Facilitating the Transition to Life After Sport through the Lens of Social Cognitive Career Theory Model of Career Self-Management: Are Student-Athletes Less Prepared than Their Non-Athletic Peers?

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For many student-athletes, their athletic career will end once they have exhausted their athletic eligibility, and many of them may not be ready to transition to life after sport. Indeed, the large amount of time devoted to athletics combined with their strong athletic identity and sport commitment may impede them from exploring alternative career options and experiencing non-athletic activities, which are fundamental steps to the career planning process (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Although the large majority of them will not compete professionally after college, student-athletes are so preoccupied by fulfilling daily obligations that they may overlook the importance of preparing and planning for a professional life after they graduate. Thus, their career development may be postponed until they graduate from college and retire from sport, which can leave them ill prepared to transition to life after sport.

Indeed, college athletes face unique developmental transition challenges that warrant further investigation. The lack of developmental identity explorations is not just the result of their involvement in college athletics; they are also the consequences of many years of sport involvement that have deprived them from developing other identities and skills from a young age and throughout their adolescence. In addition to strongly identifying as an athlete, time constraints and regimented structures of the athletic system are also reasons explaining why student-athletes may have deficient career planning skills (Martens & Lee, 1998). While the changing and uncertain world of work makes it more challenging for recent college graduates to transition into the professional world, most student-athletes must also cope with sport retirement challenges. In fact, at the conclusion of their college career, the abrupt loss of a salient identity that has been part of who they are for most their lives heightens the intensity of identity crisis and substantially diminishes their self-worth, often leaving them confused about their next step in life (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996).

As proactive career planning for life after sport can play a pivotal role in easing the sport career transition challenges (Demulier, Le Scanff, & Stephan, 2013; Stambulova, Alffermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009), it is critical to clarify the factors facilitating and impeding career planning behaviors in the context of student-athletes’ career transition. The recently developed Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) model of Career Self-Management (CSM) was intended to determine key predictors shaping individuals’ self-direction in career pursuits (Lent & Brown, 2013). This model emphasizes personal agency by asserting the active role individuals engage in for the own career planning and adaptation processes in conjunction with environmental influences and resources. Thus, this model enabled us to examine how, under varying personality attributes and contextual influences, student-athletes can navigate a normative career transition through key developmental tasks referred as career planning for life after sport.

Although previous applications of the self-management model consisted of examining developmental tasks such as job search behavior (Lim, Lent, & Penn, 2014), and career exploration and decision-making behaviors (Lent et al., 2016), Lent and Brown (2013) encouraged researchers to investigate the application of various developmental tasks such as the one central to our study (i.e., career planning) by using a similar set of predictors. Thus, drawing on the CSM model, we examined the unique and joint contributions of career planning self-efficacy, outcome expectations, perceived supports, perceived barriers, career goals setting, and each of the Big Five personality attributes to the prediction of career planning behaviors as well as the underlying relationships among these predictors.

In addition to facing unique challenges in adjusting to life after sports, college athletes have consistently exhibited lower levels of career maturity and planning in the literature compared to other college students (Blann, 1985; Dailey, 195; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Martens & Cox, 2000). Therefore, we hypothesized that our sample of student-
athletes would obtain lower scores on positively related career planning predictors and on the level of career planning itself, and a higher score on perceived barriers compared to their non-athletic peers. Relationships between the study variables were also expected to differ by each group of students.

The operationalization of the eight variables used to assess the hypothesized CSM model was established using created and existing scales that were modified and adapted to our specific context as recommended by Lent & Brown (2013). Two scales were created to measure career planning outcome expectations and career goals setting. 10 items were created for the Career Planning for Life After Sport (CPLAS) and 10 other items were adapted from existing scales such as the Career Maturity Inventory (CMI; Savickas & Porfeli, 2011), and the Student-Athlete Career Situation Inventory (SACSI; Sandstedt, Cox, Martens, Ward, Webber, and Ivey, 2004). The 18-item career planning self-efficacy scale was derived from the 50-item Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (CDSE; Taylor & Betz, 1983), specifically focusing on the planning subscale from which we modified seven items. The perceived career planning barriers were measured with 20 items that were inspired by the 45-item Perceptions of Educational Barriers Scale – Revised (PEB-R; McWhirter, 2000). The 35-item Career Influence Inventory (CII; Fisher & Stafford, 1999) was adapted to our context to measure career planning supports. Finally, the Big Five personality structure was assessed with a 15-item adoption of the Big Five Inventory Short version (BFI–S; Gerlitz & Schupp 2005). We added five more items from the 44-item BFI of John and Srivastava (1999) to have four items per dimension.

An initial pilot study of 47 participants from NCAA Division I and II institutions enabled us to develop and refine our measurement scales. Initial results produced acceptable reliability estimates and convergent validity. Utilizing an online questionnaire, the collection of data from a target population of 500 NCAA student-athletes and 500 students from the same university is currently underway and will be completed prior to the date of the presentation. Assistance in recruiting participants are requested from an array of sources, including athletic administrators, coaches, and professors at several Division I and II institutions. Descriptive analyses will be provided separately for student-athletes and general students. Prior to testing the hypothesized relationships of the CSM model, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) procedures will be conducted to assess the psychometric properties of the measures utilized in the study. Hypotheses testing will be performed through structural equation modeling analyses to evaluate the applicability of the CSM model to the career planning of student-athletes and general students and to compare competing models between the two groups. We will also assess mean differences between the two groups using a MANOVA.

College time is a critical developmental period for college students in terms of shaping their identity for adulthood and making career decisions; hence, it is our responsibility as members of a higher education institution to provide student-athletes with adequate learning opportunities that facilitate their transition into young professionals. This theoretical framework and forthcoming validated measures can assist researchers and practitioners seeking to help student-athletes by uncovering the key determinants in shaping student-athletes’ career planning processes that may yield a healthy transition to life after sport.