FACILITATING UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH IN STUDENT ATHLETICS THROUGH A FACULTY-STUDENT PARTNERSHIP: BUILDING SUPPORT STRUCTURES TO FOSTER TEACHING AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

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Abstract: This study overviews a two-year effort collaborative mentoring project at a regional university involving 3 faculty members partnered with 3 undergraduate student-athletes and an academic advisor. The study, which focused the perceptions of student-athletes across university athletic teams through the lens of communication, yields insights on the "high impact practice" of student-faculty research. In this effort, a mentoring relationship was formed over a two-year period where faculty and undergraduate students worked as partners in seeking to better understand the needs of student-athletes across all varsity athletic teams. The faculty partnered with the student-athletes to plan, execute, and analyze a qualitative research study involving 28 student-athletes with at least one student representative from each of the 18 athletic teams. This two-year effort allowed collaborative, interdisciplinary structures to provide a framework for mentoring, research, and dissemination, and allowed the university Faculty Athletic Council to better understand student-athletes' perspective on on-campus support systems.

Introduction

The University of North Carolina Wilmington is a regional, coastal university of over 16,000 students that is "dedicated to the integration of teaching and mentoring with research and service" (University of North Carolina Wilmington, n.d.). Located in Wilmington, North Carolina, the university celebrated its 70th anniversary during the 2017-2018 school year, has been part of the UNC system since 1969, offers bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral degrees, and is ranked #14 in the 2017 US News and World Report list in the South region (University of North Carolina Wilmington, n.d.). The university initiative of Experiencing Transformative Education through Applied

Learning (ETEAL) supports initiatives such as the Summer Undergraduate Research and Creativity Awards (SURCA) which provided the opportunity for three faculty members who serve on the university Faculty Athletic Council (FAC) to mentor three undergraduate student-athletes. Through this effort, a mentoring relationship was formed over a two-year period where faculty and undergraduate students worked as partners in seeking to better understand the needs of student-athletes across all varsity athletic teams.

The SURCA award provided the faculty and students a mechanism to closely study student-athletes' experiences with on-campus support structures. The faculty worked with the student-athletes to plan, execute, and analyze a qualitative research study involving 28 student-athletes with at least one student representative from each of the 18 athletic teams. A follow-up funding award allowed for framing the results in peer-reviewed manuscripts and presentations. This two-year effort allowed collaborative, interdisciplinary structures to provide a framework for mentoring, research, and dissemination, and allowed the FAC to better understand student-athletes' perspective on on-campus support systems.

This particular study seeks to answer the research question: "How do student-athletes perceive their experience as it relates to aspects of communication?" Better understanding how undergraduate student-athletes communicate with their peers, coaches, and faculty could help us understand current and potential support structures of student athletes. Research has indicated that support structures and campus-based professionals (such as athletic support staff, student affairs, counseling, first-year programming, etc.) can play a significant role in helping student-athletes at the "intersections of social and athletic identity" (Cooper, Davis, Dougherty, 2017, p.76). With over 460,000 collegiate student-athletes nationwide (National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.), a closer examination of their unique perspectives is warranted.

This study sought to build on the high-impact practice of student-faculty research, which offers the powerful potential of deep learning, general gains, practical gains, and personal gains (Kuh, 2008, p.15). This partnership has implications for the way in which faculty-student research efforts could be framed in an institutional context to gain valuable insights into student perspective and experiences.

Communication and Student-Athletes

Student-athlete experience is determined by not only the individual, but also the surrounding personnel that interconnect in the athlete's daily lives to create an efficacious networking environment and foundation for success. Coaches provide substantial support to athletes throughout their collegiate careers (Adams, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2015).

Each individual is different in how they interact with peers and difficulties lie in not only interpersonal faculty/coach relationships, but also in relationships with teammates, and among non-athlete students. "Part of being a college student involves learning how to balance school and non-school responsibilities while developing into an independent adult" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 246). Transitions into the routines of university life as student-athletes, as well as transitions out of athletics can be challenging for undergraduate students. Schlossberg (2011) posited a Transition Model that begins with the assumption that "everyone experiences transitions" (p. 159) including "anticipated transitions" like graduating from high school or college, or starting a first job, or "unanticipated transitions" such as a major injury or surgery, or a surprise promotion. College athletics is a time of measured transition and balance, which in turn, determines a student-athlete's ability to communicate.

Coach and faculty interactions with students can vary depending on student background characteristics such as race, gender, and sociability (Comeaux & Harrison, 2006, 2007). Traditional ways of teaching and communicating are not resonating with student-athletes of this generation. As male homogeny and discourse are still dominating the coaching world, certain aspects of a feminist ideology are starting to become more profound in the world of collegiate athletics. According to Forrest and Rosenberg (1997), "the infusion of feminist philosophies into ways of

teaching assist in balancing and integrating educational dichotomies (publicly, privately, logically, and emotionally), rethinking power and authority, creating communal classrooms, embracing, respecting, and increasing diversity and cultural change, and incorporating the notion of personal experience and social action" (p.110). Developing empathy as well as an appreciation of and understanding for diverse perspectives can be fostered through the relational aspects of being a part of a team.

It is with these coaching practices and ways of teaching that students tend to approach coaches and faculty in a more comfortable setting, allowing dialogue and relationships to form. "Such opportunities allow for mutual assistance and support as well as formal and informal communication regarding academic and personal goals" (Comeaux & Harrison, 2006, p. 522). Healthy interpersonal and collective organizational communication can thus impact student-athlete success.

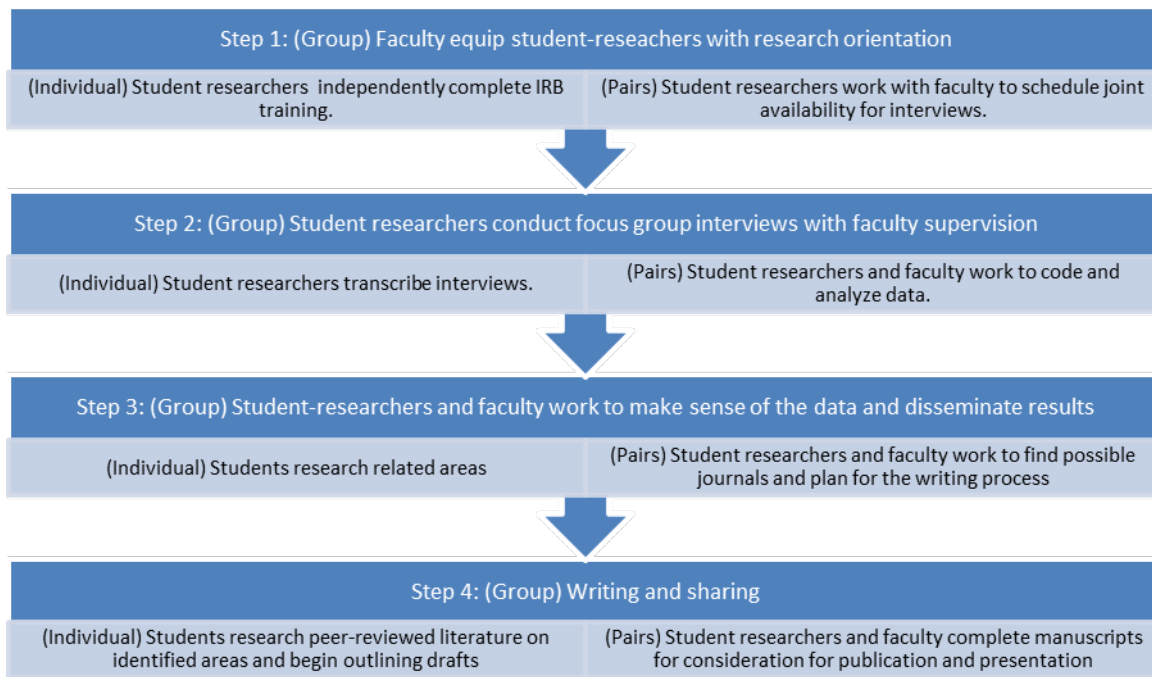**A Mentoring Framework for this Study**

Lunsford and Brown (2017) examined the role of collegiate leadership centers in developing leaders, and noted that there is a "research-practice divide" (p. 262). The framework in this study involved three faculty members (two of which are faculty members in the educational leadership department in the College of Education and one who is in physical education in the College of Health and Human Services) partnering with three undergraduate researchers, who were each student-athletes, who majored in either business or communications. The three faculty members had served on the FAC and were, in prior years, tasked with interviewing student-athletes across the various sports teams to better understand perceptions related to their experiences with athletics, academics, living conditions, and supports. A framework to partner faculty with students to in order to "develop students as participants in research and inquiry" (Healey & Jenkins, 2009, p. 6) was seen as a viable alternative to the usual faculty-only approach and sought to enable the students to be "producers, not just consumers of knowledge" (p. 6).

The three undergraduate researchers, after learning how to plan and carry out research in a manner appropriate to the study (Brew, 2013), in turn led the qualitative inquiry with the 28 student-athletes in a manner that was Healey and Jenkins (2009) described as "research-oriented" as it was developing research and inquiry skills and techniques (p. 7, as cited in Brew, 2013)

In the spring semester of Year 1, we began by convening the full group of three faculty members and three student-athletes (Chart 1) to overview the process, get to know each other (we convened on campus weekly) and set goals for the study. Students worked independently to complete necessary paperwork such as IRB certification and time sheets for stipends, and we began working in pairs (one faculty member and one student-athlete) to devise potential questions and focus areas.

Chart 1

A Research-Oriented Study with a Faculty-Student Partnership Model

In order to first equip the student researchers, the full initial group (three faculty and three student researchers) met in the initial weeks to overview the process, introduce research methods with a focus on qualitative research. We agreed to work also in smaller groups, or pairs, to focus in on strands of research (such as communication aspects). Thus, the process involved a two-year effort organized into four overall steps (Chart 1) as a group, with individual and paired efforts moving the work along.

Methodology

This study involved a single institution case study (Yin, 2012; Stake, 1995; and Merriam, 1998) of undergraduate student athletes at UNCW. This descriptive approach was conducted to seek to describe ways in which the student-athletes experienced the environment at UNCW as student-athletes. A sample of 28 current student-athletes who responded to an initial interest-level request to all student athletes agreed to participate in the study. This *purposive sampling* ensured that there was at least one representative from each of the 18 teams (Check and Schutt, 2012, p. 104). The sample included the following demographics:

- 15 males, 13 females
- 17 students in state (NC), 8 from other states, 3 international
- 23 white, 3 Latino/Hispanic, 2 African-American
- GPA 3.42 average (4.0 scale); only 3 reported lower than 3.0 (all white males from NC)
- Majors: Business/Finance/Accounting (10), Exercise Science (5), Economics (2), Political Science (2), Biology, Chemistry, Geoscience, Literary Science, Mathematics, Public Health, Secondary Education, Undecided.

The student researchers were trained in basic qualitative research methods and transcription as a group (see Chart 1) and individually completed training modules for the Institutional Review Board at the university. The student researchers then took initiative to schedule times to meet with members of athletic teams at a time where the faculty member could be present. The interviews took place in 9 groupings (of about 3-4 students per group) across 4 evenings in the spring semester; each meeting lasted approximately 45-90 minutes. The faculty member was present to ensure consent forms were collected and materials stored. The focus group facilitators compiled field notes and, following the interviews, transcribed the interviews independently.

The data analysis was completed by the student research assistants with assistance from the faculty mentors as follows: the initial round involved an open-coding process where each researcher reviewed transcripts and identified any initial codes that stood out. Second, teams of researchers met and discussed initial codes and refined them into patterns that resembled initial themes. Third, we convened as a whole group to discuss initial codes and themes and refined them based on feedback and discussion amongst the group. Finally, we returned to our smaller teams to review the data and further refine themes and sub-themes.

We took several steps to improve the trustworthiness and reliability of our data analysis such as triangulation (using multiple researchers to complete the analysis and then coming together to discuss points of convergence and divergence) which allowed for "different sources of evidence" (Yin, 2012, p. 104). We utilized peer review in relying upon the undergraduate researchers as assistants or "gatekeepers" to make sense of the data when clarification was needed regarding their peers' experiences and perspectives. Finally, we involved expert review as the three faculty who are experts in research methods, leadership, and general student support services.

Findings on Communication

Our initial findings on communication examined the more-frequently identified sub-themes of communication that emerged as noted in Table 1.

Table 1

Themes Related to Communication and the Student-Athlete

Theme	Frequency
Communication aspects related to university resources and services	59
Coach-athlete communication	51
Team communication	18
Athlete-faculty communication	13
Athlete-athlete communication	9

The researchers looked at these five sub-themes to better understand the participants' insights regarding communication as a student-athlete. Findings from the various 28 participants sometimes reinforced each other, and at other times differing views were apparent.

University resources and services

Resources such as advising, nutrition, the academic center, and health services were discussed through the lens of communication. While student academic advisors were seen as "awesome" and supportive by some, another student-athlete noted "we went through I think four or five academic advisors my freshman and sophomore year." Resources such as the athletic trainer were highlighted as one participant noted "She's great, she's like my mom here, which is nice, because I don't see my mom very often." Another noted that a chaplain comes to practices and though "it's not sports-driven" that he "just kind of a guy that's there if we need someone to talk to." Another noted the availability of a counselor who had experience with student-athletes.

Having more helpful conversations with nutrition was noted by numerous student-athletes as one participant noted "we just need a little bit of a healthier option" or an "athletic café" rather than sharing the same options as non-student athletes. A number of participants noted that the on-campus resources, such as CARE (Collaboration for Assault Response and Education) center were accessible, observing that "the CARE center is pretty open . . . if you need to get something off your chest." Having on-campus contacts who could listen to the student-athletes emerged as a point of discussion.

Coach-athlete communication

The perspective whether or not the coach was seen as "available" was apparent in numerous participants' feedback. One noted that "our coach is just good at being there for everyone." Some indicated change in perspective over time. For example, one participant, an upperclassman, noted that some underclassmen were initially hesitant to approach the coach for fear of losing playing time, but then, as they progress through the years, they realize "as you get older you kinda realize that they're there for you. . . if you talk to them about it then they're not going to punish you." Some indicated that they wanted more understanding between their coach when, for example, they weren't feeling well as "we know our bodies better than they know our bodies." Most participants conveyed positive interactions, such as one female athlete noted "Our coaching staff is actually pretty good about that. You can talk to them about anything, and they see the bigger picture that (sport) isn't your life, and for most people it won't be a life after your four years out of here." Navigating the digital landscape of communication was described as a potential challenge as one student described getting an e-mail at 3pm notifying the team of a mandatory team meeting at 7pm.

Another athlete noted how the coach had worked hard to ensure that there were not divisions on the team, explaining, "We don't really have cliques because our coaches make it so that we don't. And that's one thing about my team that I really, really, really like because I feel like I can go to anybody on the team if I have a problem." One athlete who had experienced a coaching change while at UNCW noted "I definitely felt closer to the (second coach). . . you're not always talking about your sport with your coaches, you're talking about life in general."

Team communication

Team dynamics varied amongst teams, but overall, there was very positive "within-team" communication. One participant offered example:

> As a freshman, I had a lot of support from my teammates and coaches. We always do this thing called Mind Gym with my team. It's about mental toughness, basically. It's just a session where we talk about everything that could happen in any type of situation. I think that's really helped.

Another added "I'm the only freshman so I was worried about coming in and not knowing anyone but my teammates are very supportive of me and are always with me," adding that "I never feel like I'm alone." Another added "they are the strongest non-family member connections that I have." Having common interests seemed to be a factor for one who shared "I think we just all have similar interests so it's just easy to have real conversations."

Athlete-faculty communications

Communications with faculty members were mostly positive, with some exceptions. One female athlete explained, "The faculty they work with us well." Another added "Faculty are all good, have been there to help, that sums it up." A male athlete reflected on his varied experiences, noting "Because there are some professors that I've had that write you off as a person, then I kind of write off their classes as a whole and (then) don't do well." Attendance issues were seen as a challenge for some who had to miss class due to team-related games. One student noted that overall, faculty were flexible "Yeah, most of my teachers, especially during the season, I just give them a note and let them know ahead of time" and a teammate agreed, saying "All of mine are pretty relaxed except for (specific

department), they are not very understanding, they don't really care about your absence, whether it's for a sport or not."

One student noted an overall positive approach with a rare exception, explaining "I think that most professors are great" and that "I have a pretty good relationship with all my professors, at least for the past two years," adding that "I've only had one professor that has been like completely against student-athletes as far as traveling goes and making up schoolwork."

Athlete-athlete communication

Spending significant amounts of time together with like-minded individuals seemed to foster strong athlete-athlete communication. One athlete remarked, "I'd say my relationship with other athletes is much stronger that with non-athletes just because I'm with them so much more" (this was echoed by two teammates in the focus group). Others noted that they played a mentoring role with younger athletes; one noted that underclassmen would approach them asking "What's your take on it, cause you've already been there." Another added that friendships would make transitioning out of the sport (a noted concern for many) more bearable, explaining "I'm going to keep in touch when I continue with my path with what I want in life" adding that they felt prepared to "make friends and meet people."

Discussion

Better understanding the unique perspectives of the 28 student athletes informed the researchers of aspects such team communication and resources. This study provided reflection in regards to implications in two areas. First, it provided the researchers an opportunity to reflect on better understanding student-athlete perspectives through the lens of a faculty-student partnership that provided a research structure for student-athlete inquiry. Second, the study helped us examine the role of communication in the unique context of student athletes.

Reflections on the student-faculty partnership

The process of forming a student-faculty partnership mentoring framework was a positive experience. From moving forward as a full team through the research-oriented study as outlined in Chart 1, to growing together as small teams, we were able to gain valuable insights on student-athletes' experiencing. The initial internal (SURCA) grant effort of conducting the interviews and analysis led to a follow-up SURCA grant (with a focus on writing and dissemination) as well as the three faculty members joining an external grant effort to better understand student-athlete perspectives within the conference association. Being able to work with students outside the department enabled the researchers to gain additional perspective as well as advance the notion of, as Lunsford and Brown (2017) note, "of helping undergraduate understand that leadership is a process that involves leaders, followers, and environments" (p. 263). The environmental contexts of support systems and team dynamics, for example, indeed were evident in the participants' discussions with the undergraduate researchers.

Healey and Jenkins (2009) describe undergraduate research as a "powerful way to reinvent or reinvigorate the undergraduate curriculum because the focus is on the student as a learner; it explicitly brings the student into the worlds of research; it views the student as a potential producer of research; (and) it potentially values all academic and support staff (p. 9). This project, which indeed brought together undergraduate students, undergraduate and graduate faculty, and staff to engage in the research process, was indeed a powerful way to reinvigorate the shared learning experiences of those involved.

The Faculty-Student Partnership Model (Chart 1) allows for a structure of empowering students to serve as researchers and to grow through a mentoring framework. The institution gains from gaining valuable, student-focused insights from student-athletes in order to continually improve experiences and delivery models.

Reflections on communication and student-athletes

The context of communication is indeed relevant for today's students. Our study lends insights to the importance of communication in helping students feel successful. From a professor understanding an excused absence because of a scheduled away game to a team fostering a time of discussion to prepare student-athletes for challenging situations, the relevance of communication—both within the team context and outside of the team context- was expressed by the participants. Having these additional "layers of support" (team, coach, and individual teammates) could indeed uniquely position student-athletes for success in the real-world.

Research suggests that students who participated in collegiate athletics were more open to mentoring relationship, had higher emotional intelligence, and earned higher salaries than non-athlete counterparts in their first 10 years after university study (Sauer, Desmond, & Heintzelman, 2013, p. 657). Student-athletes benefit from forming an "elevator speech" that highlights transferrable skills such as leadership, commitment, and time management to the workplace (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017, p. 263). Further examination of this data set, as well as future studies, could help lend insights to specific inconsistencies (such as some departments not being as supportive as others) or how student-athletes deal with both anticipated and unanticipated transitions (Schlossberg, 2011). A similar study could be replicated in other contexts (universities) to better understand student-athlete perceptions. Our research team indeed found that this study allowed us, faculty and students alike, to "experience diversity through contact with people who are different from themselves" (Kuh, 2008, p. 15) in an authentic manner.

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