Leveraging Human and Social Capital to Transition Out of Sport and into Collegiate Athletic Coaching and Administration

Allison Smith, University of New Mexico
Tiesha Martin, Radford University
Fred Williams, University of New Mexico
Jeongwon Choi, University of New Mexico

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Athletic transition in and out of sport has been explored extensively within the sport management literature (e.g., Fuller, 2014; Paule-Koba & Rohrs-Cordes, 2019; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Collegiate athletes (CA) experience both positive and negative transitions from sport. However, research has found when CAs “branched out” and explored areas neglected due to their sport, they were able to re-direct their passions into different areas (Fuller, 2014; Lally, 2007), sometimes remaining in sport in some capacity (Boixandos, Cruz, Judge, & Torregrosa, 2004). CAs that maintain realistic expectations surrounding their athletic careers and career maturity report more positive transitions to life after sports (Navarro, 2014; Warehime et al., 2017).

Social and human capital have been used to explain the differences in coaches’ career success, between women and men in athletics, and impediments to entrance and promotion within organizations (i.e., Cunningham & Sagas, 2007; Cunningham & Singer, 2007; Day, 2015; Day & McDonald, 2010). Social capital explains individuals with relationships aiding in social and networking support obtain more career benefits than peers with fewer resources (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Human capital posits individuals with more job-related skills (i.e., education, experience, training) obtain more career benefits than peers with fewer resources (Becker, 1993; Nordhaug, 1993). Previous research found women and minorities lack the same social and human capital as their white male peers and are faced with professional barriers to entry, discrimination, and uneven levels of career success (i.e., Cunningham & Singer, 2007; Day, 2015; Sagas & Cunningham, 2005). Despite existing literature exploring human and social capital within sport, little work has tied the two to athletic transition. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand transition experiences of former collegiate athletes (FCA) now working in collegiate coaching or administration. This study sought to understand if FCAs established and leveraged social and human capital to move into their collegiate athletic jobs.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone and audio recorded with 10 FCAs now working in collegiate athletics. The interview protocol consisted of three parts: history of athletic career, transitioning out of sport, career path navigation and resources (human and social capital). After data collection and transcription, members of the research team participated in several rounds of coding. The researchers jointly grouped the codes into categories that were most applicable in order to generate themes.

Two themes were revealed: Lack of Human Capital and Importance of Athletic Network. Participants lacked academic majors that fit with their career paths, did not use available athletic academic resources, or lacked resources all together. Participants discussed that their relationships with coaches and teammates allowed them to network and move into new roles within athletics. Participants also discussed leaving sport was difficult, but they experienced a smooth transition out of sport. Findings have organizational culture implications both for the NCAA as a whole and athletic departments, as participants discussed how they lacked formalized human capital initiatives to enter the athletic workforce and further formalized networks between collegiate athletes and campus peers and superiors should be created.