



Original Research

The Relationship of Athlete Identity and Career Exploration and Engagement of NCAA Division II Athletes

JADE M. BELL[†], STEVEN L. PREWITT[‡], VIPA BERNHARDT[‡], and DEAN CULPEPPER[‡]

Department of Health & Human Performance, Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, TX, USA

[†]Denotes graduate student author, [‡]Denotes professional author

ABSTRACT

International Journal of Exercise Science 11(5): 493-502, YEAR. There are over 480,000 individuals who compete under the governing of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) but only a few of these student athletes continue to compete after college. The aim of this study was to assess whether there is an association between athlete identity and career exploration and engagement among current student athletes. Student athletes ($N = 44$) from various National Collegiate Athletic Association Division II institutions in the Southwest United States participated in the study. Participants were asked to complete an online survey consisting of demographic questions, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) and the Occupational Engagement Scale-Student questionnaire (OES-S). Means and standard deviations on each scale were reported and a Spearman correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between athlete identity and career exploration and engagement. A multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was also run to explore gender differences among the variables. Results suggest there are associations between athletic identity and career exploration and engagement, providing direction for the examination of several areas in future research.

KEY WORDS: Athletic career, student athlete, sport psychology

INTRODUCTION

Currently, there are almost 500,000 individuals competing as National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes at all levels. Yet only a few of these will continue on to compete at the professional or Olympic level within each sport (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2017), suggesting that most athletic careers at the competitive level will close at the end of their NCAA eligibility (19), typically around age 24. This signifies a comparatively shorter athletic career than work career (24). As a result of the short-lived careers of many competitors, it is paramount that athletes begin to explore and engage in their chosen field while in college and earn a college degree, without the unrealistic expectation of becoming a professional athlete. The majority of research on the subject of athletic identity and career exploration and engagement among student athletes has been at the Division I level. This accounts for approximately 37% of all NCAA student athletes. Very little research on this topic has been conducted at the lower levels of collegiate sports.

A great concern for many is the emphasis that student athletes place on their athletic identification as opposed to their student identification. Athletic identity refers to “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (6). Referring to the multifaceted self-concept, it is believed that both an athlete identity and a student identity can be present in an individual at one time, which can further progress to being situation-specific whereby in an athletic setting, an individual may identify as an athlete but in an educational setting, one may identify as a student (14, 23). Unfortunately, other aspects of an athlete’s life are the first to be compromised, with the dismissal of athletics for a student athlete being rare (2).

During the period of adolescence to young adulthood, a time when many individuals are attending college, athletes with a strong athletic identity often experience identity foreclosure, which is characterized as prematurely committing to an interest without much exploration in other possible areas of interest (21). Research at the Division I level suggests those in revenue-producing sports do not have meaningful career plans at the conclusion of their higher education experience and student athletes in general at this level also struggle to explore, choose, and prepare for life after college (18). Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, and Fletcher (6) also found that individuals who identified strongly as an athlete failed to explore and develop in areas away from sport, including their careers. Although 81% of the participants studied by Sturm et al. (24) claimed their education prepared them for life after college, the authors also suggested that these athletes disregarded their future plans and enrolled in easier classes and majors in an attempt to remain eligible for their chosen college sport. Pressure to sustain eligibility was seen as a primary determinant in a study by Navarro (18) in selecting a major and career plan. Of those that choose a professional major on arrival to college, only one fourth of them stayed with their original choice through graduation (1). Fountain and Finley (10) reported that student athletes were not always able to enroll in their preferred major. Others reported similar findings, perhaps due to courses only being offered during practice times (1, 3).

Identity exploration involves, among other things, participating in organizations, taking courses, and exploring opportunities in an attempt to investigate and build on interests before committing to an interest following a long period of healthy development (21). Participating in purposeful activities is one of many factors to influence personal development and the extent to which student athletes do this is fundamental to their post-graduation goals (18). Unfortunately, with many student athletes identifying highly as athletes, they may be sacrificing this important period of their life for their sport (13) which, as mentioned previously, is actually only a very small section of their lives. The demands and requirements of student athletes along with attempts to preserve their identity as an athlete means less consideration may be given to exploring other areas of their identity. In order to be perceived as interested and committed to their sport, exploration may suffer because focus and/or commitment to other areas of interest may show lack of commitment to sport, resulting in less playing time and a decrease in athletic identity (15). It has been reported that male athletes at the Division I level generally identify strongly as an athlete (23), but not as strongly as their female counterparts (25). Others have also reported a significantly stronger student identity

over athletic identity in females compared to males regardless of the competition Division level (24) suggesting that women have a lower athletic identity compared to men. However, others have reported that independent of the sport, males and females reported similar identification toward their athlete role (17).

Career exploration and engagement is the degree to which individuals are performing activities that enable them to explore and prepare for future training and employment (21). Exploration is considered to be a state that is continuous until a decision is made and enrichment, used interchangeably with engagement, is a trait that is also continuous and enlightens the future career-related choices that are often unknown (8). Several authors suggest that student athletes' participation in career exploration and engagement is negatively affected by role commitments and investments to their sport (6, 13, 16). The resulting lack of career exploration and engagement among student athletes could lead to a poor attitude toward early jobs, underemployment, and loss of earnings (7) at the termination of the athletic career with male athletes in revenue-producing sports being linked to possessing the highest potential concerns when making career decisions (16). Nevertheless, these findings are in contrast to Fogarty and McGregor-Bayne (9), who found that career decision-making difficulties or decision status, had no relationship to gender, thus suggesting there are no differences between male and female athletes.

It is thought that student athletes who display personal effort and are proactive in their career exploration and engagement are more likely to select a major appropriate to their careers than those who do not prepare accordingly (17). Therefore, to help with the adjustment of the conclusion of their athletic career, student athletes must find equilibrium between their student role and athlete role (23). Nevertheless, these findings are in contrast to Fogarty and McGregor-Bayne (9), who found that career decision-making difficulties or decision status, had no relationship to gender, thus suggesting there are no differences between male and female athletes. It is believed that intervention strategies and support should be more focused toward male athletes, since according to Murdock et al. (16), this population needs it most based on role conflict, self-limiting academic behavior, differences in athletic identity based on sport participation, willingness to seek help, and future prospects of becoming a professional athlete. Although male athletes at the Division I level seem to be at most risk, these athletes felt they had, in comparison to their female counterparts, a better understanding of the job market and employment trends (24), and have also been shown to have more career optimism compared to their female equivalent (9). In females lacking optimism, they too showed discomfort with their career development and may be failing to develop past their athletic identity, possibly not reaching their maximum career potential (24). As stereotyping could explain, some career fields are more appealing to one gender as opposed to the other. Fogarty and McGregor-Bayne (9) stated that females display a higher self-efficacy in some occupational fields (healthcare) whereas males are more drawn to others (science and technology).

Many student athletes believe that their motivation and confidence towards academics should mirror that of athletics (12); however the development of other aspects of life may suffer at the

expense of athletic identity for those who receive greatest recognition and acknowledgement for being an athlete (11). The increasing revenue of athletic competition, the success of athletic teams, and the mentality of the coach whose need is to remain employed, may all compromise a student athlete's non-athletic education (3). Student athletes must remain academically eligible and ultimately graduate for an athletic department to be deemed successful. This may, however, be at the cost of student athletes being clustered into majors, suggesting that they are enrolled in athlete-friendly classes and take the path of least resistance (3). Therefore, the purpose of this pilot study was to assess the athletic identity of NCAA Division II student athletes and how they associate with career exploration and engagement. The study was designed to provide insight into the experience of life as a student athlete and begin to find areas for future examination at the Division II level. It was expected that student athletes who scored higher on the athlete identity scale would score lower on the career exploration and engagement scale. It was also expected that males would score higher on athletic identity than females.

METHODS

Participants

Student athletes from 11 NCAA Division II universities from the Southern region of the United States were initially recruited for this study. Forty-four individuals ($n = 31$ females) between the ages of 18 and 23 years old completed the online survey. Participants represented a variety of sports: baseball, cross country, football, golf, soccer, softball, tennis, track and field, and volleyball. Approval to conduct this study was granted from the university Institutional Review Board, and consent was obtained from each athlete prior to the survey. The majority of the respondents identified themselves as White (57%), followed by Black or African American (23%), Hispanic or Latino (16%), Native American or American Indian (3%), and 3% were unidentified. Relating to classification based on academics, respondents identified as freshman (19%), sophomores (35%), juniors (25%), seniors (19%), and graduates (5%). When asked about their current playing status, participants included starters (68%), non-starters (those that participated, but not as starters) (28%), and redshirts (practiced with team, but did not participate in competitions) (5%). In terms of scholarship, the majority were on an athletic scholarship (89%), with fewer on an academic scholarship (7%). Some were on no scholarship or preferred not to answer (5%).

Protocol

With limited research on these topics at the NCAA Division II level, the premise for this study was based on similar research conducted by Poux and Fry (21) at the NCAA Division I level. Aware that student athletes at all levels are a challenging population to study due to other commitments and busy schedules, the decision was made to include only the AIMS and OES-S without the additional questionnaires used by Poux and Fry (21). This was to shorten the overall length of the survey and time required to participate. The decision was made in this study to use only email in an attempt to reach out to a variety of institutions which would not be able to be reached directly.

An initial letter of invitation was sent to the Athletic Directors of 11 NCAA Division II schools in the Southwest region of the United States. On agreement by the Athletic Director, student athletes were to have received an email requesting their voluntary participation in the research study that included a link taking them directly to the online survey (Qualtrics.com). Follow up emails were sent to the Athletic Directors at the 11 universities after 3 weeks and again after an additional 5 weeks (8 weeks post initial invitation) if they had not previously requested their removal from the study. In an attempt to increase the response rate, an amendment was requested and accepted by the university Institutional Review Board to send the original letter to the Athletic Directors at an additional 22 NCAA Division II institutions in the South Central region of the United States, combining for a total of 33 potential universities participation. Informed consent was obtained via the online service tool.

The seven item Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), developed by Brewer and Cornelius (4), was used for this study to assess how strongly an individual identifies him or herself as an athlete. Modified from the original 10-item survey (5), this instrument utilizes a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Question examples include “most of my friends are athletes,” and “I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport.” The AIMS questionnaire is a unidimensional scale with questions added together to achieve a total score with a maximum of 49 and a minimum of seven. Although there are no specific criteria for measurement, the closer the total is to 49, the more emphasis an individual has on their athlete identity. The AIMS has shown to be highly correlated to a previous 10-item version with an internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.81$ and a high reliability ($r = 0.89$; 5).

Table 1. Participant frequencies

Category	N
Gender	13
Male	31
Female	
Age	
18-20 years	27
21-23 years	17
Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	25
Hispanic/Latino	7
Black/African American	10
Native American / American Indian	1
Other	1

The Occupational Engagement Scale-Student (OES-S) measures the extent to which individuals are planning for their future training and employment through exploration and preparation. Developed by Cox and others (7), the nine-item questionnaire asks to rate comments such as, “I gain hands on experience that I might use in the future” and “I talk about my career choices with family and friends,” on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all like me* to 5 = *very much like me*). Adequate reliability of the scale was reported by Cox et al. ($\alpha = 0.80$; 7). The OES-S is assessed by calculating the total score with a maximum score of 45 available. Although there are no specific standards listed in previous research, it is intended that the

higher the total score, the more opportunities the individual feels they have experienced in terms of exploring and engaging in their future careers.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS for Windows Version 24 (2016). Data were downloaded from Qualtrics and manually inserted into the SPSS software. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity were tested, along with identifying the mean and standard deviation for each of the scales. An initial multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was calculated and presented, but due to lack of power and the assumptions of normality and equality of variance not being met, Spearman's correlation were performed on each of the scales and reported in order to answer the research questions of the study.

RESULTS

Respondents were 44 Division II NCAA student athletes between the ages of 18-23 years. Frequencies for the population are shown in Table 1. A MANOVA was run to assess the effect of the different independent variables (gender, age, ethnicity, sport, academic classification, playing status, and type of scholarship) on the scale results (Athletic Identity Measurement Scale and the Occupational Engagement Scale-Student Questionnaire). While significance was found between some groups, assumptions of normality and equality of variance were not met, and therefore, the results should be viewed with caution. It was decided that the MANOVA results be presented to provide suggestions for several areas of examination and future studies. Significant results were reported for gender [Wilks Lambda = 0.610, $F = 3.193$, $df = (4, 44)$, $p = 0.035$], indicating a difference between males and females in terms of athlete identity and career exploration and engagement. Univariate F tests showed there were significant differences between males and females for athlete identity ($F [1, 44]$, $p = 0.036$) and career exploration and engagement ($F [1, 43] = 9.851$, $p = 0.005$). Significant results were also observed for sport [Wilkes Lambda = 0.040, $F = 5.537$, $p = 0.001$], however, due to low participant numbers and a limited representation of each sport (Figure 1), it cannot be concluded true significant differences, but it could be an area of future research. Spearman's correlations were calculated and reported along with means and standard deviations (Table 2). These results suggested strong associations between athlete identity and career exploration and engagement.

Table 2. Summary of Spearman Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations for each scale.

	AIMS	OES-S
AIMS	---	
OES-S	0.975*	---
Mean \pm SD	38.54 \pm 8.69	34.28 \pm 7.28
Males	28.69 \pm 6.79	25.85 \pm 4.49
Females	43.46 \pm 4.12	38.55 \pm 3.91

AIMS = Athletic Identity Measurement Scale; OES-S = career exploration and engagement. * $p < .05$

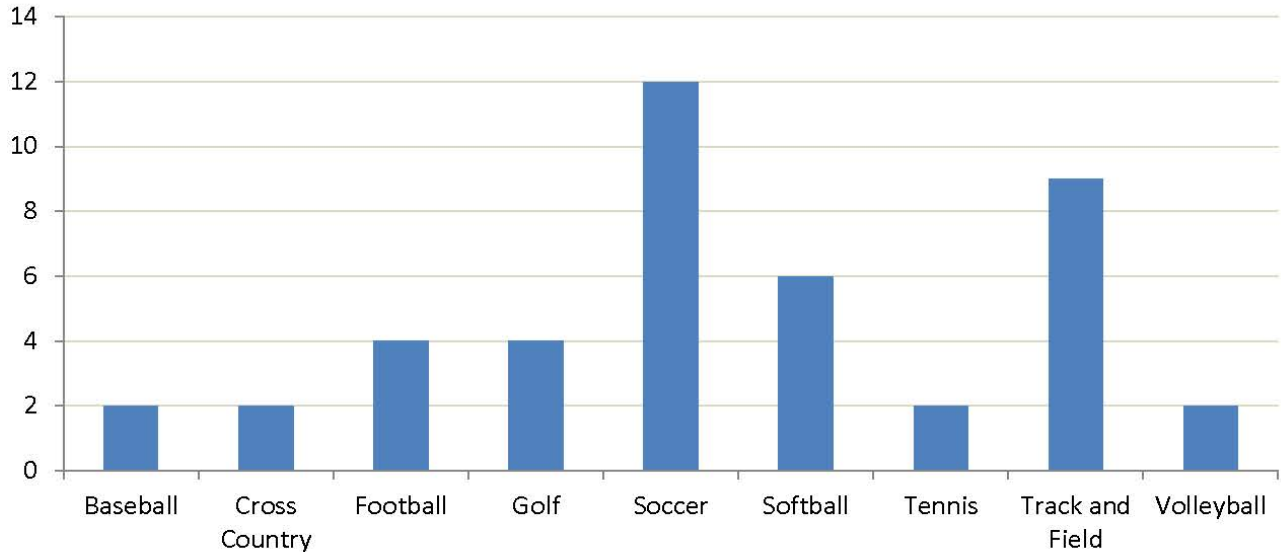


Figure 1. Frequencies for sport participation.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to assess athletic identity of student athletes and their association with career exploration and engagement in current NCAA Division II programs from a variety of institutions in the Southern region of the United States. The literature has reported that student athletes with a higher AIMS score tend to have lower OES-S scores. This cannot be fully supported from this study; however, the study does show a positive association between athlete identity and career exploration and engagement. Burns et al. have observed that those that identify highly as athletes have shown a lack of career exploration in areas away from sport (6). Houle and Kluck (13) also state that individuals with a high athlete identity generally sacrifice exploration for their sport. These same authors state that among NCAA Division I student athletes, career maturity, which is related to a student athlete's coping ability in terms of vocation and educational development in the light of making career decisions, has been found to decrease as athletic identity increases.

In spite of being contradictory to some past research, results from this study do align with others. A positive correlation between athletic identity and career exploration and engagement, similar to what was found in this study, has been found by Poux and Fry (20). The researchers also took into consideration the athlete's perception of their team motivational climate, which is an area of research that is limited in connecting the three constructs although it is thought they may be closely related. Relating motivational climate to athletic identity and career exploration and engagement, Poux and Fry (21) believe a task-involving climate can encourage identity exploration away from sport while not completely sacrificing a healthy level of athletic identity. In an environment where a coach offers instruction for improvement, and where athletes work hard, help each other, and believe everyone has an important role on the team (23), an individual should feel confident in exploring other areas of interest (21) away from the belief that success in sport requires sole focus on athletics (17). This in turn avoids the

internal and external factors that contribute to role conflict among student athletes that cause concern when preparing and planning for life after sport (18).

Examining other results from this study showed no strong significance between many of the other independent variables (age, racial-ethnic identity, sport, academic classification, playing status, and type of scholarship) and scale scores (AIMS and OES-S). Nonetheless, gender has shown some initial significance which could be a path for further research. Though caution must be taken when making conclusive statements due to a small sample size, gender showed some association to athlete identity and career exploration and engagement. Much of the previous literature differs regarding the differences between gender in relation to athletic identity and career exploration and engagement. It must be remembered, however, that over the last 3 decades, female participation in sport has transformed dramatically. This leads to universities and coaching staff placing more demands on female student athletes as their expectations to compete and win are ever increasing (24). Therefore, while some studies have found significance concerning gender and the relevant outcomes to the scales (16, 17, 24), others have not (15, 22). As a result of this, research on gender differences among the student athlete population in relation to athlete identity and career exploration and engagement should be expanded, taking into consideration the relatively new aspect of the motivational climate of the team.

The results of this study have suggested that there is an association between athletic identity and career exploration and engagement, but further data collection and analysis needs to be conducted to produce more significant findings at the Division II level. Results do align with some previous research (21), suggesting that future, non-athletic careers can be explored and engaged in by student athletes identifying highly as athletes. However, there is limited literature investigating the behaviors and experience of Division II student athletes. As Nite (19) points out in his exploratory study of NCAA Division II athletic departments, it is likely that these programs face certain challenges that other NCAA Divisions may not in terms of providing academic and athletic support. As a result, this study provides a starting point in directing future research within the uniqueness of an NCAA Division II program.

This research paves a way for similar studies with NCAA Division II student athletes on a much larger scale. A larger participant pool will also allow for more statistical analyses to be made based on a variety of independent variables that could not be analyzed in this study (gender, age, racial-ethnic identity, sport, academic classification, current playing status, and scholarship type, if any). In addition to the variables subject in this study, future research could also include international student athletes in this area of investigation. According to Popp, Pierce, and Hums (19), the top two factors for international student athletes competing at Division I universities in the United States that are most influential in their college selection process are athletic-related. This is in contrast to the same researchers also finding that domestic student athletes listed academic factors as the most influential, one being career opportunities after college. As a result, this could be an area of concern for this unique population and another direction for researchers to assess athlete identity, the perception of team motivational climate, and exploration and engagement in future careers. With the ability

to analyze and compare more specific variables, results will provide researchers and practitioners with more information and understanding of particular groups of student athletes, thus enabling them to offer more support to those that need it the most. Another area for future research could include investigating differences between majors of student-athletes. As was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, student-athletes sometimes are not allowed or able to pursue the academic major of their choice for various reasons, including time out of the classroom or practice/game scheduling (1, 3, 9).

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