The Influence of Athletic Identity on Career Exploration in Intercollegiate Athletics: Examining a Mid-Sized University Considering a Move from FCS to FBS in Football

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Research suggests that intercollegiate student-athletes (SA’s) in general lag behind non-athletes in terms of career planning (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996) and often compromise their career goals to accommodate their athletic endeavors. Students who report higher levels of career compromise experience lower levels of satisfaction and more career distress (Creed & Blume, 2013). Furthermore, students with higher levels of athletic identity are less likely to plan for future vocations (Gordon, 1995; Lavallee et al., 1997) and have a lack of knowledge about occupation and experience internal conflicts about career choices (Albion & Fogarty, 2005). While the literature has examined athletic identity and career exploration (Brown, & Hartley, 1998), and some studies have investigated athlete transitions out of sport (Fuller, 2014), little has been done to examine how athletic identity impacts career exploration as an athletic program pursues a transition to a new and more competitive conference. The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of athletic identity on career exploration for SA’s attending a university currently considering a move from the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) to the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level. Studying athletic identity is important because expectations for athletic excellence increase when a program advances from the FCS to FBS level.

Athletic Identity and Career Exploration

Athletic Identity. Athletic identity is the “degree to which an individual thinks and feels like an athlete” (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) and it impacts an athlete’s personal and psychological development (Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014). Athletic identity is worthy of examination because of the psychological, social, and behavior implications of athletic identity on a student-athlete (Martin, Eklund, & Mushett, 1997). It is positively associated with athletic performance (Martin et al., 1993) and an important dimension of an individual’s self-concept (Brewer et al., 2014). Good et al. (1993) suggest that many individuals focus on their athletic identity at the exclusion of investigating other identities. Athletes who are making career transitions may experience stress and uncertainty (Stamulova, et al., 2009) and many are not prepared for the challenges ahead due to a lack of post-sport planning (Hardin & Pate, 2013).

Career Exploration. Career exploration is defined as purposive behavior and cognitions that afford access to information about occupations, jobs, or organizations that was not previously in the stimulus field (Berlyne, 1960, Stumpf, Colarelli, & Hartman, 1983). It is a primary antecedent to job search intensity (Werbel, 2000) and an important element of career readiness for job choice (Phillips & Blustein, 1994). Career exploration is associated with modeling and vicarious learning (Blustein, 1997), decision-making self-efficacy (Blustein, 1989), personal growth (Robistscheck & Cook, 1999), self-appraised problem-solving (Heppner & Kreishok, 1983), and self-esteem (Creed, Patton, & Bartrum, 2004). Plum and Blustein (2000) suggest that career exploration includes activities which are directed toward enhancing self-knowledge; an attitudinal component which refers to motivation for engaging in and sustaining exploration.

Method

A mixed methods explanatory sequential design was used in this study. Quantitative methods included both a paper and online survey. A convenience sample of SA’s at a mid-sized university in the mid-Atlantic region were asked to complete an online survey administered using Qualtrics. A link to the survey was emailed to the population of 460 SA’s in sixteen varsity sports. Athletic identity was measured using an adapted version of Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder’s (1993) 10-item Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). Career Exploration was measured using an adapted version of the 62-item Career Exploration Survey by Stumpf, Colarelli, and Hartman (1983). Following
quantitative analysis, SA’s were then invited to participate in follow-up interviews to add voice and depth to the quantitative data (Creswell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews lasted from 20-40 minutes, focusing on the student-athlete’s identification with being an athlete and his/her career exploration. Questions were asked such as, “How would you describe the way you identify as being an athlete?” and “How does your own athletic identity shape your career exploration?” Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method.

Results
A total of 186 SA’s completed the survey (167 via online; 19 via hard-copy). Among them, 64 responses were excluded from the analysis. The effective sample size for the current analysis was 122. A summary of the demographic characteristics of the respondents revealed that students were aged between 17 and 24 with a mean age of 20; 69% were female; 77% were white, and 50% had prior paid-work experience. Students were distributed roughly equally across all four academic years (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior). The quantitative portion of the study was analyzed using partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The validity of all measurement items was satisfactory. Among 12 facets of career exploration, athletic identity was negatively associated with environment exploration ($\beta = -0.34, p < .001$), self-exploration ($\beta = -0.16, p = .04$), intended-systematic exploration ($\beta = -0.23, p < .01$), focus ($\beta = -0.19, p = .02$), satisfaction with information ($\beta = -0.23, p < .01$), external search instrumentality ($\beta = -0.24, p < .01$), and method instrumentality ($\beta = -0.31, p < .01$). In contrast, athletic identity was not associated with decisional stress, employment outlook, certainty of career exploration, internal search instrumentality, and importance of obtaining preferred position. Qualitative interviews were still in progress at the time of submission.

Discussion
This study is one of the first to examine athletic identity in relation to transition during a time in intercollegiate athletics where a number of programs are moving to different conferences. The study also adds the literature by examining the relationship between athletic identity and career exploration. Findings from the study show that athletic identity was negatively associated with 7 facets of career exploration, which is consistent with prior research that examined the role of athletic identity in career-related variables (Gordon, 1995; Lavallee et al., 1997; Albion & Fogarty, 2005). The findings help sport managers and athletic administrators to better understand the influences of athletic identity on career exploration for SA’s. In particular, it provides intercollegiate athletics employees working in Student Athlete Services with proper information to teach SA’s about factors germane to career exploration.