depression (e.g., Cox et al., 2017; Davoren & Hwang, 2014; Fearon et al., 2011; Jolly, 2008; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; NCAA, 2014; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005; Wolanin et al., 2016).

Most instructors teaching athlete FYS are athletic staff whose primary job duties are outside of teaching. Specifically, many of these individuals work in athletic academic services or student-athlete development divisions. This finding is consistent with Young (2019) who reports on the wide variety of professionals who teach FYS inclusive of student affairs staff and full-time faculty. As such, athlete FYS instructors work closely with student-athletes and provide support in areas of academics, athletics, and life (Meyer, 2005; Rubin, 2017). The familiarity with the daily experiences of student-athletes is likely the reason why this study concluded that the FYS course syllabi were aligned with the literature on the needs of this student population.

The document analysis also revealed that FYS courses for student-athletes attempted to address a wide range of student needs and seemed to take on a major amount of responsibility for student-athlete development. Most NCAA Division I institutions offer student development programming for athletes, formerly known as *CHAMPS/Life Skills* (Meyer, 2005; NCAA, n.d.-a); in fact, NCAA life skills administrators serve as a pathway between student affairs divisions and athletics (National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics, 2015). However, in some of the FYS syllabi, the course calendar resembled a series of speakers and workshops that would typically be seen in an athletic life skills program rather than an integrated curriculum of a course designed with carefully selected learning outcomes.

A potential explanation for the large reliance on guest speakers is that FYS instructors hoped to accomplish the learning objective of integrating athletes within the campus community. As some scholars posit, athletes are often isolated from the rest of the student body and may not engage with faculty and staff as much as their non-athlete peers (e.g., Astin, 1977; Huml et al., 2014; Hyatt, 2003; NCAA, 2015; Rubin & Moses, 2017). Based on this study's findings, it is likely that the FYS instructors wanted athletes to become familiar with the different services on campus and take advantage of the plethora of on-campus activities and resources. Thus, the likely goal was to heighten athletes' student engagement, a concept that is linked to favorable outcomes inclusive of heightened persistence and college satisfaction (e.g., Axelson & Flick, 2010; Kuh, 2009; Kuh et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, more intentional design in collaborative partnerships would likely result in more meaningful learning experiences and knowledge retention and application for student-athletes.

To conclude, the document analysis revealed that the curriculum of athlete FYS largely catered to the needs of first-year athletes. However, the sheer quantity of the topics seemed overwhelming in many of the FYS courses. Of course, there is no universal approach to designing FYS that vary from institution to institution (Graziano & Schmidt, 2016). Yet, for athlete FYS to be more impactful, careful planning and intentional selection of *a few* specific topics, which are based on the characteristics of the first-year athletes at the given university, is necessary. For example, some of the lesson topics discovered in the document analysis could be delayed to future semesters (e.g., leadership, personal branding, or social media) when student-athletes have become more comfortable with academic expectations, campus environment, and university culture. This would leave space to focus on student-athletes' immediate needs when they arrive on campus. Thus, a more balanced and intentional approach of quantity and quality is needed to make athlete FYS even more HIP.

Focus on Quality Over Quantity and Collaboration

To understand the ways in which athlete FYS is designed and instructed, the study found that this course is as varied and overwhelmed by campus initiatives as FYS for general populations. Overall, just like with the course topics, the analysis revealed that FYS instructors have long lists of student learning outcomes, expectations, and assignments which frequently coincide with HIP quality dimensions. However, there is not a consistent template when designing these courses. In addition, the level of assumed rigor does not necessarily correlate with the number of credit hours offered. This finding is not surprising as the literature well-established the large span of differences among FYS courses in terms of type, content, credit hours, and goals (Graziano & Schmidt, 2016; Greenfield et al., 2013; Young, 2019).

In many syllabi, the number of course outcomes and projects seemed potentially overwhelming to both the student and instructor, which is expected based on the claim that FYS is often a catch-all for many university initiatives (Greenfield et al., 2013). Like FYS courses for general student populations, FYS for student-athletes must continue to intentionally balance the most pivotal learning outcomes for the success of their students. An *appropriate amount of content and rigor* in a course is a quality dimension of HIPs and "too much or too little discourages interest" (Frye, 1999, p. 5). Student-athletes' heavy time demands (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; NCAA, 2017) necessitate the instructor's need to help foster healthy working behaviors. Thus, instructors should be intentional in what activities and assignments they facilitate as well as the learning outcomes they seek.

In terms of instruction, most of the FYS were taught by athletic department staff; only two athlete FYS were taught by a full-time faculty member. Interestingly, when the FYS were taught by full-time faculty rather than athletic staff, the HIP quality dimensions seemed more authentic and intentional in their inclusion in the course design. The same discovery pertained to the FYS courses at universities where a specific department or college coordinated learning communities and independent FYS for unique student populations, such as athletes or first-generation students. In other words, as Comeaux (2018) posited, when collaborative efforts take place between academic and athletic departments, student-athletes benefit.

Overall, this study revealed many existing partnerships between instructors of FYS and other departments on campus as well as within the community. These individuals became guest lecturers or workshop leaders in many class sessions across the analyzed FYS. This finding was interesting but not surprising as research highlights that athletic department employees, including

student-athlete services professionals, experience high levels of burnout (Rubin, 2017; Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018; Taylor et al., 2019). For example, Rubin and Moreno-Pardo (2018) found that many of these staff members worked long hours inclusive of nights and weekends; experienced physical and mental exhaustion, stress, and depression; and felt a lack of appreciation in the profession. Subsequently, the prevalence of campus and community partnerships found in this study may be due to FYS instructors/athletic staff hoping to alleviate some of their workloads. Therefore, such collaborations likely benefit the instructors *and* the student-athletes enrolled in these courses who get to engage with individuals outside of the athletic department.

To conclude, the literature on athlete FYS is scant; as of today, only a few publications exist on this topic (e.g., Eggleston & Mitchell, 2005; Higbee & Schutz, 2012, 2013; Mamerow & Navarro, 2014). Therefore, this study's findings provide an insight into the designs and curriculum of these courses. Overall, the study offers a promising look at athlete FYS and reveals the instructors incorporate many of the HIP quality dimensions to increase the positive impact on athletes who enroll in them. However, some further refining of the course curriculum and design is needed to make these courses even more impactful in terms of positive educational outcomes for student-athletes.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, student-athlete FYS includes high-quality dimensions of practice, addresses student-athlete needs, and incorporates many best practices in curriculum design. To continue to administer and employ successful FYS courses for student-athletes, there are a few implications for practice.

Design of FYS for Athletes Should be Intentional and Abide by HIP Dimensions

As well-established in research (e.g., Kuh, 2008), FYS are a HIP when they employ specific quality dimensions as outlined by Kuh and O'Donnell (2013). The document analysis exposed some favorable utilization of quality dimensions as part of seminars' designs, which should be implemented by all instructors teaching athlete FYS. However, it is unknown whether the inclusion of these quality dimensions was intentional or a happy accident. As Harper (2011) posits, *intentionality* is an enabler of good practice. Therefore, all instructors designing such courses must be intentional in the application of these principles and employ deliberate strategies to produce desired educational outcomes. Course design should also consider the specific student-athlete population being served and their unique needs. Intentional design based on HIP dimensions and student-athlete needs will allow for effective assessment and evaluation leading to continuous course improvement and, ideally, student success.

Instructors Set Limited Number of Learning Outcomes Targeting Needs of FY Athletes

In this study, FYS included a wide span of topics such as financial literacy, bystander intervention, nutrition, mental well-being, and social media management. As it relates to this study and its findings, quality trumps quantity. By trying to accomplish often competing goals, these FYS appeared to deviate from their stated primary course objectives of guiding athletes' transition from high school to college and equipping them with the critical skills to succeed in

their first year. Notably, NCAA Division I institutions intentionally employ student-athlete development (formerly known as "life skills") administrators to facilitate programming and education with the primary objectives of equipping athletes with skills they will utilize throughout college and preparing them for life after graduation (NCAA, 2015). This NCAA programming should be designed appropriately for each stage of student-athlete development, while FYS focus on a limited number of learning outcomes for the population of *first-year* student-athletes they are designed to serve. FYS should look to develop the underlying skills necessary in mastering the topics deemed vital to student achievement in their first year and beyond. As a result, students will master strategies that they can transfer and apply to novel contexts and new experiences (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Cross-campus Collaboration Necessary When Designing FYS

As this study found, many FYS are taught by athletic staff rather than faculty. While athletic staff engage with student-athletes daily and are familiar with many of their needs and challenges, other divisions on campus - inclusive of faculty and staff - possess expertise in areas that will also enhance the first-year student-athlete experience. Collaboration and coordination between personnel from athletic and academic units are vital to promoting the academic success of student-athletes (Comeaux, 2018; Ishaq & Bass, 2019). As this study found, the majority of instructors of FYS for athletes collaborated with campus and community constituents. Moreover, such partnerships may ease the workload of athletic department staff members given the professional burnout many of them experience (e.g., Rubin, 2017; Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018; Taylor et al., 2019).

Future Research

This study was among the first to explore the topic of FYS specifically for student-athletes. The authors hope that current practitioners - faculty *and* athletic staff - who teach this course - or will teach it in the future - utilize this study as a guide on how to shape and evaluate their curriculum design and implementation in terms of HIP quality measures. However, more research on this topic is warranted to close the existing gaps in knowledge about athlete FYS and whether these courses meet the needs of today's first-year student-athletes. Future research on this topic should focus on assessment and evaluation via quantitative methods as well as compare the benefits of athlete-only learning communities, or other HIPs, integrated with FYS versus standalone student-athlete FYS courses. Finally, the pool of data should be expanded to provide further in-depth analysis and comparison among programs.

Limitations

This study has several potential limitations. First, syllabi may not contain information about all assignments, activities, and learning outcomes of the FYS courses. Additionally, instructors have the right to change these documents throughout the semester without prior notice. Second, the findings relied solely on document analysis of information located on the syllabi and university websites. However, some of the relevant information pertaining to the studied phenomenon could not be determined solely from analyzing these documents. Third, HIPs rely on the instructors' execution upon the learning outcomes, methods of instruction, and

lessons as proposed in the syllabi. Nevertheless, the findings of this study, which was exploratory in nature given the limited research on athlete FYS, set the foundation of knowledge about the design of FYS for student-athletes as it relates to their quality implementation. Now, other scholars must expand on this knowledge through empirical studies.

Conclusion

When creating any type of course or program designed to foster student success, intentionality should be a key driver in those efforts. As this study depicted, instructors that adhere to quality dimensions of HIPs tend to be more intentional in the design and implementation of their programs, which can result in the achievement of desired learning outcomes. This is highlighted through the examination and evaluation of FYS for student-athletes, which have been identified as a HIP and typically meet several of Kuh and O'Donnell's (2013) quality dimensions. Based on student-athletes' needs, it is imperative for all stakeholders in student-athlete success to stay connected at the HIP to provide the most beneficial FYS experience.

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