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FORMER AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE FOOTBALL
STUDENT-ATHLETES AT SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE
INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR TRANSITION FROM ATHLETICS TO
NON-ATHLETIC CAREERS:

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctorate of Higher Education
in the Department of The School of Education
The University of Mississippi

by

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May 2021

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ABSTRACT

The problem of practice for this dissertation will address the perceived deficiencies in the cultivation of workplace readiness and the projection of career success among former African-American football student-athletes at Southeastern Conference institutions. The focus of this dissertation in practice will be to examine the perceived lack of development of academic, social and psychological skills in order to achieve a successful transition from athletics to non-athletic careers.

This study will identify the applicable career and academic developments, discussed and articulated by former African-American male football student-athletes, which directly influence their employability qualities. Manuscript two will review data generated from the semi-structured interviews that will be conducted in order to identify best-practices that were important in assisting these former student-athletes with their transition from collegiate athlete to early career success.

Manuscript three will discuss non-athletic career development considerations for former African-American student-athletes and how universities could better prepare such students for non-playing careers. The various experiences, the relationships and programs that influence early career success and methods of implementation for scholastic frameworks will be discussed and explained within an institutional context.

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CHAPTER I: MANUSCRIPT I

INTRODUCTION

Intercollegiate athletics within higher education and the student-athlete transition into early career non-athletic careers has become a frequent topic for discussion amongst collegiate education practitioners. Institutional researchers have begun to investigate the intersectionality of athletic responsibilities, institutional values and student-athlete career development pertaining to early career success in higher education. Division I student-athletes occupy a socially prominent space, whether as the subject of controversy or of celebration. They provide publicity to their universities and entertainment to the community, and they help develop and instill school pride (Sylwester & Witosky, 2004 as cited in Comeaux, Harrison, 2011). Career readiness and successful transitioning into the workforce are impactful attributes that higher education professionals and researchers have studied.

While several higher education models have been instrumental and helpful in shaping early career success for scholars, some researchers have viewed the academic focus for Division I institutions, particularly concerning student-athletes, as questionable. Although colleges and universities offer a myriad of support services and programs for student-athletes, they have not managed to consistently and effectively enhance student-athletes' learning and personal development (Comeaux, 2007; Hinkle, 1994 as cited in Comeaux, Harrison, 2011). External influences such as

multimillion dollar television contracts have heightened the commercialization of college sports, resulting in enhanced pressure for coaches and athletics administrators to produce winning teams (Croissant, 2001). In turn, media forums continue to depict large Division I athletic departments as systems which exploit student-athletes for their athletic prowess, but place little emphasis on meaningful career development during college (Fountain & Finley, 2011; Renick, 1974; Suggs, 2003; Thelin, 1994 as cited in Navarro, 2015).

The de-escalation of commitment to athletics and the re-direction towards a more concerted effort towards academics and career readiness has become an important objective for researchers. Students who are involved in educationally productive activities in college are developing habits of the mind and heart that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal development (Kuh, 2003, as cited in Hannah, Kuh, Palmer, Umbach, 2006). Understanding the nuances and traditions that negatively impact student-athlete achievement is extremely important to dissect and has gained the attention of several prevalent academic scholars.

As higher education practitioners continue to evaluate the effectiveness of career development practices on Division I campuses, African-American males on predominantly white campuses have become a focal point for researchers seeking to analyze the equitable and ethical approaches to minority male scholastic achievement. Assisting Black male student-athletes in high profile intercollegiate athletics, to develop meaning of their identities that best enable proficient learning and healthier

personal and educational growth is critical evermore (Bimper, 2014). African-American males are seen as particularly vulnerable to these circumstances because they often enter college with general background disadvantages (e.g., socioeconomic status, academic preparedness) and goal-discrepancy concerning professional sports careers (Roscigno, 1999; Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997 as cited in Beamon, 2008).

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The problem of practice for this dissertation will address the perceived deficiencies in the cultivation of workplace readiness and the projection of career success among former African-American football student-athletes at Southeastern Conference institutions. The focus of this dissertation in practice will be to examine the perceived lack of development of academic, social and psychological skills in order to achieve a successful transition from athletics to non-athletic careers. This study will identify the applicable career and academic developments, discussed and articulated by former African-American male football student-athletes, which directly influence their employability qualities. Manuscript two will review data generated from the semi-structured interviews that will be conducted in order to identify best-practices that were important in assisting these former student-athletes with their transition from collegiate athlete to early career success. Manuscript three will discuss non-athletic career development considerations for former African-American student-athletes and how universities could better prepare such students for non-playing careers. The various experiences, the relationships and programs that influence early career success

and methods of implementation for scholastic frameworks will be discussed and explained within an institutional context.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE IN LOCAL CONTEXT

The University of Mississippi's athletic department is extremely vast, composed of fundamental values that epitomize what administrators and coaches see as ideal components of an adequate and efficient athletics department. Academic excellence, integrity, social responsibility, student-athlete welfare, university integration, community engagement and competitive excellence are essential characteristics that define the values and morals of such an extensive branch of the University of Mississippi.

With 11 total athletic teams (football, basketball, baseball, soccer, cross country, track and field, golf, tennis, rifle, volleyball and softball) and more than 400 student-athletes who become both instrumental and valuable components to the overall mission and goal of the institutional value system, understanding the advantages and complexities that encompasses the University of Mississippi's athletic department is important to understand. Known by many as the "front porch," to the institution, the University of Mississippi's athletic department has become a valuable source for both prestige and prominence, which allows for universal notoriety across a plethora of platforms. Additionally, the findings and purpose of this study will center specifically on former African-American male football student-athletes who played at the University of Mississippi.

The measuring tool for academic success, governed by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for college student-athletes, is the Academic Progress Rating (APR). This data analysis measures student-athletes academic success, which indirectly predicts career outcomes. The NCAA uses this scholastic method in order to “grade” the performance of program competence. The scrutiny of this academic scaling system, according to researchers, is that it does not measure the degree in which students are critiqued. Researchers suggest that this rating metric does not ensure student-athletes are being challenged academically. Linking the existing APR system to a more comprehensive, evidence-based framework at each participating institution might contribute to organizational innovations that benefit student-athletes in both their sports and their studies (Comeaux, 2012). The problem of practice for this Dissertation in Practice involving former African-American male student-athletes and their early career success emerged from the assessment of student-athletes and how they viewed the organizational structures of being a student-athlete.

After examining the responses from several former African-American football student-athletes, development for career readiness became an apparent concern and reason for research. This Dissertation in Practice evolved from the athletic department creating a diversity initiative team, with the express purpose of increasing focus on elements of social responsibility and community engagement by student-athletes. It has been believed by educational researchers, that such a redirection of focus would positively impact the student-athletes career readiness in a non-playing context.

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONALITY ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Reflecting on my educational experiences, there have been a plethora of educators who have been extremely influential in supplying me with the wisdom and knowledge that has inspired me to pursue a career that is focused on minority male student-athletes. As an African-American male who excelled athletically as an adolescent, having to defeat the barriers that are so often prevalent within neighborhoods conducive to my upbringing, birthed my desire to understand and study the inherent hurdles that several underprivileged young African-American males have to overcome.

My purpose and passion for dissecting the intricacies surrounding African-American male student-athletes and their early career success is situated within my biography as a young black male. I must admit that the wisest person that I have ever met dropped out of high school in the 10th grade. This extremely gifted individual also defeated the addiction of crack-cocaine. With a total of 54 criminal charges stacked against him, he would eventually go to prison for four years where he would eventually find out that the true value in life was to assist his wife in raising three beautiful children. Additionally, this same person has become a constant reference for me as I continue to investigate the notion of early career success for young African-American males. I must express that this same man helped raise a child that was biologically not his, and has constantly helped to influence young individuals within his community to not allow the system of drugs and crime to define their trajectory in

life. That same man is my step-father, who took on the responsibility of raising me, although the blood that flowed through my veins and his veins were unrelated. As an adolescent, I remembered how my step-father would often tell my mother, brother, sister and me of a question that often stagnated his upward mobility into society: “Have you ever been convicted of a felony?” This question would usually lead to my family hearing his frustration that usually ended with him proclaiming, “I cannot find a job.” While he became a hero for my family, his past of being incarcerated gave the world a reason to label him inadequate and unwilling to become an impactful leader in society. I tried to understand this as an adolescent and although I did not personally agree with this perspective, I subconsciously felt victim and believed for a specific amount of time that my father was a failure. Imagine being an adolescent, constantly hearing your father cry for opportunity, met with “we cannot hire ex-felons.” Visually, I understood as I grew older how handcuffs and drugs painted a falsified picture of my father and what he represented to my family. Due to a conditioning mechanism that has perpetuated the idea that ex-convicts are incompetent individuals, I became a victim to this way of thinking. I graduated from the University of Mississippi years later as a student-athlete and noticed that several of my African-American teammates, who had on their resume the completion of a college degree would often verbalize to me, “I cannot find a job,” words identical to that of my father.

Up until the 10th grade, I had no idea what a doctoral degree stood for. My biological father had passed away when I was in the 10th grade and my step-father

dropped out of high school in the 10th grade. Statistically speaking, the 10th grade was supposed to be me emulating the generational mediocrity that had preceded me. In my hometown of Decatur, Alabama, I had never met an African-American male with a doctoral degree, thus, dreaming and achieving that an intellectual accolade of this magnitude could ever be owned by me is honestly unbelievable to most. I have accrued the power and tenacity to passionately turn my dreams into reality by not only accomplishing this great feat, but going back into underprivileged communities and expelling the often expressed statement, “I cannot find a job.”

The problem of practice for this study addresses constructs of early career success and how African-American football male student-athletes struggle to become adequate citizens once their athletic and academic eligibility is exhausted. Synonymous to that of ex-convicts, both my teammates and my father seemed to speak the same language once leaving their “temporary residence of reality.”

First generation African-American college student-athletes who are adamant at becoming a trailblazer for their families, like myself, often come from neighborhoods that support athletic superiority, while lacking the intellectual fortitude and scholastic opportunities to transition into a successful non-athletic career. I want to understand the organizational systems that often leave African-American male football student-athletes grappling to become successful as it relates to non-athletic early careers. From my experience in underprivileged communities, I have observed that several of these athletes are majoring in “eligibility,” and therefore rarely establish a repertoire in a

major that is sustainable for career advancement outside of athletics.

Researching the issues that are so prevalent in communities across the country, I have created a program titled, “Uncommon M.E.N.,” which specifically centers on the scholastic and upward mobility for young minority male student-athletes in high school (Shackelford, 2017). “Uncommon M.E.N.” is an effective mentor-leadership program which focuses on professional development, scholastic attainment, increased self-efficacy and self-perception and community engagement. “Uncommon M.E.N.” is a program focused on bridging the opportunity gap for minority male student-athletes at high schools across the country. “Uncommon M.E.N.” is also a program dedicated and committed to developing and building brighter leaders for the advancement of society. Developing leadership within our young men in order to create and sustain effective change agents within our community is paramount and ultimately the crux of my organization.

My unconventional and unorthodox approach to higher education has given me a deep yearning and desire to discover learning as a life-long mission. Noticing a deficiency at the high school level of this perceived underdevelopment of African-American male student-athletes, I have dedicated a large degree of my energy and efforts to improving the academic and career choices for minority male high school student-athletes, which could be the chief difference between a successful or unsuccessful transition into a professional capacity outside the context of football.

The focus of this dissertation in practice will be to interview former African-American athletes who are experiencing adverse complications as they transition from the “superstar athlete,” to the “average citizen” maintaining employment. Through semi-structured interviews, I will examine these student-athlete experiences to investigate if they were encouraged psychologically, socially and academically while student-athletes. My experience as an African-American football athlete for the University of Mississippi were filled with statements like, “you are here to play football” and not necessarily focused on obtaining an education. Seeing this system from a personal standpoint, I must say that we definitely identified more with “athlete-students.”

Being equitable and equipping all individuals within the educational setting of the University of Mississippi with the tools to excel professionally, should be an obligation and a duty to make sure that these scholars are not being limited intellectually. As my focus strives to target the inconsistencies of underprivileged communities and African-American male student-athletes who are adamant about becoming the next “big star,” my objective involves creating a lasting legacy and positive impact for minority male student-athletes that may decrease the opportunity gap addressed in this dissertation in practice. Furthermore, early career success for African-American male student-athletes is not only important in the collegiate setting but the idea of becoming academically proficient must become a necessity that extends into the K-12 educational system.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Educational policy and the statistical data surrounding the early career success for graduates once leaving the public higher education system has become a phenomenon that several researchers and scholars are seeking to comprehend and explain. The widespread belief in the socioeconomic return to higher education has prompted policy efforts that expand educational opportunities for all Americans (Brand and Xie, 2010). Scholarly and succinct research analysis within this examination will focus on three distinctive categories: Social Capital, Career Success and African-American male Athletic and Racial identity as it relates to early career success.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to a person's current and potential social networks (i.e., formal, informal) and resources to include knowledge and accomplishments that can be utilized to succeed in social institutions (Anheier et al. 1995; Brown and Davis 2001; Coleman 1988; Yosso 2005 as cited in Carter-Francique, Cheeks, Hart, 2015). Developing relationships with people in different functional groups, management levels, geographic locations, and organizations provides access to a larger variety of resources than if all of a person's contacts are similar (Cullen-Lester, Willburn, Woehler, 2016). Networking creates many forms of valuable social capital including advocacy, introductions and mentoring that would otherwise require the use of human or financial capital (Simon, 2013 as cited in Batistic, Tymon, 2017). Issues of whether

and how educational structures consider class, gender, race, and ability have long threads in the literature and history across athletic and academic rhetoric (Anderson, 1988; Clifford, 1982 as cited in Dougherty, Lombardi, 2016). There has also been a clear recognition that the educational enterprise itself, while perhaps intended to reduce inequity, may have adopted elements of design and practice that reproduce social inequality (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Dorn, 1996; Grubb & Lazerson, 1982 as cited in Dougherty, Lombardi, 2016). Access to different types of educational opportunity may be incidentally or deliberately limited, based on the policies and programmatic structures of educational systems (Oakes, 1983, 1986; Oakes, Selvin, Karoly, & Guiton, 1992; Tyack, 1974 as cited in Dougherty, Lombardi, 2016).

According to researchers, social capital, while an extremely powerful tool for upward mobility, has been analyzed by critics, who feel that the exclusionary components of social capital has often ostracized students coming from underprivileged backgrounds. Sociological research has shown that these disadvantages disproportionately affect marginalized groups through structural barriers that cap their access to a variety of more extensive resources, including information, and affect their willingness or capacity to develop weak, acquaintance relationships (Granovetter, 1983; Bourgois, 2003 as cited in Daniel, Dube, Gauvin, Moore, 2009). Comparisons between first-generation students to their peers, provide evidence of distinct disadvantages of first-generation students before college years, during college years, and after college years (Gofen, 2009). First-generation college students, defined

as those whose parents lack postsecondary education or training, often attend college to honor the family or to pursue future financial success (Bui, 2002 as cited in Gibbons, Woodside, 2014). For individuals who classify themselves as “first-generation” college students, researchers often state that these students seem to benefit the least from the relationships and networking opportunities available. As a result, strong bonding ties can impose a heavy obligation on members that are part of a community, following a dominant social hierarchy, social norms and excluding outsiders. The lack of bridging social capital is crucial in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities (Kawachi, Olives, 2017).

Several researchers have admitted that while post-secondary education has provided advantageous benefits for individuals who come from challenging socioeconomic backgrounds, translating academic competency to early career success has continued to be a challenge. A student’s habits can limit their educational success as it can impact upon the ability to ‘decode the implicit “rules of the game”’ that they encounter (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997 as cited in O’Shea, 2016). Such a perspective identifies that students do not necessarily lack knowledge but rather that the knowledge or cultural capital that they hold may not be valued within the higher education environment (O’shea, 2016). In particular, inherent privilege is associated with dominant groups’ access based on their race (e.g., White), sex (e.g., male), and social class status (McIntosh, 1988); thus, non-dominant status is associated with marginalization or deficit ideologies (O’shea, 2016 as cited in Carter-Francique,

Cheeks, Hart, 2015). In many cases, African Americans' social networks (e.g., family, friends, acquaintances) do not consist of people who can help them obtain jobs, obtain internships, or receive other career outcomes that signify upward mobility (Smith, 2005b). This is described as a social capital deficit (Lin, 2001), such that Blacks' tend to be embedded in social networks that contain few career-enhancing resources, unlike Whites' networks, which often offer many resources (Parks-Yancy, 2014).

Understanding the interconnectedness of social capital as it relates to early career success for minority college graduates is imperative to recognize.

Many jobs are never publicly advertised because social capital acts as both the job advertisement and the initial screening process (Waldinger, 1997 as cited in Parks-Yancy, 2012). Networking is the age-old practice of building and nurturing personal and professional links with a variety of people to create a bank of resources, including contacts, information and support (Batistic, Tymon, 2017). Whereas educational level, quality, prestige, and academic majors are all important predictors (Judge et al., 1995), it is likely that college students' activities outside the classroom may be equally or more important determinants of future success in the workplace than academic success (Desmond, Heintzelman, Sauer, 2012). Diversifying one's social and psychological environments within institutions of higher learning, while not absolute, has become a major predictor for dissecting the early careers success for college graduates, according to several academic researchers.

Conducting a qualitative analysis on African-American male football players

and their early non-athletic careers, researching the social capital acquired while a student-athlete, is a driver to my research. With influences from coaches, administrative staff, professors and the campus community, comprehending the pros and cons of how these student-athletes expand upon their social contacts could prove to be a very important observation. The organizational structure present at larger institutions could have a direct impact on the social connections.

Classes serve as the institutional glue that solidifies academically oriented network ties between students and their professors and peers (Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1997). As they grow in size, however, student opportunities for socio-academic integrative moments may diminish (Deil- Amen, 2011 as cited in Beattie, Thiele, 2015). Administering a qualitative study will allow me to take a more direct focus on student-athlete achievement and career readiness. The organizational structures that exist within Southeastern Conference campuses for both the academic and athletic missions could be indirectly opposed which could be a determining factor when trying to objectify the improvement of career readiness for student-athletes. Organizational characteristics are known to shape social capital acquisition in the workplace (Adler & Kwon, 2002 as cited in Beattie, Thiele, 2015). Acquisition of social capital is often embedded within institutions, depending first on a context which allows access to social relationships, and second on the amount, quality, and transferability of resources held within these network ties (Bourdieu, 1986 as cited in Beattie, Thiele, 2015).

Scholarly researchers such as Alejandro Portes (Portes, 2010) address the

negative implications of social capital and how, while positive to several individuals, can be extremely detrimental to others. Portes highlights four primary issues: (a) higher social capital can involve excessive demands being placed on group members to provide support to others, (b) higher social capital can entail a restriction of freedom as a result of excessive informal control; (c) strong bonding capital can be used to exclude out-group members; and (d) social capital can lead to a “down-leveling” of norms, in which the demand for group conformity can pull down the achievement of individuals trying to break free from the group (Kawachi, Olives, 2017).

Career Success

Career success as objective career achievements has an indirect positive association with life satisfaction through multiple subjective success evaluations that are based on social and individual comparison standards (Abele, Hagmaier, Spurk, 2016). The distinction between the so-called objective and subjective measures of career success is very frequently made. Both subjectively and objectively, the culmination of these defining characteristics could be classified within three prospective categories; job, career and calling. Having a job orientation usually results in low satisfaction with one’s occupation. Individuals with a job orientation focus primarily on the mere financial rewards they receive for working, rather than pleasure or fulfillment (Heslin, 2005). The distinctive characteristics from a job to a career are very interesting. While a job is extremely essential, having a career orientation has been labeled by several researchers as a higher level of progression. Lastly, individuals

identifying with a calling orientation strive to experience personal fulfillment as a result of performing their work. Work is therefore seen as an inherent part of life and as an end in itself, rather than merely as a means to income or advancement (Heslin, 2005). The objective outcomes of pay and advancement are respectively the prime concern of those with either a job or a career orientation. By contrast, people with a calling are much more concerned with subjective outcomes that matter most to them, such as the sense of meaning and fulfillment they derive from their work (Heslin, 2005). Objectifying the prospects of career paths for early career success, researchers have continued to try and understand the gaps that may exist within higher education.

Higher education has become a fundamental resource for guiding and successfully transitioning individuals into the workplace. It is generally maintained that a college degree yields substantial economic returns. By the early 21st century, college graduates received earnings about 90% higher than their high school graduate counterparts, a premium that has increased dramatically over the last quarter century (Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2008). College attainment is also related to better health, longevity, happiness, and a host of extra-economic outcomes (Ross and Mirowsky 1999; Pallas 2000; Rowley and Hurtado 2003; Attawell and Levin 2007; Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008 as cited in Torche, 2011). Programs such as learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research with faculty, internships, senior capstone projects or culminating experiences, and study abroad were recognized as “high-impact practice” (HIPs) due to their positive connection with key educational

outcomes as well as the mutual qualities that influence their effectiveness (Dumford, Miller, Rocconi, 2018). According to researchers, student learning projects that take place outside of the classroom setting can prove to be relatable to career readiness. The hands-on learning that can take place within service learning course requirements or participation in a learning community can promote the integration of abstract concepts with real-world experiences and activities, which is beneficial for many careers as well (Dumford, Miller, Rocconi, 2018). Researchers have reverberated the message that higher education uses several extra-curricular activities that can become extremely valuable in strengthening and easing the transition from college to early career success.

However, as the plight of our global economy continues to face several challenges within the workplace sector, several proponents of the higher education system have discussed the transitioning from scholastic competency to workplace efficiency. In forecasting job mobility, the United States Department of Labor has projected that early career workers will have 10–14 jobs in their first 20 years in the workforce and that 25% of these workers will be with an employer less than 1 year; with 50% serving less than 5 years (Floch, McLood, & Bronman, 2011 as cited in Stumpf, 2014). Projections estimate that companies and countries will need more than four billion people to fill knowledge worker positions by 2020, accompanied by shortages between 32 and 39 million qualified people (Foster, 2008 as cited in Cukier, Hannan, Holmes, Yap, 2010). Researchers are seeking scholastic reform, suggesting that

while formal education is extremely important, practical experience that can translate to real world experience is vital to early career success. Past research on graduates' early careers stressed that the determinants of acquired competencies and graduates' career success are not simply rooted in study curricula but also in relevant work experience, personal characteristics, individual circumstances, family backgrounds and general societal trends (Allen et al., 2011 as cited in Pavlin, 2014).

Researchers continue to try and define the role and responsibility for institutions of higher learning as they have both diverse and complex ramifications for the advancement of early career success. The divergent viewpoints related to both labor markets and labor supply, have led some researchers to study the “great divide,” that leaves several graduates trying to understand and comprehend how their degree attainment transfers to early career success. However, a decrease in flexibility on the labor market, due to a turbulent state of the economy and the enduring economic crisis (Thompson, Shea, Sikora, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2013) has resulted in a larger mismatch between labor supply and labor demand for graduate students (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011 as cited in Emmerik, Gils, Grip, Meng, Verbuggen, 2015).

Underemployment and the prospect of graduates working outside of their degree focus, has given researchers an opportunity to explore the inequitable practices when considering the effectiveness of early career success. Level underemployment – or “overeducation” – implies employment in a job that in a formal sense is below one's educational level (Allen & van der Velden, 2001). Content underemployment – or

horizontal mismatch – refers to employment outside one's field of education (Meng, 2006; Verhaest, Sellami, & Van der Velde, in press as cited in Emmerik, Gils, Grip, Meng, Verbuggen, 2015).

The interest of faculty and the interest of athletic departments are often met with stark opposition concerning the scholastic attention that student-athletes must receive. Further study of faculty oversight responsibilities is particularly important, especially in regard to role clarity, expertise, agenda setting, and overall efficacy (Lawrence, Ott, 2013). Campus governance and the role it plays in predicting and understanding the lasting impact that higher education has on student-athlete career success is extremely important. Some scholars have argued that particularly within college athletics, the interest of stakeholders and the politics that impact student-athlete career success has been geared towards a privatized market placing the interest of student-athletes secondary to the monetary gains and personal interest of competing stakeholders. Sports organizations, particularly collegiate athletic departments, maintain relationships with tightly coupled stakeholders, such as financial donors. Research suggests organizational leaders consider which stakeholders possess valued resources and communicate accordingly as they attempt to make decisions and facilitate change (Lewis, Richardson, & Hamel, 2003 as cited in Richardson, McGlynn, 2011).

Early career trajectories for student-athletes and being mindful of their workplace readiness once eligibility is exhausted has become a focus for practitioners

interpreting and implementing higher education learning models. Among students, athletes might be especially at risk for having poor career decision-making skills because of conflicting roles (Adler & Adler, 1987) and potential isolation with a peer group that is typically focused on nonacademic outcomes (Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981 as cited in Burns, Dunn, Fletcher, Jasinki, 2013). It appears that identification of specific roles and responsibilities to be fulfilled by each member of a support network, as well as an understanding of the sporting and educational demands and goals of athletes would be useful to guide support for a dual career during adolescence (Harwood, Knight, Sellars, 2018). Researchers believe that the difficulties facing student-athletes are intrinsically formed from balancing being both a student and an athlete. Student-athletes playing at institutions whom are members of elite athletic conferences are faced with the dual reality of being both a student and athlete, thus experiencing their developmental college years in ways dissimilar to their student peers (Bimper, 2014).

The qualitative analysis of this dissertation in practice should reveal institutional practices that may positively impact the career readiness of student-athletes. Opportunities such as internships, in-depth student-teacher relationships, time commitment, service learning projects and socialization within extra-curricular activities could be great predictors for understanding student-athletes transition from college to career success. Furthermore, the socialization of student-athletes as well as the curriculum and overall impact that the benefits of higher education has on student-

athletes will be uncovered in detail through the qualitative interviews.

Racial and Athletic Identities

Researchers have continued to explain the *racial and athletic* identities that continue to have an impact on the early career success for African-American males at public Division I institutions. The focus of recent scholarship has argued that the unrealized dreams and frustrated aspirations of African-American male athletes seeking to find an identity outside of the role of “student-athlete,” is vitally important .

Emerging research has begun to investigate the nuanced relationships of athletic identity perceptions with culturally salient factors, such as racial identity, germane to Black student athlete development (Bimper, 2014). Scholars reveal that the racial and athletic identities that African-American athletes encounter in order to become competent and successful individuals once their athletic eligibility is exhausted is a sophisticated complexity.

Several practitioners have found that racial and athletic identities present at Division I institutions have become essential predictive factors for determining the early career success for African-American collegiate football players. Racial identity is the qualitative meaning that an individual ascribes to being a member of his or her racial group (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998 as cited in Fuller, 2017). Athletic identity is the degree to which an individual identifies as an athlete (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001 as cited in Fuller, 2017). Some scholars have argued that this narrative has been perpetuated and upheld by administrators and scholastic

institutions. The aspect of racial identity may be considerably important to the relationship between college student-athlete identity and academic outcomes for the disproportionate number of Black athletes in NCAA revenue generating sports(Bimper, 2014).

The social implications that continue to define and exhibit itself within several major Division I institutions for African-American student-athletes has become the focus for several practitioners. African American student-athletes have expressed that they feel discriminated against by faculty and other students because of their race and the perceived privilege of their status as college athletes (especially in revenue generating sports) (Dixon, Kelly, 2014). Collegiate student-athletes, particularly, African American male student-athletes, often have lower career maturity, an impaired aptitude to devise educational and career plans, with self esteem and an identity based on athletics (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blann, 1985; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987 as cited in Beamon 2008).

Some researchers have noted that the responsibility for institutions of higher learning should be to uphold the fundamental principles that were expressed by coaches and administrators during the recruitment process, namely to develop student-athletes academically and psychologically. The present sociocultural climate of intercollegiate athletics, particularly in revenue generating sports (i.e., football, men's basketball) at a Division I institution, may encourage Black student athletes' racial identity development too compliment the sport cultural norms in ways that are

restrictive to one's personal and academic development (Bimper & Harrison, 2011 as cited in Bimper 2014). Social responsibility involves moral and legal accountability on the part of institutional stakeholders, including the administrators and faculty. When reliability, trustworthiness, and regard for others become parts of the everyday organizational behavior, then the institution may better assume and exhibit the important characteristics of social responsibility (Carter-Francique, Cheeks, Hart 2015).

Racial identity within predominately White institutions for African-American male football players has become a phenomenon that several scholars are interested in researching. In addition to being susceptible to “jock identity” and culture, African American student-athletes must also face stereotyping and racial prejudice. Edwards (1984) brought forth the stereotypical term of the “dumb black jock” to describe the student-athlete that is brought to the university only to play sports with no expectation that he will achieve educational success (Dixon, Kelly, 2014). While stereotypes are fundamental factors within the campus community, African American athletes also recognize how the overarching community views them outside of their athletic uniform, according to some scholars. Additionally, researchers have discovered that many of these student-athletes come from backgrounds in which they are first generation college students. Arnett (2000) explored the ongoing psychological development of recent graduates under the umbrella of “emerging adulthood,” examining the extent to which the post-college years constitute a distinct

developmental stage (Olson, 2014).

Researchers have observed that student-athletes often come from environments that have never been exposed to a college education. Some scholars have suggested this narrative is adopted by institutions of higher learning in order to propel athletic and racial identities while neglecting upward scholastic mobility. Scholastic researchers have noted that several student-athletes grapple with the prospects of trying to excel academically, while both the institution and their community environment pushes athletic superiority.

Educators often encourage Black students to play sports because it is often believed that their athletic skills are better than their academic skills (Entine, 2000; Codjoe, 2001 as cited in James, 2005). Edwards suggests, that of those who do graduate many graduate in less marketable majors "riddled with 'keep 'em eligible' less competitive' jock courses' of dubious educational value and occupational relevance" (Edwards, 1988, as cited in Beamon, 2008). Accordingly, African-American football players may be plagued by an over-identification in athletics. With respect to such athletes over-identifying with the athletic role, they may be more prone to injury, over-training, anxiety, poor career development, and drug use than those whom are less identified with an athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993; Cohen & Ogles, 1993; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996 as cited in Harris, Post, Tyrance, 2013).

Identifying the diverging perspectives concerning racial and athletic identities

will be important and essential for researchers to better understand the nuances that impact upward mobility for African-American male student-athletes. Additionally, it will become an interesting dialogue to objectively define how the contrasting differences between different players are situated between the two perspectives of racial and athletic identities. Conducting this qualitative study and dissecting the impact that both implicit and explicit identities have on scholastic attainment and ultimately early career success will be valuable as it pertains to higher education and providing an equitable education for all individuals represented on college campuses.

THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE AND ISSUES OF EQUITY, ETHICS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Perspectives pertaining to equity, ethics and social justice for African-American male football student-athletes relating to their career readiness and subsequent professional success should be primarily established and implemented by the athletic departments.

With respect to athletic departments, athletic administrators must ensure that student-athletes receive an equitable opportunity to develop not only athletically but also scholastically, psychologically and socially. Additionally, both athletic departments and institutional administrators must synchronize actions congruently so that student-athletes are afforded the opportunity to competently grow into professional citizens once their eligibility as a student-athlete is exhausted. The communication between academic and

athletic support staffs concerning the relevancy and effectiveness of educational attainment for student-athletes is vital. Practical and applicable feedback regarding the sufficiency of scholastic programs is essential in order to achieve educational equity.

The obligations for athletic departments to contribute and create a comprehensive learning experience for student-athletes is an ethical issue. The academic and athletic departments should have an ethical obligation to progressively and succinctly enhance student-athlete development and readiness with regard to their non-athletic careers. Athletic departments within the Southeastern Conference gain both prestige, notoriety and substantial revenue from the success of their team sports. To advance an athlete to merely seek to develop the on-field abilities of a student-athlete, while dismissing the cultivation of opportunities for learning, engagement and career success results in an ethical dilemma contradicting an institutions mission. Creating and sustaining an institutional environment, allowing for critical thinking and life-long learning for football student-athletes is imperative for best ethical practices.

One of the primary issues surrounding social justice that could impact and limit upward mobility for African-American student-athletes is the lack of equal access to institutional resources which indirectly limits social relationships. With an increased effort on social networking and a direct focus on one's social capital influences, an understanding of building professional connections is critical. National greek-lettered organizations and extra-curricular exposure to differing cultures could increase

network capacity immensely while also improving upon social and professional skills. Additionally, summer internships and study abroad programs could be extremely beneficial for student-athletes, in order to obtain a diverse skill set. Failure of predominantly white institutions to be sensitive to the social capital deficiencies encouraged by some African-American student-athletes coming from underprivileged communities may result in significant limitations for the minority student. The explicit and implicit biases on a college campus could be monumental when projecting career success, which are definitely social justice problems. Idealistically, athletic departments should establish an equitable environment that allows for student-athletes to excel professionally, socially and intellectually.

NEXT STEPS

My research project will seek to express the intersectionality of African-American male football student-athletes and The University of Mississippi and how these two variables impact early career success. I will purposefully select 8 interview subjects, who were former football players from the University of Mississippi. Using this methodology, former African-American football student-athletes will participate in semi-structured interviews in order to evaluate and investigate my problem of practice. These representatives will be football student-athletes, who played for the institution from 2009-2015, who are now participating in non-athletic careers. The qualitative interviews will be conducted individually and in-person. This study will attempt to

answer the following research questions:

1. How do former football student-athletes perceive the connection between their college football experience and their early non-athletic career success (or lack thereof)?
2. What supports may enhance the early career success of African-American football student-athletes?

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CHAPTER II: MANUSCRIPT II

The concept of post-career readiness as it pertains to intercollegiate athletics within Southeastern Conference institutions has become a frequently discussed topic amongst higher education professionals. As higher education continues to evolve concerning the post-career success of student-athletes, interpreting and understanding the learning experiences for student-athletes both scholastically and professionally is both critical and necessary. Transitioning from student-athlete into a competent and well-rounded professional has invariably challenged the integrity of the longstanding organizational structures that have existed within intercollegiate athletics. While leadership and teamwork are inherently learned through athletic enrichment, structuring the academic experience to augment and compliment early career success qualifications outside of the ramifications of athletic attainment is extremely valuable and important. The early career success model for football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi deserves a more in-depth analysis. Many of the former student-athletes expressed their college experience from both the academic and athletic perspective. However, beneficial exploration regarding the non-playing career trajectory for African-American football student-athletes is important for higher education administrators. Limited research has been conducted as it pertains to the effectiveness of post-career non-athletic career success for African-American football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi.

Practitioners are interested in dissecting the scholastic and career advancement strategies for successful post-playing, early career transitioning for African-American student-athletes. The desire for athletic prestige has constituted an issue preparing competent and professional student-athletes to transition into non-athletic professional careers. Holistic education must be measured within the realm of professional and developmental improvement outside of the classroom. While formal education serves as the building blocks of human capital, developing literacy, expertise, critical thinking skills, and work habits; learning what happens outside the classroom adds to the store of productive skills and cognitive knowledge that make up human capital (Heslin, 2005). In this way, participation in collegiate athletics can be viewed as an investment, with the development of teamwork and relationship management skills (i.e. mentoring and emotional intelligence) as the return on that investment (Desmond, Heintzelman, Sauer, 2012).

Evidence based research has testified that the traditional models that are used to instruct and inform policy concerning post-career early career readiness for student-athletes has become commonplace and non-effective. Ineffective practices should be examined as institutional frameworks should strive to develop competent student-athletes into proficient and professional citizens in the workplace. Organizational wrongdoing and the mismanagement of the psychological and intellectual trajectory of student-athlete livelihoods is not only an organizational flaw but an ethical and social mishap. Practitioners have become intentional and deliberate

concerning post-career, early career success strategies and systems that impact the upward trajectory for African-American football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi.

SUMMARY OF PROBLEM OF PRACTICE AND DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Higher education practitioners have continued to research and invest into best-practice strategies concerning post-career, early career success for African-American football student-athletes. As the evolution of intercollegiate athletics continues to develop, post-career, early career success for student-athletes is a topic that deserves a considerable amount of attention. American higher education is in transition among many dimensions: tuition levels, faculty composition, expenditure allocation, pedagogy, technology and more (Ehrenberg, 2012). The transition from student-athlete to workplace competency has become a chief objective and focus for higher education practitioners. Universities are contemplating how to enhance support for classroom-workplace transitions that can increase social and economic value by providing better career guidance, communications support and strategy planning for their students (Oleksiyenko, 2018). As degree attainment has increased significantly, competition within global labor markets has threatened the relevancy and purpose of a college degree. With the continuous shifts of labor market boundaries, stimulated by rapid technological advancement and skill erosion, aspirations for stability or upward mobility are constantly challenged (Oleksiyenko,

2018).

Democratic equality, social efficiency and social mobility are valuable characteristics that David Labree considers the nucleus and primary factors when measuring the effectiveness of institutions for higher learning. Equality from a democratic perspective insinuates that a democratic society cannot persist unless it prepares all of its young with equal care to take on the full responsibilities of citizenship in a competent manner (Labree, 1997). The social efficiency approach to schooling argues that our economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles with competence (Labree, 1997). The social mobility approach to schooling argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social position (Labree, 1997). Situated within Labree's framework, democratic equality, social mobility and social efficiency have become defining variables for comprehending higher education from perspectives pertaining to private and public policies as well as exposing and defining what an equitable education encompasses. The role of higher education and the careers affiliated with scholars who graduate from institutions of higher learning have become closely associated with the values demonstrated by Labree.

As higher education professionals continue to define the specific dimensions that make up institutional efficacy, different perceptions of success have become a relevant topic for discussion with respect to student-athletes. Success for the

student-athlete is often focused on non-academic outcomes (Burns, Dunn, Fletcher, Jasinski, 2012). Career development and cognitive engagement are two important factors that educators feel should be addressed at the collegiate level in order to improve student-athlete career developmental skills. Cognitive engagement is the psychological process of expending mental effort and utilizing strategies or skills to process information, complete an academic task, or understand a concept (Bagley, Harris, Hines, Kelly, Williams, 2014). Intercollegiate athletics, as it relates to revenue generating sports (Division I football, mens basketball and baseball) has created a form of inequitable practices, specifically for African-American male athletes. While organizational structures are established in order to enhance scholastic and professional attainment among student-athletes, there remains concerns as it relates to the effectiveness of organizational policy and structure in practice. The athletic administrative officials, whom are responsible for molding and providing the necessary tools for student-athletes, should be mindful of cognitive engagement and increasing the set of real-world skills necessary for former student-athletes to enter the non-playing professional world. Statistics show that Black males are drawn to major revenue generating sports and can be heavily influenced by coaches and administrators. Given that Black males have historically considered sports as a way out of their social condition, coaches are likely to have their undivided attention and can, therefore, facilitate development across a number of domains (e.g., personal, academic) (Bagley, Harris, Hines, Kelly, Williams, 2014).

In the literature on intercollegiate athletics, there has been an extensive amount of research on student-athlete success within the ramifications of academic competency. However, there has been an overwhelming amount of research that has not been covered as it relates to African-American football student athletes achieving early career success once they leave their respective Division I institutions. The specific dimensions of this dissertation's problem of practice will identify former African-American male football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi and their transition from college athletics to non-athletic careers. This problem of practice will be analyzed within the constructs of early career success, social capital theory and racial and athletic identities.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do former African-American football student-athletes perceive the connection between their college football experience and their early non-athletic career success (or lack thereof)?
2. What supports may enhance the early non-playing career success of African-American football student-athletes?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your family and where you grew up. Who in your family had been to college before you? What motivated you to attend college?
2. At first, how did you choose your major? What did you think you wanted to do after college?
3. Talk about your transition to the college academic environment. How difficult was it for you? How helpful was your family to you during that transition?
4. What role did the football coaching staff, athletic academic advisors, and other student-athletes play in your transition to college and to your future academic success?
5. How did you experience life on campus as an African American male?
6. In what field of study did you earn your degree? How would you describe your academic experience in relation to your major?
7. How does what you studied in college relate to your current job or occupation?
8. Looking back, how prepared did you feel for work-life after college when you first graduated? How have your feelings changed over time, if at all?
9. How difficult for you was it to find a job? How many applications did you complete? How many interviews did you go on before landing your job?
10. How satisfied are you with your current position? How would you describe your prospects for securing a better position?
11. Looking back, how might you have been better prepared for the “real world of work” after college?

12. If you had the opportunity to talk to African American college football student-athletes today, what advice would you give them about preparing for work after college football?

Definition of Terms

Academic advisors: Professionals within collegiate institutions that specifically focus on scholastic enhancement and academic development. This manuscript will focus on the holistic approach that academic advisors use in order to help aide student-athletes achieve ultimate academic success.

Academic Progress Rating (APR): Accountability measure for student-athletes' academic performance. This measure places the onus on colleges and universities to police themselves and to understand the extent to which, and conditions under which, environmental factors such as sport demands and campus involvement patterns affect the overall college experience of student-athletes (Comeaux, Harrison, 2011)

Athlete Identity: Used to classify athletes who identify closely with their athletic participation within a specific sport as opposed to other defining variables.

Career Readiness: An academic terminology used in order to objectively identify the

cumulative process involved in order to measure the scholastic and professional advancement of college students and their successful transition from collegiate student to a competent and employable professional.

Developmental Skills: Techniques designed to assist with and establish both formally and informally, the educational and professional necessities in order to improve and impact successful transitioning into a non-athletic job capacity. For purposes of this manuscript, this term will be discussed within the context of former African-American male football student-athletes from The University of Mississippi.

Early Career Success: Observed from both an objective and subjective perspective, this terminology seeks to rationalize and understand the dynamics that impact and influence student- athlete success. For the purposes of this manuscript, early career success will be observed through the lens of former African-American Division I student-athletes who graduated from The University of Mississippi from the years 2009-2014.

Institutional commitment: Refers to the level of importance credited to completing one's undergraduate degree at a given institution. Student-athlete who, at the time of matriculation, demonstrate a high institutional commitment will be seen as likely to achieve academic success. (Tinto, 2012)

Institutional values: The fundamental qualities and characteristics that detail and compose the genetic make-up of the social and ethical standards that an institution of higher learning strives to uphold and maintain with all fairness and dignity.

Major in Eligibility: A social colloquialism used for organizational structures within intercollegiate athletics in order to explain the phenomenon of student-athletes excelling athletically and underachieving academically.

Networking: To create and establish sustainable and functional relationships that will assist and encourage human development socially, intellectually, scholastically, professionally, emotionally and psychologically.

Racial Identity: A social classification also known as “collective identity,” that closely identifies an individual with their common heritage as it relates to a particular racial group.

Social Capital Theory: The ability to acquire vital and necessary connections in both the academic and professional setting in order to improve one’s upward mobility within society.

Southeastern Conference (SEC): An American college athletic conference composed of 14 flagship universities, whose member institutions are located primarily in the

Southeastern part of the United States (Portes, 2010)

Social Integration: Social integration occurs primarily through student–athletes’ engagement in campus extracurricular activities (other than their sports), interactions with faculty, and interactions with peers other than their teammates (Comeaux, Harrison, 2011)

Sport Commitment: Athletes who develop a commitment to sport participation as they establish personal reputations and identities as athletes in their sports (Comeaux, Harrison, 2011)

Student-Athlete: Terminology used to describe the dual-role responsibility of the academic and athletic obligations by students who are sponsored by their respective institution of higher learning.

DATA OVERVIEW

This research project was approved by The University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the professional and developmental skills gained by former African-American football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi and

their transition from student-athlete to post-career non-athletic career employment. A total of eight African-American student-athletes whom graduated from The University of Mississippi between the years of 2009-2014 were selected to participate in these interviews. Former African-American student-athletes interviewed were selected based upon their athletic participation in football at The University of Mississippi. Interviews were conducted at the Indoor Practice Facility on the campus of the University of Mississippi and ranged from 30-45 minutes in duration. Interviews took place during the fall of 2018 and winter of 2019. Each interviewee was informed of the purpose of the interview and encouraged to speak freely when responding to questions. The researcher audio recorded each interview, took field notes during the interview sessions, and made observations to highlight responses to specific questions. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and relevant themes were identified. Responses were categorized by terms and themes used by the former student-athletes. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of each former student-athlete who participated in the interviews. The pseudonym for the former student-athlete, the year of graduation, date of interview and degree specifications for each former student-athlete is listed in Table 1.

Table 1:

Pseudonym	Year of Graduation	Date of Interview	Degree Specification	Current Employment
Greg Thomas	2012	January 12, 2019	General Studies	USPS Driver

Quentin Rodgers	2014	January 17, 2019	Criminal Justice	Forklift Operator
Ryan Tucker	2010	January 21, 2019	Accountancy	Real-Estate Agent
Kyle Pointer	2012	January 26, 2019	General Studies	Unemployed
Felton Smith	2011	January 26, 2019	General Studies	Transportation Security Administration (TSA agent)
Chase Black	2013	January 28, 2019	Criminal Justice	Forklift Operator
Maurice Bush	2009	February 1, 2019	General Studies	UPS Driver
Anthony Sims	2013	February 2, 2019	Criminal Justice	General Factory Worker

LIMITATIONS

There are specific limitations as it appears in this study's data. Interviews were only conducted for selected African-American football student-athletes who graduated from The University of Mississippi from the years of 2009-2014. Findings were not intended to be generalized to student-athletes that graduated from the institution between the years aforementioned in my study. Additionally, findings may not fully reflect the complete learning of the social and psychological advancement that student-athletes experience while at their specific institution.

Interviews were collected at The University of Mississippi during specific

academic terms. The findings may not accurately depict similar academic and early career success discoveries for student-athletes at different academic periods or other institutions. Also, different findings may have resulted from utilizing a different pool of African-American student-athletes from The University of Mississippi as well as increasing the amount of total former student-athletes interviewed.

For former student-athletes whom were interviewed, they may have been valuable in other recreational activities or served in other leadership capacities on campus during their tenure at The University of Mississippi. While interview questions were specific to the student-athlete experience and early career success, it cannot be assumed that African-American football student-athletes acquired scholastic and professional developmental skills learned only through their experiences at The University of Mississippi.

The interviewer was a former student-athlete from The University of Mississippi, which could have contributed to a social desirability bias. The potential existed for student-athletes to communicate information they may have thought the interviewer wanted to hear rather than their true learning experience. The interview questions were developed with biases toward the value of early non-playing career success for African-American football student-athletes. Every attempt was made to ensure the reliability of interview data. However, the potential for bias existed. Several of these former student-athletes mentioned that they had no reference of what non-athletic professional skills were developed or acquired through their student-athlete

experience.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The former student-athletes interviewed in this study were able to identify developmental skills learned or the lack thereof through their tenure at The University of Mississippi. Additionally, post-career non-athletic career employment was specified and discussed in deeper detail. Most of the former student-athletes understood the term “early career success” to mean developmental skills, or characteristics and disciplines that could be utilized in various non-athletic professional environments. Nearly all the former student-athletes equated developmental skills with post-career employment, while almost all of these former student-athletes also related these skills to their relevance in daily life. The professional skills these former student-athletes articulated can be recognized within the context of their eligibility as a student-athlete and their experiences learned and gained as a professional working citizen of society. The University of Mississippi’s Student Athlete Development/Life Skills Program was used in order to compare the skills gained during the student-athlete’s collegiate career with the qualities mentioned and attained during their job interview process. The primary variables used for the Student-Athlete Development Life-Skills Program for The University of Mississippi are career development, community engagement, diversity and inclusion and personal advancement.

The coding used in this qualitative analysis expresses the interviewees most

frequently used explanations relating to skills that have been acquired while in the professional workforce. These codes expressed the responses of the interviewees in order to understand the transition from football student-athlete into post-career, non-athletic playing careers for African-American football players at The University of Mississippi. The classification of the codes discussed in these semi-structured interviews were acknowledged as important factors for the student-athlete learning experience and how African-American football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi could successfully transition into competent non-athletic playing environments.

Listed in Table 2, are the interviewees responses that were most regularly specified in order to attain early career non-athletic playing career success.

Table 2:

Codes: Developmental Skills Gained	Responses: Number of Individual Responses who Mentioned this Particular Developmental Skill	Number of Times Developmental Skills Mentioned During Interviews
Networking	8	65
Mentoring	8	48
Internship Experience	8	43
Time Management	7	35
Leadership	6	27

Transferable Skills	5	18
Communication	5	13
Discipline	4	9

Student-Athlete Experience and Early Career Success

The interviewees used language that included the components that identify with the developmental skills they learned through their proficiency acquired during both time as a student-athlete and their post-career transition. Every former student-athlete reported networking, mentoring and time management as professional skills they learned through their experience as working adults in a non-athletic professional setting. The specific developmental skills that were discussed during these semi-structured interviews in chronological order from most mentioned to least mentioned are: networking, mentoring, internship experience, time management, leadership, transferable skills, communication and discipline.

Networking

The interviewees mentioned the desire for effective and efficient networking skills that are important when understanding the power of successful developmental skills within early career success. Maurice Bush, a graduate from 2009, candidly spoke about the power of constructive networking and the advice he would give current and former student-athletes saying,

I would network with as many people as possible. Because the old phrase is, “It's not what you know, it's who you know.” And a lot of the time that is very true. You can have the knowledge, but if you don't have the connections, sometimes it doesn't resonate and you do not acquire success like you want. So network with as many people as possible. Keep an open mind on networking with other people from different cultures and races.

Anthony Sims would also speak on the importance of networking and what it has meant for his transitioning from a student-athlete to competent worker.

You really have to keep your options open and know how to talk to certain people in certain areas. So and so does this, or so and so does that. Keep information, keep long term friends. And always ask questions, always ask if there's anything open. Even if you already have a job and a plan, you never know. It could be something on the side, it could be the career you enter into. Or it could just be information for somebody else along the way. It's always important to make those connections with people, so you just further yourself friend-wise and career-wise and just socially.

Networking was also discussed from a perspective of campus involvement and having the ability to associate across racial boundaries. Ryan Tucker spoke concerning his lack of involvement on campus and how he believes becoming involved socially, has an overall impact on networking capabilities.

I think that I should have been more social, you know what I'm saying? I knew things, but I wouldn't take part in discussions, or campus discussions. You know the institution was predominantly white. They always asked me to become involved but I didn't get into that. For one reason, I'm like, "Hey, I'm an athlete. White folks gonna love me regardless," you know what I'm saying? But as I got older, and I'm mixed with all kinds of things, I wished I would have communicated across racial boundaries about relevant topics. I would have become better well-rounded.

As networking became a primary focus throughout interviewing one could see with Ryan's words, how having a strong athletic identity could prohibit an individual from excelling and taking advantage of the social benefits available at an institution of higher learning. In addition to having a strong athletic and racial identity, Chase Black gave an interesting perspective as it relates to career direction for student-athletes and their social interactions.

I'd say being in college I feel that the institution should at least allow extra time for yourself to network on the campus, why? In case you're trying to internship somewhere on the campus, but playing football you don't have time like that. So I feel like they should try to bring someone in or something to help you network on campus, coaches wise too. They should help you network also.

Understanding the nuances of networking and knowing how to cultivate and maintain longstanding relationships was extremely valuable to several of these

former student-athletes. Additionally, it was discovered through interviews that ninety percent of the interviewees were first-generation college students. Kyle Pointer would speak of his ascension and his ability to influence his families trajectory through academic attainment,

My family on my mom's side, it's just me and my brother. My dad, that's another story. I have fourteen brothers and four sisters on my dad's side of things, and my brother that's by my mom is included in that number. Out of my entire family, not just my brothers, sisters, dad, mom, but from grandmother, uncles, cousins, I am the first to graduate from a four-year university, to attend a four-year university and obtain a degree. Getting out was a big thing, and now my family see that and I'm happy. Like I said, I started that trend for them. I am happy to say that I am that trailblazer.

Challenges with networking and the academic dialect used within their families history, as a lack of scholastic opportunities, seemed to be a learning barrier and a difficult one to overcome as it relates to excelling socially on a predominately white campus. Anthony Sims would add, "As far as college, school wasn't really known in my family." Quentin Rodgers would also speak concerning the challenges of being a first generation college student coupled with being the "family light."

My family went through a lot, man. For a long time, it was just pain and stress. You could see it in their eyes 24/7. I know with me playing college ball and being a first generation college student, at one point, it was like I

was the only light. I was the only light around here. Like I said, man, it's real. It's deep. That's why I could never fake it when I went out. I could never fake it in college, man. That's why coaches stayed on me. "Hey, Quentin, You got to smile more, man. You look like you got an attitude, like you just mad at the world." "Nah, I'm cool." "I'm burning up inside. Like I said, I'm burning up, man, but I'm not stressed, you know what I'm saying? It just, I want more. I'm dying to be successful. I am the first to do this shit and its tough!

Mentorship

Student-athletes throughout these interviews would often express a deep desire to not only defeat the odds but to redefine the odds in the face of insurmountable frustration. Kyle, who spoke extensively about mentorship would state, "I am not sure that we profited or benefited from mentorship professionally. There is a big difference between football mentorship and professional mentorship." Trailblazing a path that has never been blazed seemed to be a consistent hurdle for several of these African-American male student-athletes. Greg Thomas, who was an accounting major, would give an interesting perspective about the influences at the collegiate level that were instrumental and constructive as it relates to mentorship beyond the football field.

To be completely honest, in a way, everyone involved in my success were mentors to a certain degree. They wanna see you succeed more than you do.

To be completely honest, man, my accounting professors, they saw a thing where, hey, this is an athlete who has come in, a black kid, that's gonna major in accounting. We wanna keep him in this school. Then I had classmates. To see my other classmates doing well, and they talked about, well, my dad was an accountant and finished here, I want that same feeling for my kids. I'm always forward-thinking, and that was just the little things that got me through. The mentors in my life at the collegiate level was the difference for me and stood as the difference between me being an average employee and a great employee.

One of the interesting dynamics that seemed to speak with such a resounding voice was the emphasis and credit that several of these student-athletes gave to their upbringing and immediate family for being such a influence and inspiration to achieve a college education. Ryan would add, "Peer-mentorship from some of the older guys on the team really provided me with some well needed guidance. My professors were also valuable mentors. They gave me tools for helping to transition into the workplace." Mentorship seemed to take on more roles than just formal education. Several of these student-athletes alluded to being raised in adverse social and economical environments. Felton would say,

My mentors were extremely helpful. I had an uncle who lacked a college education but helped me to maneuver through college on how to communicate with others. I grew up in a rough neighborhood so survival has always been

huge for me. Academic mentors were important but surviving life was necessary for me. My uncle through his mentorship role gave me that.

Maurice Bush would add,

I could call home and ask mom and dad for advice as far as survival. As far as the college life and what to expect in this class and how to overcome this or that when it comes to the actual school aspect of college, I couldn't call, I couldn't depend on my parents for it, because they've never experienced it. But as far as life and how to survive, I could call home and say, hey, I have this going on, and they'll tell me the same thing they told me all growing up, don't give up and keep pushing. For me, that is the crux of mentorship. It is a roadmap in a dark place. Survival in the real world and learning how to navigate college was mentorship 101 from an unorthodox approach. What they did not have academically, they gave me spiritually and psychologically and that's how I now have a college degree.

Time Management

In addition to the perspectives gained pertaining to the influence of powerful mentorship, time management was a key factor expressed by several of these former African-American student-athletes. Felton would give a detailed description of what a day in the life of a student-athlete entailed and how managing his schedule as a student-athlete translated into early career non-athletic playing career success.

So when do you have time to study? So first of all in the morning time you probably gonna have a workout first, then you go to class, and don't forget about your tutor session, learning specialist, all those, then you got football practice which ain't over until about nightfall, so then you gotta go home, make sure you feed yourself, and try to study. Which that was kind of hard on a college student plus being up early in the morning, it never stops. When do you ever get a break? While I disliked it at the time, it prepared me for the “real-world.”

Ryan would also comment concerning the time constraints that come with balancing being a student-athlete. “Being a student athlete, you basically are working two jobs already, being a student and an athlete. I am sorry, what I should have said was the opposite, being an athlete then a student.” Time management was an essential element that seemed to either aide and assist or drain and deplete the qualities needed for these student-athletes to transition successfully into their career paths. Preparing to enter into a world that was foreign on several levels, understanding the principle of time and managing one’s schedule was talked about at great lengths. Converting college experiences into real world practical knowledge seemed to be a huge barrier for several of these student-athletes. Quentin would also express his propensity to excel while expressing his discontent with the systemic issues that prohibited him from exploring workplace opportunities as a student-athlete.

How prepared was I? I'm a kid that never had a job in my entire life. I come

to college, where I'm not allowed to work, because of the NCAA and the rules that they have. So I leave college, 22 years of age, never in my life having a job. Never in my life sat down for more than three hours at a time and did any real work. I think it should change.

The NCAA should allow kids to work a little bit, where I feel, I see my classmates, they have this job, or they go into internships. Well, I can't intern, because I get paid for a internship, and that deems me ineligible. There's nothing I can do to be paid for nothing in college when I have eligibility to play ball.

Internship Experience: Athletic and Racial Identity

While diversity and inclusive practices are clearly stated as both ethical and moral standards in which The Student-Development Program stresses, the lack of professional internships expressed from the interviewees gives an interesting perspective of how inequitable standards, such as lack of professional development, becomes a fundamental roadblock for student-athletes who have never had the option of exploring the job market with their professional ability. Chase spoke exclusively about the desire to improve both intellectually and scholastically, while simultaneously, discussing his lack of internship experience.

If I had the time, I would probably say that I wish I could have had a paid internship, or some type of internship for me to be even more prepared. So once I would go into the job I was looking for or using my major as best as possible, I would have that work experience, which would carry over into

the position that I was looking for at the time. So as far as anything, I would say having an internship would have been huge and helped me to balance my time management skills.

In addition to internship experience, mentorship and time management, several of these student-athletes spoke about what is termed, athletic identity. For more than half of the interviewees, they struggled adjusting to life after football due to their “athletic identity” that highlighted their athletic superiority and whispered their scholastic and academic performance. Felton would speak of his identification with athletics as it relates to post-career non-athletic career success.

It’s like you are here at this institution and nobody sees you outside of your athletic identity. You have no experience here outside of athletic performance so you don't really know what you should do once you graduate from college. You are just trying to feel your way through because your power was your athletic identity in college and never your mental capacity to do professional work. It's more like walking blind, you just reaching your hands out, touching, like should I do this? Do that feel right? Honestly, I was never told to define myself outside of the football field.

Through the tenure and eligibility of these former African-American student-athletes, several of these former student-athletes spoke to the frustrations of not understanding how to transition into the real world properly without the knowledge of defining themselves outside of their athletic and racial identity. This seemed to be an

issue due to the lack of appropriate and efficient internship experiences. Quentin spoke of this perspective when describing his employee involvement after his eligibility was exhausted.

I still felt like I could have been more prepared coming out of college. It was like I was thrown into a world without an understanding that my athletic and racial identity would be hurdles I would have to climb over. The hand claps on the field became silent off of the field. My identity was wrapped up in my relationship to my football accolades. Once football exited my life, the coaches and the relationships for professional attainment exited my life as well. It felt like when I came out of college, when I graduated, I knew that I had to adjust, but I didn't know how much I needed to adjust. I didn't know how to balance a checkbook. I didn't know about doing anything as far as taxes. I didn't know about moving into a bigger city the commute would be so much of a difference. I did not know life would be this way because I believed that my athletic identity qualified me for success.

Both athletic and racial identities seemed to be a daunting balancing act for several of these former student-athletes. Maurice spoke concerning his identity as he walked on campus;

People are always looking at you as a student-athlete, like they see a big black dude on campus oh he is automatically an athlete. You've got that aspect too. It becomes disruptive to your mental process because you are accustomed to the

athlete and you never see yourself being a top-level executive. You only see “big-black football player.”

Kyle Pointer would add,

My identity at this predominantly white institution caused me to see life solely from an athletic lens. I remember introducing myself on campus and never starting with my name but always addressing myself by the number on my jersey. It became a disease to a certain degree. Here I was a first-generation college student, coming from a neighborhood that never had much and I was finally being recognized. While all recognition may not be good recognition, for the time being, it felt good to be known. I never thought that my football ability was creating an identity that was going to be my greatest hindrance once my eligibility was depleted.

The lack of internship experience coupled with the pressure of strong racial and athletic identities seemed to be an issue that stunted the upward mobility of several of these former student- athletes. Identifying oneself as an athlete without understanding the ramifications of how their post-career early career success could be impacted, seemed to be detrimental to the holistic development of these former African-American football players from The University of Mississippi.

Leadership

While the racial and athletic identities were expressed in deep detail by several

of these former student-athletes, they also spoke about the lack of leadership styles gained due to their limitations as a student-athlete. Several practitioners allude to the term, 'academic grouping' which speaks to the process of grouping student-athletes based on athletic preference as opposed to academic and intellectual fortitude. Among the interviewees, ninety percent of the former African-American student-athletes majored in either general studies or criminal justice. Ryan, a general studies major spoke about the lack of leadership development he received from his lack of experience outside of athletic attainment.

Well, the football part of it was that a lot of the engineering classes that were offered at night were conflicting with my football schedule. My coach clearly expressed to me, that schedule ain't gonna work with, you know, playing football. So they were trying to get me into a major to where I wouldn't have to work so hard studying and stuff and focus more on football. So, majors such as criminal justice, park and recreation management and general studies you know, the general majors, was all that I was focused on. My schedule never taught me leadership outside of football. I was convinced and persuaded that these majors were more suitable to my athletic schedule.

Felton would add an in-depth conversation that he had with his mother concerning her dissatisfaction with his degree choice.

My dream, initially, in high school, was to go into some type of mechanical

engineering, electric engineering and mess with big ole robots and mess with computers that's what I was thinking about and that's what I wanted to do even in high school. But once I got to college everything changed, football became the focus... My mom was really upset that I didn't do engineering and she was upset that I was doing criminal justice cause she didn't think you could have a good career in the criminal justice field. They will tell you that you can become an FBI agent, but honestly, since I have been done with football, I am working at an airport, checking in bags, something that a person without a degree could easily do. I never learned how to lead in the workplace. I was cheated for sure and my mom knew it but respected my decision and supported me anyway.

When asked how a degree in general studies was applicable to his early career success, Maurice Bush would comment, “Nothing man, I work for UPS. You do not need a degree in order to drive a truck. My manager, who I report to daily does not even have a degree. In many ways, I have a dummy degree because I do not use it.” Quinten would add similar verbiage,

Well, the decision for choosing my major was interesting. At first, I said exercise science and I started doing those classes. Then we had a guy at the academic center who told me, we need to change your major, something easier he say, to keep me eligible to play ball. Me being the inexperienced 19 year old that I was, thinking like yes, that would be the best thing to do

instead of doing what my first mind told me to do, I bought in and did what he wanted me to do. So I end up doing general studies, which I got a minor in psychology, legal studies and education. Now, what I'm doing with that I couldn't tell you because I'm not even in either one of those fields. I am currently a forklift operator at a local factory.

Transferable Skills

Choosing a major seemed to be in the best interest of the institution.

Unfortunately, the skills that one would assume are gained while being a student-athlete were dispelled by several of the interviewees personal experiences. Ryan would state, “As a student-athlete, I never learned enough in college in order to transfer my professional ability into the workplace setting.” Felton would add, “My skills that I have learned as a current worker were gained in the workplace. I am not sure that I benefitted from the skills acquired while a student-athlete. We could get no job so my chances for improving my professional skills were limited.” Chase Black would also speak on his lack of transferable skills while being a student-athlete.

I would love to express to you that I learned things as a student-athlete relating to my transition into a career but the truth is that I struggled and I am still struggling now, you know? I am upset because the coaches were getting paid millions of dollars and they constantly stressed the bullshit-ass concept of “Academic Progress Rating.” We understood later that staying eligible was the mission for the institution and the coaches. They did not care if you majored in

underwater-basket weaving. The goal was eligibility and they understood that.

But hey, that's the life we chose and me specifically, I am reaping the rewards of a watered down education.

When asked how he would improve his transition into workplace efficiency from being a student-athlete, Anthony Sims emphasized the importance of focusing on and building his brain.

I would build my brain. As an athlete, what you do? You build your body and hopefully your brain. In my opinion, you are your brain, you know what I'm saying? As a professional worker, if you can't sell the brain, you can't sell yourself, you know? How can I sell myself? I gotta have a brain to do that, you know what I'm saying? Not just 'cause I can go out there and run a three cone drill, or run a 40, or go and make this play. Nah, nah. How can I speak when it's time to speak? How do I talk and speak in an interview? How do I present this business plan? I would learn more and make myself more intelligent. Like I said, building my brain, man.

Communication

Communication was also an important factor mentioned by some of the interviewees as essential and necessary for post-career non-athletic careers success. Great communication within intercollegiate athletics requires a large degree of synchronicity between student-athletes and the constituents that make up the institution

in order to maximize on the potential for student-athletes and their early career success. Felton would add, “Learning how to effectively communicate with my academic advisors, coaches and professors prepared me for the real world. Becoming balanced in the way that I communicate has been an important attribute to have with my current role.” Greg and Anthony were former student-athletes who also identified communication as a key trait to have. Anthony would state, “Communication was huge for me. I have an employer who expects me to communicate effectively. I can honestly credit my tenure as a student-athlete with equipping me with the tools.” Greg would speak on his differing perspectives, as he admittedly credits his ‘on-the-job’ training that has assisted him with adequate communication tactics and habits. “The systems that I face daily require me to have a strong sense of communication. I have learned that through what many people call “on the job training.” Most of the former student-athletes described how their communication skills attained as a student-athlete translated into workplace environments. Chase would state, “Communication was necessary in college because you had to be able to balance being a student and an athlete. I learned this in college. Learning how to communicate is important in daily life.” Communicating seemed to be a trait that while not spoken about in deep detail was essential for successful post-career non-athletic career transitioning.

Discipline

Additionally, discipline was another term used to describe the transitioning into post-career non-athletic playing careers. Felton identified discipline as a professional

skill that translated from college athletics into his post-career non-athletic playing career.

Discipline is paramount because despite the profession one may choose, disciplining yourself to fit the criteria of the workplace and the obligation to your home life is important. Discipline is valuable and was taught playing college athletics.

Ryan also spoke extensively about discipline and what he learned from being a student-athlete.

I once had a college coach to tell me that discipline is the bridge that connects dreams to reality. I have never been able to get that quote out of my head and it has stuck with me for years. My discipline was developed from being a student-athlete. If you lack discipline in college as a student-athlete, you will lack discipline in life.

Maurice would also add, “Discipline is everything. The alarm clock, the early morning workouts and the tough class schedules all helped me to become a better worker.” Discipline seemed to be a characteristic that helped transform student-athletes into desirable and competitive employees. “I am on a job now and have two kids. I must have discipline and learn how to manage my schedule. My kids and my wife force me to prioritize my time and make sure that I am making ‘the main thing, the main thing,’ by disciplining myself.”

Additional Developmental Skills

Former student-athletes identified a few other developmental skills they thought would be beneficial for early career success such as commitment, teamwork, dependability, dedication, motivation and character. For both Ryan and Felton, they felt that a high degree of commitment to the task at hand and teamwork was valuable in any workplace setting. Ryan mentioned the value of dependability by saying, “to have someone depend on you whether it be family or your teammates drives you to go the extra mile for the task at hand. Being selfless to the point of knowing others must count on you is a huge commitment and falls under the umbrella of dependability. ” Felton would add, “Character has kept me in positions that my degree could not.” Anthony would also reference persistence as a key leadership trait as it related to early career success. Maurice discussed how the tenacity he gained through his rigorous student-athlete experience, while extremely difficult, has carried over to his early career transition from college student-athlete to working class citizen. While working as an account executive, Quinten noted that it would be important to master certain aspects of time and how they correlated to his everyday work-schedule balance of his position. “ Time management and organization is everything. Learning how to balance the student-athlete lifestyle definitely gave me the upper hand in my current role.”

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The review of the former African-American football student-athletes

responses exhibited and conveyed several interesting observations. As an initial examination, the skills applicable for transitioning into early career success that was most frequently identified, such as networking, mentoring and internship experience aligns with the necessary aptness and ability former student-athletes have presented in order to transfer into future professional settings. The attributes attained from these essential traits have proven to be indispensable as it pertains to the ascension required for early career success. There could be several reasons why these three distinct traits were the most frequently identified, ranging from professional development and workplace environments that center on the emphasis of effective communication to networking and successful mentorship roles.

With the limited mentioning of communication as a learned skill and its lack of acknowledgement in being identified as a skill necessary for early career success this could be detrimental and should be researched further. Since, this study observed that the majority of these student-athletes were first generation college students, they may have limited experience in understanding the value of efficient communication tactics within professional settings. A disconnect was observed between the developmental factors that student-athletes stated they cultivated through their time as a student-athlete and what they felt was necessary in positions of employment. Conflict resolution coupled with leadership capabilities were identified as skills learned through their dual role as student-athletes and could be pertinent in their professional capacities. Mentorship by appropriate individuals was identified by all of the interviewees as a

highly valuable component that should be utilized while a student-athlete.

The student-athletes were challenged to be as descriptive as possible in terms of the non- playing career skillset they developed during their tenure while intercollegiate athletes. While they discussed the behaviors dealing with interactions with peers and athletic and racial identity, they had difficulty using terms that were synonymous to the rhetoric closely identified with community engagement. Student-athletes had difficulty articulating several of the perspectives identified in the student-athlete developmental framework for The University of Mississippi. For example, one student-athlete stated that while he was adamant on becoming a successful change agent in his hometown community, he was never granted the opportunity to participate in community events due to his rigorous athletic schedule. Additionally, another former student-athlete shared that he had become much more aware of his athletic identity once he became fully immersed into his non-athletic, post-career workplace environment. Professional development through experience took place through both leadership competency and workplace experience and efficiency. Several of these student-athletes communicated how they were able to navigate workplace situations and learn from the experimental on-the-job training that transpired as they were fully immersed into the workplace environment. For most of these former student-athletes, personal experience seemed to be much more impactful as it relates to early career non-athletic career success.

Peer interaction and the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries were areas where these student-athletes seemed to develop more once eligibility was

exhausted. Due to athletic and racial identities developed within the collegiate setting, socializing without a preceding comment relating to their athletic prowess was mentioned by a majority of the former student-athletes as a communication mechanism that forced growth in the arena of social interaction. Interview preparation, the delegation of workplace assignments and interacting with both managers and colleagues were all described as situations where the former student-athletes evolved and enhanced personal and socialization skills. Student-athlete knowledge of early career success was impacted largely by workplace environments that necessitated the engagement of social interaction.

While the student-athlete developmental framework seems to be beneficial in providing student-athletes with terminology to help transition into workplace efficiency, there seemed to be some deficiencies regarding career development and personal advancement. The Student-Athlete Developmental Life Skills Program may want to include and implement a deeper and more in-depth student-athlete developmental guide, which helps to translate and transition into early career success. There were a select few of the former student-athletes whom mentioned how scholastic training related to their developmental experiences within their current workplace positions. The athletic department should consider adopting elements of guided reflection to assist student-athletes in their understanding of transitioning into post-career non-athletic career success.

There is a vast amount of potential research regarding the learning of

professional skills through a potential student-athlete internship experience with respect to workplace success. An important area of investigation could be how athletic administrators might partner with student-affairs professionals, such as career planning officials to explore possible avenues of assistance for student-athletes. How might the student-athlete framework for life skills relate to the qualities and characteristics detailed in varied academic units such as engineering, nursing, journalism, amongst a host of others that exist on campus. Athletic administrators could also retrieve extensive feedback on the value of the student-athlete developmental model through their exit interviews of former student-athletes, to measure the effectiveness of their program and the ability of student-athletes to communicate and relay their skills developed as it relates to post-career non-athletic career success.

For future investigation, practitioners and on-campus athletic administrators should consider early career success for African-American football players from both an ethical and social justice perspective in order to improve scholastic competency. As institutional issues continue to increase, higher education policymakers responsible for the organizational structure for intercollegiate athletics should analyze the impact of career preparation and post-graduation employment outcomes for student-athletes. An in-depth evaluation and dialogue with former African-American football student-athletes concerning best-practices for early career success strategies could prove to be a monumental benefit as it pertains to equitable opportunities to progress student-athletes holistically.

SUMMARY

Research was conducted during this study of former African-American football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi and their transition from intercollegiate student-athlete to post-career non-athletic career transition. This practitioner-researcher identified former African-American student-athletes in order to assess the developmental skills learned as student-athletes and how those capabilities translated into post-career non-athletic career success. This Dissertation in Practice originated from the practitioner-researcher's interest in evaluating the effectiveness of The University of Mississippi's Student-Athlete Development and Life Skills Program on the early career success of student-athletes. Calculating and classifying the athletic department's student-athlete developmental framework, student-athlete's acquisition of professional skills were investigated in-depth through in-depth interviews. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How do former African-American football student-athletes perceive the connection between their college football experience and their early non-athletic career success (or lack thereof)?
2. What supports may enhance the early career success of African-American football student-athletes?

The cultivation of some of the professional skills and practices attained as student-athletes were communicated and identified through semi-structured interviews with eight former African-American student-athletes. Networking, mentorship and

internship experience were the most commonly identified skills indicated by the interviews. While these three characteristics align with certain attributes listed in the Student-Athlete Developmental Program, several of these former student-athletes admitted to acquiring these traits post-career as opposed to their experience as an intercollegiate student-athlete. The departmental values of community engagement while stated, was not significantly identified as a skill acquired through their student-athlete experience.

Learning through experience was critical and vital to the acquisition of professional and developmental skills. Former student-athletes suggested that their experiences corresponding with peers within their current profession coupled with understanding leadership roles were primarily gained through professional expertise. Adaptability and diversity of knowledge were also skills that seemed to correspond with post-career employment experience. The necessity to adapt in workplace environments were felt to be essential for post-career non-athletic career success. The ability to work with others was a key element in identifying the value of teamwork.

Essential findings from the study include the benefits of the identifiable traits listed in The University of Mississippi's Student-Athlete Development/Life Skills Program. The Student-Athlete Development Program was an essential tool that helps to measure the effectiveness of former student-athlete words to the written communication enlisted in the Life Skills Program. The values of duty, responsibility and goal-setting did not elicit a strong response, which entails why further observation

should be taken on the effectiveness and efficiency of the Life Skills Program for student-athletes at The University of Mississippi. The athletic department should consider inclusive and comprehensive methods and practices to incorporate into the development of professional opportunities for African-American student-athletes at The University of Mississippi.

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CHAPTER III: MANUSCRIPT III

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Facilitating and creating an environment that is conducive to the academic, social and economic development for African-American football players at The University of Mississippi is an important area of research as it relates to higher education. Institutions of higher learning should strive to improve and increase upon the inequitable practices and deficiencies that are projected upon African-American football student-athletes. The literature reviewed for this dissertation consists of early career success, social capital theory and racial and athletic identities. The problem of practice was developed as the researcher had the opportunity as a student-athlete to observe first-hand, the pros and cons of participating as an African-American football student-athlete at The University of Mississippi. Additionally, understanding the impact that being a student-athlete had on becoming a successful workplace employee was vital to comprehend. This research centered on the early career non-athletic career success of former African-American football players from The University of Mississippi.

As the National Football League (NFL) continues to gain a significant amount of attention for superior athletic ability, the number of athletes who gain an opportunity to play professionally is rare. Cognizant of this dynamic, this practitioner-researcher focused on former student-athletes whom are not given the necessary attention to develop career development skills that are necessary for successful non-athletic career transition. Post-career non-athletic career success was essentially formulated from the in-person stories that transpired as I interviewed former African-American football student-athletes

who were struggling to cope with the chaos and challenges of putting on the uniform of life and becoming competent and sufficient working-class citizens. My analysis led me to an interesting question, “Where are they now?” As this question developed, I began to observe the organizational structure within the athletic department at The University of Mississippi and how they were preparing student-athletes for the “real-world.” The primary concern was that while degrees are being achieved at a high level, I was not sure that academic accolades were translating to early non-playing career success of former African-American student-athletes. One of the misleading notions relating to several institutions of higher learning is that graduating equates to successful entry into the professional work world. With my research I wanted to go beyond the normalcy of academic proficiency. Institutions of higher learning must pride themselves on developing students and competent citizens for the future. Through qualitative analysis, it was discovered that African-American former student-athletes ascended into their post career non-athletic careers without the satisfactory skills required to become effective employees. I soon began to realize that early career success, the lack of social opportunities outside of the athletic environment and being regarded predominately through their athletic and racial identities all contributed to some of the struggles and conflicts experienced by many of these student-athletes. Researching the organizational structures and the extent to which institutions implemented and revised the effectiveness of their programming for student-athletes is vital as it relates to early career non-athletic

career success. Andrassy (2014), addresses the important role athletic departments play in serving the educational needs of student-athletes by stating:

Organizational capacity reflects, ‘the ability of an organization to harness its internal and external resources to achieve its goals.’ An organizational framework consists of three dimensions: human resources, financial resources, and structural capacity. The latter consists of three sub-dimensions: relationships and networks, infrastructure and process, and planning and development. The ability of an athletic department to achieve its goals is influenced by the attitudes, knowledge and skills of its organizational members (i.e., administrators, staff, and student-athletes) (Andrassy, et. al, 2014).

There are several common characteristics that are acquired and attained as a student-athlete that aides with transitioning into a competent and proficient workplace employee. First, being a student-athlete forces both diversity and inclusion.

Participating on a team consisting of student-athletes from diverse backgrounds forces individuals to respect the opinions and thought processes of others. Communicating adequately while having opposing viewpoints on academic, athletic and societal differences complements, strengthens, translates and aids in developing competent and well-rounded employees whom are able to interact with others in a diverse workplace.

Secondly, being a student-athlete increases and improves accountability. Coaches, academic advisors and professors often set expectations and goals that, if not met, could result in consequences detrimental to the student-athlete’s academic and athletic

fulfillment. Eligibility requirements mandated by the National College Athletic Association, (NCAA) are created in order to make sure that student-athletes are not only accountable to themselves but also for the betterment of the institution. Accountability is taught as a fundamental necessity in order to achieve monumental accomplishments both academically and athletically. Learning accountability as a student-athlete sets the standard and prepares student-athletes for the structure and order occurring in workplace settings. Additionally, teamwork forces student-athletes to dispose of a “me-first” mentality in order to achieve a greater goal. Championships on the field and academic success off the field requires successful chemistry amongst athletic administrators, academic advisors, professors, coaches and teammates. Decision making skills is also an important quality that enhances the student-athlete’s early non-athletic career employee transition that is cultivated by participating in collegiate athletics. Knowing how to make decisions decisively and effectively are essential traits to possess in the workplace setting. While the environment of an athletic department differs from that of a college atmosphere for non-athletes, determination and dedication are powerful workplace tools that are imperative. Determination to achieve high standards in the classroom and on the field as well as remaining persistent in the face of adversity are qualities that can be gained from being a student-athlete. Finally, student-athletes are expected to effectively manage their time. Managing the schedule of relentless weightlifting programs, demanding academic requirements, high expectations from coaches to perform and managing personal obligations are all

distinct attributes that translates into early career non-athletic career success.

While analyzing the organizational structures persistent within The University of Mississippi's athletic department, researching other major Division I athletic universities working to improve student-athlete transitions into early career non-athletic careers was both informative and enlightening. For example, Clemson University has developed a model for the professional development of their student-athletes to connect the experience as student-athletes to transition into workplace environments. Comparatively, The University of Mississippi's Student-Athlete Development model was closely identified with Clemson University. Clemson University's student-developmental program within the athletic department, focuses on four core values; (1) equip intentionally, (2) serve intentionally, (3) bridge intentionally and (4) collaborate intentionally. Enhancing career readiness beyond the classroom, community engagement and global interaction are fundamental precepts that drives and infuses the goals and ambitions for student-athletes at Clemson University. The career development department for student-athletes uses a structured four-year model that tracks the progress and evolution of the student-athlete from freshman year until the exhaustion of their athletic eligibility. For freshman student-athletes, core value workshops, etiquette dinners and individual advising are used to initiate and fully immerse the student-athlete with an in-depth understanding of the strategies and methods necessary in order to grow and develop into a competent and well-rounded employee. The student-athletes in their sophomore year focus on the implementation

of interview preparation. Preparing to transition into a specific career field requires the comprehension of effective communication with future employers. Student-athletes are required to do mock interviews in order to articulate their skills and ability. As juniors, “Tiger Pro Night,” has been developed in order to allow for juniors to properly understand professional dress, simulating future job interviews and opportunities to solicit productive career advancement advice. Gaining guidance from their administrators and professionals within chosen career paths allows for face-to-face interaction which allows genuine and impactful dialogue. Clemson’s University’s Assistant Director of Student-Athlete Development Kyra Lobbins, responsible for preparing student-athletes for life after sports, stated:

We’re focused on preparing them for that transition from college to the real world. We hold their hands through a lot of things and kind of coddle them, but at some point they are going to have to move on, and having events like this is what’s going to prepare them for the next step (Professional Development Workshop, 2018).

Based on the academic majors selected by the student-athletes, corresponding industry professionals were personally selected for networking sessions. During the student-athlete’s senior year at Clemson University, “Athlete Identity Transition” and financial literacy workshops are conducted for student-athletes whom are transitioning from a predominant athletic identity to a professional identity based less on their athletic expertise and more on their professional skills and abilities relating to the

workplace.

The professional development curriculum in place at Clemson University has been divided up into seven classifications including: goals and expectations, core values and self-awareness, social media and personal branding, social and global responsibility and diversity and inclusion, community service, public speaking and final presentations. These professional development sessions are strategically implemented in order to encourage student-athletes to concentrate their efforts on developing holistically. Over the course of an entire semester, student-athletes are coached and advised on these seven specific functional areas as to how they are used to successfully translate into competent employees. Additionally, several Division I institution's athletic departments have been proactive in cultivating their student-athletes for effectively transitioning into the professional work world. Michigan State University uses a unique model for allowing student-athletes to become effective in their communities. One of their programs entitled, "Putting Athletes and Communities Together," creates avenues for student-athletes to become actively engaged in community service projects both in their immediate communities and abroad. Student-athletes are afforded the opportunity to travel abroad to gain knowledge as to how to become a more well-rounded member of society. Texas Tech University also has become extremely interactive with the developmental progress of their student-athletes. Career planning and placement are valuable components that athletic administrators at Texas Tech University have focused on improving for several of their student-athletes.

Listed as a vital component in their academic services department for student-athletes, preparing for career success beyond their athletic ability is essential. The University of Minnesota uses the core principles of professional development, personal development and service as their chief aims. Career progression and developmental initiatives are defined and used for the betterment of student-athletes ‘beyond the game.’

Incorporating learning and career outcomes, gaining valuable knowledge and wisdom from former student-athletes through reflective analysis has become a vital trait for The University of Minnesota and the success of their early career non-athletic career success for student-athlete success. While multiple Division I programs are continuing to value the importance of enhancing the academic and professional development experience for student-athletes, there has been limited research on assessing how African-American football players at Division I institutions are transitioning from the student-athlete role to early career non-athletic career success.

Although The University of Mississippi has become forward thinking as it relates to African-American football student-athletes and their post-career non-athletic career transition, there are some limitations and concerns. One of the limitations of these student-athletes transitioning successfully is the lack of community involvement. Having an education that teaches the value of selfless sacrifices and focusing on serving others is substantial. However, the lack of opportunities for student-athletes to enlist in community service events due to athletic obligations should be a focus of serious examination relating to ways of increasing student-athlete involvement. When

structured properly, engagement with the community can positively impact the non-playing success of the student-athlete. An additional limitation is the lack of opportunities for student-athletes to engage with student organizations. Student organizations in higher education are powerful tools that not only help with transitioning into the work-place but they also encourage inclusive practices that forces one to think and operate outside of traditional methods of functioning. Due to stringent athletic schedules, academic majors are often pre-selected, creating an ethical issue as several student-athletes are urged to select academic majors that are not conducive to their interests or passion. This practice, regarded as “academic grouping,” refers to the purposeful grouping of student-athletes into specially selected majors so as to provide additional time for athletic obligations, such as team meetings and practice. This term refers to the organizational structures that have been adopted that contributes to the inequitable practices catering to the athletic agenda as opposed to holistic educational enhancement. Another limitation that emerged from these semi-structured interviews was the lack of mentorship from within the institution. During the qualitative interviewing, it became evident that mentorship was essential and valuable in transitioning into competent workplace employees.

The problem of practice for this dissertation emerged from analyzing the effectiveness of The University of Mississippi’s Student Athlete Development and Life Skill Program and the research on the early career non-athletic career success for African-American football student-athletes from The University of Mississippi. While

the primary component was to understand the deficiencies that existed and contributed to the transitioning from student-athlete to knowledgeable and proficient employees, there was an underlying theme focusing on best-practices that should be considered when developing the student-athlete at the collegiate level. Understanding the educational and professional practices that could benefit African-American football players as they transitioned into early non-athletic careers became imperative to dissect and examine. The implementation methods for best student-athlete developmental practices, are important to consider relating to the successful transitioning from student-athlete to early career non-athletic careers.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Qualitative interviews were conducted in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the professional skills attained by former African-American student-athletes while at The University of Mississippi that could assist them in successfully transitioning into early career non-athletic careers. A total of eight former African-American student-athletes from The University of Mississippi whom graduated from 2009-2014 agreed to participate in the interviews. The former student-athletes interviewed were selected based upon their employment tenure, race and diversity with respect to the years in which they graduated from The University of Mississippi. Interviews were conducted at the Indoor Practice Facility on the campus of the University of Mississippi. Former University of Mississippi African-American football student-athletes were encouraged and prompted to articulate the professional skills

developed through their tenure as a student-athlete. They were asked to describe how the professional skills acquired as a student-athlete were beneficial for their early career non-athletic career success. These former student-athletes were also questioned as to what they have gained since being employed in their current position and what career advice they would offer to current African-American football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi. While interview questions were not specifically designed to highlight the importance of mentorship, internship experience, and the power of networking, interview feedback indicated there should be a concerted effort to re-focus and restructure the composition of The University of Mississippi's Student Athlete Development and Life Skills Program, to incorporate such areas. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of each former student-athlete who participated in these semi-structured interviews. The pseudonyms for the former African American football student-athletes, the student-athletes year of graduation, date of interview, and the degree specification is listed in table 3.

Table 3:

Pseudonym	Year of Graduation	Date of Interview	Degree Specification	Current Employment
Greg Thomas	2012	January 12, 2019	General Studies	USPS Driver
Quentin Rodgers	2014	January 17, 2019	Criminal Justice	Forklift Operator
Ryan Tucker	2010	January 21, 2019	Accountant	Real-Estate Agent
Kyle Pointer	2012	January 26, 2019	General Studies	Unemployed

Felton Smith	2011	January 26, 2019	General Studies	(TSA agent)
Chase Black	2013	January 28, 2019	Criminal Justice	Forklift Operator
Maurice Bush	2009	February 1, 2019	General Studies	UPS Driver
Anthony Sims	2013	February 2, 2019	Criminal Justice	General Factory Worker

One of the fundamental elements that became evident through these semi-structured interviews was the power of professional networking. While devoting a considerable amount of time and effort to a purposeful task such as being a student-athlete, it became apparent that networking was essential and vital for the upward mobility of African-American football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi. The interviewees reported how they believe communicating beyond one's immediate surroundings was best for both holistic development and encouraging diversity of thought. Chase would add, "I became better connected once I understood the power of networking. Working with people that do not look and think like you strengthens your communication. I never valued networking in college and I am observing the importance of it now." Quentin, a criminal justice major, noted how his professional development ascended to new levels once mastering the art of networking.

My life has changed since learning how to network. I think and move differently now because I see now that I am just not a football player. I am much more. In my current role, they always say, 'it is not what you know but

who you know.’ I am not sure how true this is but in my current role, relationship building and networking has helped a lot.

Maurice would speak quite candidly on the importance of networking stating,

Growing up, I never interacted outside of my race because I grew up in an all-black community. I did not dislike people of other cultures but we just did not see that growing up. Now that I have matured, I wish I would have networked more in college. I am learning it is the difference between a poor salary and decent salary once leaving college.

In addition to networking, mentoring was also a frequently discussed topic amongst the interviewees as they expressed the importance of successfully transitioning from student-athlete to early career non-athletic career success. Chase would add,

Mentoring has made a huge impact in my life. Mentors come at different levels. I had mentors in my family but I needed mentors that could show me how to maneuver in life. As a student-athlete, I really never had someone who would send me a text or call me and ask me ‘What’s next after football?’ I am positive that having a mentor could have helped me to transition into my future success.

These former student-athletes articulated that professional development and peer mentors had positively influenced their experiences. Felton Smith would discuss how professional staff and peer mentors in his current position are helping to develop

his propensity to excel as a proficient employee.

Never would I have thought that mentors at my job would be so helpful in assisting me to complete my tasks at a high level. I always had mentors on the football field. The same technique is helping me in my current role. If I could go back and speak to current student-athletes I would encourage them to find a mentor. Not for football but for life decisions and work transition.

Peer mentorship was also expressed in detail by several of the interviewees. Anthony would state,

There are days that I am completely lost in my current position. This will seem crazy but I do not always want to get advice from my boss you know? Most times, I have a peer mentor who coaches me on the do's and dont's of the profession. Mentorship is important but most times, I gain knowledge from peer mentors.

Ryan would add,

I take what I learned from being the best in football and apply it to real-life. I was able to do well at my position because I had older players to coach me from their experience. That happens often where I work now. Mentorship is probably undervalued because most people assume that they know it all. For me, I am at my best because I am surrounded by awesome mentors.

Developing skills essential for transitioning into early career non-athletic careers, several of the interviewees gave a substantial amount of credit to mentors.

Greg, general studies major and 2012 graduate would state, “My career has went beyond my capacity because I have understood that mentors are everything...No matter what people may say, making it in life requires meaningful mentors. They have been key for me.” Several former student-athletes also reported experiences surrounding internship experience. Acquiring skills beyond athletic superiority on the collegiate level, should give student-athletes the opportunity to “think beyond the football field.” Encouraging student-athletes to develop intellectually and professionally requires exposure to employee experiences. Encountering workplace environments allows for student-athletes to classify themselves outside of their athletic identity. Former student-athletes articulated that internships and experiencing exposure prior to entering a specific career, could contribute to purposeful degree attainment. When discussing elements of his current work experience, Maurice stated:

I am smart and intelligent but looking at my degree you probably could not tell. I lacked proper internship experience. Learning how to maneuver in the workplace before choosing my major would have been beneficial. Knowing what I know now, I would have demanded that my coach and administrators give me time for internship experience.

Felton also addressed the importance of internships.

Having internship experience is extremely important. I speak to people who manage the company I work for and have leadership positions in the company and they always tell me how they had internships in college. I noticed that none

of them played college sports. I am not sure the correlation but I do know that I had no time for internships because my schedule was dedicated to football. They should discontinue summer workouts and have summer internships. In my opinion, it means more in the long run.

Chase stated:

I had no clue that me never having an internship would determine so much. Internship experience would allow for student-athletes to see the “bigger picture.” I regret not learning more outside of football. Interning to see what I wanted to be in college would have helped with my transition.

Multiple former African-American student-athletes also connected lack of internship experience with what several of these former players considered a lack of time management. Quentin stated,

The value of time was always geared towards those 12 Saturday’s in the fall. I believe there were 12 games played. For me, too much of our time was focused on the temporary. What counts most now is being able to communicate effectively and survival. Those 12 Saturdays did not prepare me for Monday through Friday. That was bad “clock management” by the university you know?

Kyle stated,

Time management on the micro level was day to day making sure that we went to class and did not miss any mandatory football meetings. At the macro level, I

see now that time management was much bigger. I am at a job now where being late will take away from your check, which takes away from your family.

Mastering time was big in college but bigger in the real world.

Chase articulated his current career experience, saying, “Time is money. My dad or mom was not college educated but they did warn me that life favored people who favored time. My position that I am in forces me to respect time.” Another essential element discussed by former African-American student-athletes acquired in their current profession was leadership qualities. Most of these former student-athletes discussed how leadership both in college and in their current roles took on many different roles.

One interesting comment by Felton Smith, highlighted the layers of leadership and how he has noticed the development of his leadership in areas he never quite understood in college.

I remember seeing my peer picking up trash around the facility randomly. I instantly asked him why he did that and he expressed to me ‘picking up trash was something he felt all leaders should do.’ Here I was a former glorified athlete being taught leadership from someone who simply picked up paper. I did not do that much in college because I saw that as below me. I now see that leadership is way bigger than being the loudest in the room. I now pick up paper and that now is leadership for me.

Additionally, Ryan addressed leadership and what he has learned in his current role. “Leadership for me is taking initiative when others will not. I believe most people

wait for a title to lead but that is not true. I consider myself a leader and I am not a manager. Taking the initiative on the football field has translated to my current role.”

From the interviewee’s responses, several former student-athletes gave differing perspectives as to how society generally regards leadership. While leadership is not always visible, the interviewees were adamant in relaying the message that leadership takes many different forms. When comparing themselves to others, several former student-athletes credited their leadership capabilities with having to maneuver life as a student-athlete. Maurice stated:

I naturally have a leadership trait from playing sports. In college, I was a leader for many people. I was leading my family by being the first to attend college. I was leading my peers back at home by being the first to play sports in college. I have always been a leader. It now takes on a different form but leadership to me has always seemed innate and developed from my athletic background.

These former student-athletes also spoke briefly on how constructive feedback and criticism helped to develop them into competent leaders. Chase would add, “ In college, criticism happens all the time. As a student-athlete, coaches, professors and advisors are always critiquing your every move. It became natural for me to receive criticism and keep going. Receiving criticism has helped me a ton.” Anthony revealed how vital feedback from peers and others helped to develop his leadership ability:

Being told that your way is wrong never feels good. However, I have grown

the most as a leader when I have humbled myself down and received insightful information from those I work with. It is one thing to receive criticism. It is another thing to take heed to the criticism and actually improve. Leadership is always improving and knowing that growing through mistakes is key to growth.

Former African-American student-athletes also commented on how transferable skills acquired at the collegiate level assisted with job interviews and teamwork on the job. Former student-athletes reported that discipline and communication skills developed in college, translated into valuable assets early in their non-athletic career. Two former student-athletes, Ryan and Quentin, spoke vividly about their skills in the arena of communication and discipline and how they were essential in their current roles. They both noted how their experience as student-athletes connected to their employment experience. Ryan said,

I have learned teamwork. I have learned communication and I have learned the importance of discipline. These skills in one way or another were gained from participating as a student-athlete. Communicating effectively on a team and being disciplined is probably the chief difference between winning and losing. I believe the same applies for my current position.

Quentin would make a unique comparison and connection between academics and employment that focused on communication, saying,

Communicating with your professor in college is like communicating with your boss on your job. I remember having professors that required me to send emails prior to going on a road trip to a game. I did not know then but they were forcing me to be responsible and an effective communicator. I never liked those professors then but I respect them now.

They had a standard for communication and it has helped me a lot now.

Felton noted how he felt his various roles as an employee had prepared him for his professional career. He said,

In football there were roles a teammate had to play. Everyone could not be the quarterback. Everyone had a job though. Now, I see that in my current role, disciplining myself to put myself second and others first has really helped me to transition from a student-athlete. Teamwork and communication were important in football and are important in real life.

Former student-athletes were also able to articulate how employment in their current position, work-life balance, adaptability in the workplace and having a propensity for dealing with failure were learned both as a student-athlete and within their employee experience. Importantly, the former student-athletes suggested having a well-rounded educational experience coupled with an intense focus on social enhancement, academic enrichment and community engagement in college could assist in them becoming skillful and competent employees.

IMPROVING PRACTICES

In-depth research led to a critical examination of The University of Mississippi's Student Development and Life Skills Program. The athletic administration at the University of Mississippi has adopted and utilized four core values as it relates to the development of the proficient development of student-athletes. The attributes and primary characteristics that are defined as the core values are: career development, community engagement, diversity and inclusion and personal advancement. These are the chief values and objectives that have been succinctly defined and outlined by The University of Mississippi's athletic department as vital principles to possess in order to transition successfully into early career non-athletic careers. Additionally, there are four preeminent goals that The University of Mississippi has defined as leading principles for holistic student-athlete developing. The first goal is to provide both educational and experiential learning opportunities to develop personal and professional characteristics that will enhance the ability to obtain postgraduate placement. The second goal and aim of The University of Mississippi's athletic department is to create servant leaders through targeted support initiatives in local, state, national and international causes. The third fundamental goal is to create a sense of community through university partnerships and beyond to promote and appreciate differences. Lastly, an essential objective is to help foster responsible social living through personal development to create productive citizens. These goals are upheld by the Athletic Department at The University of Mississippi to serve the

educational needs of student-athletes. Administrative personnel within athletics are often evaluated on their ability to achieve and accomplish these goals through strategies intended to assist student-athletes to develop beyond their athletic accomplishments. Examining the University of Mississippi's Student-Athlete Development Life Skills Program in relation the qualitative data collected through interviewing former student-athletes revealed several insightful positives as well as some glaring deficiencies.

Analyzing the effectiveness of The University of Mississippi's initiative to increase student-athlete development best-practices is essential. Striving to provide opportunities to improve professional skill development that will translate into early career non-athletic careers is an important educational objective of the university. As these former African-American student-athletes were asked to clearly express additional developmental and professional skills they acquired as student-athlete's, they addressed needed advancements in the arena of community engagement and career development. While several of the developmental skills mentioned in the Life Skills program were not discussed at great length, several of the interviewees were able to share how they had communicated examples of their proficiency and experience as a current employee in the workforce. One of the strengths of the Life Skills program was emphasizing the correlation between time management and career advancement. Through qualitative responses, student-athletes spoke candidly concerning their transitioning from a student-athlete to working citizens. They stressed

that time management was, indeed, a determining factor in achieving success. Additionally, most of the former student-athletes believed the opportunity for growth in skill development, could only occur with time management as a priority. The qualitative analysis also discussed the essential elements of successful scheduling and stressed that organizational structures could also significantly contribute to the mismanagement of time. Another objective of The University of Mississippi is to encourage student-athletes to become involved with other students. One of the former student-athletes, Kyle, would express, “I wish I would have become more engaged in social issues. I really wanted to be involved but being a student-athlete limited my voice I thought.” Stated as a goal in The University of Mississippi’s Life Skills Program, is to foster in students responsible social living and encourage student leadership at the local, state, national and international levels.

Several of the interviewees, however, felt they had not received encouragement to become social change agents. In assessing the growth demonstrated by student-athletes in participation for community effectiveness, it was revealed that the student-athletes inability to participate in leadership programs, inability to travel abroad, and serve in extracurricular activities was a significant detriment to them developing effectiveness as community leaders. Additional information retrieved from qualitative interviews revealed that a need for administrators to discuss civic, social and community enhancement was absent. The student-athletes felt that community involvement was seen as secondary to the athletic and academic experience. Ethically,

it is important to understand that academic and community competence should be considered as a unified entity. Another perspective detailed in the Life Skills Program that did not receive an adequate amount of attention during interviews was post-graduate opportunities. While specifically mentioned in the Life Skills Program, academic learning and critical thinking were not stressed during the interviewing of the former African-American football student-athletes. As mentioned in the Life Skills Program, establishing and creating university partnerships with alumni and organizations, once eligibility was exhausted, is an important focal point for the development of student-athletes. However, several of the former student-athletes interviewed, related that they had no meaningful contacts once they graduated from The University of Mississippi. As Chase stated, “I knew of no one to contact once I tried to apply for jobs. The hand claps on the field were cool but I never had connections for opportunities once football was over. Honestly, I still struggle with that now.” The University of Mississippi could strive to strengthen partnerships, between student-athletes and businesses by various internships being formed. Relevant apprenticeships with companies represented by alumni, could allow for successful transition into non-athletic careers. Direct employer connection, prior to exiting the institution, could assist in identifying essential networking connections for student-athletes entering the workforce. The opportunity to expose oneself to a specific profession could be valuable and instrumental in helping with early career non-athletic career success. Student-athletes interviewed indicated that practical application, which

is a fundamental element of any early career non-athletic career transition, did not receive adequate emphasis. It should be noted that while the interview questions did not specifically ask students to make this connection, the fact that the topic was not addressed by any of the interviewees indicates that The University of Mississippi could be inadvertently contributing to the lack of professional skills attained by African-American football student-athletes. Another key component that needs improvement as identified through qualitative analysis was the inability of The University of Mississippi to design and construct learning environments outside of the classroom setting, which would be valuable for African-American student-athletes career development. As mentioned in the interviews, all but one student-athlete was a first-generation college student, pointing to the need for these students to have increased guidance and mentoring by faculty. Stronger university partnerships between athletic administrators and academic personnel on campus could create a more productive learning environment for first-generation college students. Furthermore, while several of the student-athletes showed an intense desire to learn, the interviews revealed that most of the former African-American student-athletes felt that professors and academic advisors did not understand their background and resulted in deficient learning experiences. While traditional teaching methods are extremely important and instrumental in the development of higher education models, ingenuity is a necessary component in order to create learning experiences that will allow for African-American football student-athletes to successfully transition into their early career

non-athletic careers. Anthony would speak on his learning experience and the lack of creativity expressed in several of his classrooms.

My learning environment as a black student-athlete was geared for people who looked differently than me. I was a first-generation college student. I was also black at a predominately white school. I was smart but there were not many teachers who met me where my situation existed. I wanted to learn but the teaching styles did not fit my background. I learned differently and I don't believe my professors understood that.

If critical thinking skills and professional development are to become implemented at the collegiate level, educators must be relatable and innovative when delivering knowledge. Creative tactics and techniques suitable for teaching African-American football student-athletes must include career development of professional traits. Several professional positions require employees to demonstrate and display a large degree of conflict resolution and problem solving. However, student-athletes do not typically become immersed in their critical thinking skills which could include analyzing information, increased and improved decision making skills and leadership capabilities. The University of Mississippi's Life Skills Program for student-athletes could implement a four-year plan that focuses specifically on critical thinking and how these skills can be used professionally in their early career non-athletic career development.

Additionally, consulting with former student-athletes such as the eight former

student-athletes interviewed, could give insightful recommendations from their experience that could assist in establishing and creating models useful for professional development. In addition to former African-American student athletes giving recommendations based on their employment experience, I believe that purposeful dialogue with local businesses and leaders could provide information on how to develop professional skills within a local context. University partnerships with the local community, that involves student-athletes, would assist in developing community leaders. Although the input from the former student-athletes varied, depending upon degree specification and professional occupation, the developmental skills gained at the collegiate level seemed to be quite similar. Time management and overcoming adversity were essential objectives for these former student-athletes to possess. In addition, support from athletic administrators was an essential element for their success. For example, Chase spoke candidly about the lack of input he received from his athletic administrators while a student-athlete. "I remember never seeing any of my coaches or athletic administrators when I was celebrated for my academics. I always saw them on Saturdays. That always stood out to me and gave me an indirect look into what they cared about the most." As indicated by several of these former African-American student-athletes, a concentrated effort to garner more attention and focus from leadership positions within the athletic department would be indispensable as it relates to early career non-athletic careers. Anthony stated,

They never came and asked us how school was going and how academically

things could improve. My life was football and athletic personnel let me know it. They were cool people but coolness did not translate to me successfully going into the real-world you know? I look back and I believe we needed assistance from people at the top. Coaches were cool but I wanted to see people who called the shots so to speak.

I believe that guidance based on reflection from former student-athletes and administrators could give insight regarding the effectiveness of The University of Mississippi's Life Skills Program. Unfortunately, student-athletes were rarely asked to provide an evaluation on the effectiveness and rating of their academic and professional development as a student-athlete. The interviews revealed that there was no real opportunity for the former student-athletes to provide feedback to the athletic department regarding the effectiveness of the Life Skills Program. Understanding the story of the African-American football student-athlete at The University of Mississippi and the impact that the student-athlete experience has on the early career non-athletic career success of these student-athletes, is a goal yet to be obtained. Creating a model for reporting and assessing the student-athlete learning experiences is extremely vital. Opportunities to measure the early career success of African-American football student-athletes against other recent graduates of The University of Mississippi could be beneficial in gauging the success and effectiveness of the Life Skills Program.

RESOURCES FOR PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The professional development tactics and techniques created for student-athletes at The University of Mississippi, should be reconstructed and dissected for further research. Institutional leadership, athletic administrators and academic personnel present at The University of Mississippi, have the opportunity to grow minority student-athletes that are competent in successfully transitioning into their employee workplace environment. Recommendations for implementation have been made in order to highlight deficiencies in areas that need improvement as it relates to the organizational structures existing for African-American student-athletes concerning their career development. Athletic administrators and institutional leaders should be intentional in creating effective systems that will aide in assisting African-American student-athletes with their non-athletic career success.

Although The University of Mississippi athletic department places a great deal of concentration on academic success, professional development, global engagement, inclusion and fostering responsible social living practices, the qualitative data generated through this research suggests that some of the goals and aspirations stated in principle are not expressed in practice. One of the institutions that has become a trailblazer for career preparations for student-athletes is The University of Michigan. Creating the Career Ventures program, The University of Michigan has become proactive in the lives and preparation of their student-athletes. Focused on career and professional preparation, this program provides student-athletes the opportunity to learn by visiting

and networking with companies that will assist student-athletes with experiential training in companies that will broaden their career focus. The University of Michigan also has a Career Symposium, whereby student-athletes have personalized and professional sessions with companies and athletic administrators in order to provide the tools required for the transition into early career non-athletic careers (University of Michigan, 2017). Additionally, Long Beach State University operates the Senior Excellence Program, described as follows:

The Senior Excellence Program is designed to help senior-level student-athletes make the transition to the next level-whether in sport, further schooling, or finding a job. The Senior Excellence classes meet two times a month for an hour during the fall and spring semesters. This program is open to all senior student athletes but is mandated for all Degree Completion recipients (Long Beach State University 2018).

This is a powerful statement and testament to the dedicated and concerted focus that Long Beach State University has on the desire for student-athletes to graduate with a purpose. As the core values of leading, serving and growing are displayed in detail and practical measures have been taken in order to ensure transitioning from a student-athlete to non-athletic careers, this program has proven to be very successful.

Nationally speaking, professional development and career preparation offices that serve underrepresented student-athlete populations, are rare and lacking sufficient support from institutions of higher learning. Establishing an office focused on minority

student-athlete employment and career preparation practices do not seem to be a priority as it relates to institutional and athletic support for African-American football student-athletes. Division I institutions have a major obligation and ethical duty to support post-career non-athletic careers for student-athletes by implementing innovative systems that gauge early career non-athletic career success. Graduation rates and academic performance ratings (APR), while extremely purposeful, should be considered within the ramifications of professional and developmental skills and techniques that will translate into post-eligibility success. The development of student-athlete career employment would be valuable in establishing the importance of early career non-athletic career success. Connecting current student-athletes with the experiences of former student-athletes who are now full-time employees, could provide training and support for academic staff, athletic administrators and institutional leaders for best practices as it relates to career preparation. As student-athlete developmental programs demonstrate the capacity to inspect and research the impact of African-American student-athlete experiences, institutions could follow established and dedicated outcomes based on former African-American student-athletes employment experiences.

Another area for improvement that could help to support African-American student-athletes transition to their early career non-athletic careers could be financial support and alumni allegiance to partnerships with student-athletes once eligibility is exhausted. At the University of Mississippi, these practices are situated within the

alumni affairs office which aids in partnering with The University of Mississippi's M-Club. Dedicated to former student-athletes who have played a sport at the institution, strengthening relationships for African-American student-athletes through M-Club involvement is essential. In analyzing the semi-structured interview data, none of the interviewees enlisted themselves into the M-Club once eligibility was done.

Increasing the diversity and inclusive efforts of such a prestigious organization could assist former African-American football student-athletes with building meaningful and lasting relationships. Networking events and purposeful interaction within this alumni club could prove to be beneficial for establishing productive relationships. However, among leadership positions, there seems to be a minimal effort dedicated to focusing on diversity and inclusion within the M- Club organization. From the interviews conducted, it is evident that equal representation for underrepresented populations that have played sports for The University of Mississippi necessitates special attention.

While the University of Mississippi's athletic department has gained some strong recognition for their accomplishments relating to academic success, focusing on professional development within the context of co-curricular programming could be an additional area to be addressed. One of the challenges presented with trying to infuse co-curricular programming in the student-athlete model at The University of Mississippi is the demanding schedule of having to balance school and football. Demanding athletic schedules seems to limit the differing avenues that could help

student-athletes transition into non-athletic careers. Having an increased percentage of student-athletes engaged in at least two extra-curricular experiences upon graduation could improve the process of transitioning non-athletic career success. Understanding the importance of instilling extra-curricular activities in order to enhance career readiness could ensure that all student-athletes can effectively articulate goal orientation and career readiness capabilities upon graduating from The University of Mississippi. Developing a curriculum with a strong emphasis on extra curricular programs and learning outcomes for minority male student-athletes could improve the collegiate experience for African-American student-athletes at The University of Mississippi. The curriculum should be aligned with the goals and values with respect to the professional skills needed for employment in the future, with an emphasis on internships, critical thinking, mentorship and networking capabilities. Assessing the outcomes of these particular areas of focus should be done weekly by athletic administrators, academic advisors and current student-athletes. Having student-athletes available for questioning would ensure sustainability and would foster an overarching emphasis on accountability from top-level leadership positions down to the student-athletes impacted by these innovative practices. The University of Mississippi athletic department has four core strengths and values which are: career development, community engagement, diversity and inclusion and personal advancement. However, there is nothing specifically stated concerning employee experience and the strategic steps to be taken in order to ensure that student-athletes are possessing the necessary

qualities necessary for non-athletic career success. Increased involvement on campus such as student-led organizations on campus could increase a heightened awareness as it pertains to social justice issues and could contribute to developing leadership skills that are essential for the holistic development of student-athletes.

Extra-curricular activities provide students with an opportunity to interact with authority figures and privileged peers, providing them with access to important non-cognitive skills that facilitate academic learning. The similar context between extra-curricular activities and the classroom helps students practice skills that are valued within the classroom setting and outside of the classroom setting (Carbonaro, Covay, 2010).

As part of the strategic planning process, creating an office for student-athlete engagement for career preparation that helps to understand learning outcomes and assessing co-curricular activities could be advantageous. Training provided by professional staff members as it relates to facilitation and methods to measure student-athlete career preparation and professional development would help promote the setting of clear cut objectives and goals for African- American football student-athletes. Preparing student-athletes to better articulate professional skills learned through their student-athlete experience will be challenging, however, I believe some insightful dialogue could transpire and provide conversations helpful for non-athletic career transition. Having an ongoing assessment of student-athlete development and career preparation concerning professional skills relating to future employment

opportunities is vital.

The athletic department must present opportunities that support and enhance co-curricular and extra-curricular activities fundamental for future employment. Out of the eight former African-American football student-athletes that were interviewed, none of the interviewees mentioned The University of Mississippi as a significant factor for attaining and acquiring employment once eligibility was exhausted. Also, none of the student-athletes mentioned the Life Skills Program as a significant contributor for the advancement of their career preparation. Developing skills and techniques applicable for future employment were gained “on the job,” as related by former student-athletes.

However, the interviewing process did reveal that most of these former student-athletes admittedly mentioned that their focus was never on future employment. In fact, several of these former student-athletes mentioned “football was life,” to indicate that the nucleus of their student-athlete experience was dominated by attaining athletic superiority. The intent of enhancing and advancing their professional and developmental skill for future opportunities beyond athletics, seemed to indicate a minimal focus on early career non-athletic career success. Seeking employment for post-playing opportunities was sought for the attainment of financial resources while rarely mentioning the desire to acquire leadership capabilities that would qualify them to become competent employees. In order to benefit from the strenuous process of being a student-athlete while developing one’s

abilities for career opportunities, becoming proactive and deliberately interested in the learning opportunities available on campus is essential for student-athletes. While student-athletes are responsible for attaining scholastic knowledge, the athletic department has an obligation to effectively communicate the professional benefits of career advancement and fulfillment. Professional workshops, campus social-activities and marketing as well as engaging community events to student-athletes could increase active participation and develop skills that go beyond the classroom setting. On-campus activities and departments that allow student-athletes to become proficient outside of their athletic focus is imperative in order to increase early career non-athletic career success. As emphasized, professional skill development from the interviewees was not mentioned during the interview process. Based on the data from this research, the athletic department must do a better job in preparing student-athletes for employment careers beyond their collegiate playing experiences. Emphasizing the connection between scholastic attainment and career advancement from former student-athletes could convey a message of relevance and importance. Hearing the testimonials of former student-athletes concerning transitioning into early career non-athletic career success could lead to some interesting developments. Social capital, as mentioned in my hypothesis as a functional and specific detail for early career non-athletic career success, can be promoted by expanding the number of connections to which student-athletes are exposed. All but one of the former student-athletes described extracurricular and co-curricular activities as way to acquire social

contacts. Most of the connections mentioned during the interview process by the former student-athletes were solely connected to athletic affiliations.

Diversity of thought and social connections are critical in order to succeed in workplace environments. Social opportunities involving Greek-lettered fraternities and student-led organizations on campus could increase proficiency in the area of professional skills learned and translate into more successful employment experiences. Inevitably, college students with a deficiency in social capital (first generation college-students, African-American student-athletes not involved in Greek-lettered organizations) seem to struggle with expressing their professional development skills. Additionally, the lack of social capital can impede the progress of employment opportunities. Developing a broader network of people at the institutional level whom are able to assist and support programming that promotes the development of social capital is an important educational objective for the university. Professional workshops allows for students who may not have strong social capital to become equipped with the terminology and accepted practices used when applying for career opportunities. Several of these former student-athletes admitted to being eliminated from employment opportunities due to a lack of social capital and professional learning opportunities at the collegiate level that could have translated into early career non-athletic career success. Athletic administrators and academic advisors at The University of Mississippi should consider increasing in job fairs and resume-building workshops that increase the likelihood of landing a career

opportunity after eligibility is completed. Understanding the application process and the preliminary objectives necessary for acquiring a career opportunity must be addressed more frequently. As the hiring process presents a level of difficulty, providing African-American football student-athletes with equal access to knowledge relating to the hiring process is extremely important. The scholastic and instructional methods used by the academic personnel at The University of Mississippi receives a great deal of negative attention from practitioners and coaches. These individuals are very much involved in the decision making process for many of these student-athletes and must take a more assertive role in ensuring that student-athletes are advancing beyond their athletic pursuits. Providing resources and instructional models to athletic coaches in order to teach career preparation and developmental skills is vital. For most of the interviewees, they admitted to spending a majority of their time with their coaches. Having this knowledge, creating avenues to allow for coaches to have more time developing student-athletes for career success could lead to the improvement of career readiness for student-athletes. Facilitating ideas and concepts as it relates to career preparation and non-athletic career success from coaches could provide open and honest dialogue for student-athletes seeking the “next phase” in life. Transferable skills and professional development taught and implemented by coaches and athletic administrators is a suggestion that could reinforce and support rhetoric expressed by academic support staff. Synchronicity between coaches, athletic administrators and the academic support staff at The

University of Mississippi could lead to a more succinct developmental program conducive to early career non-athletic career success. Professional workshops that allows for coaches to become more familiar with learning theory and methods implemented in the classes in which the players are enrolled could also be of help. Workshops also advance the understanding of terminology utilized by students in classroom settings as well as identify learning deficiencies that may persist for several of African-American football student athletes.

Lastly, connecting the process of developing scholastic instruction as a student-athlete in order to transition into early career non-athletic career success should be a fundamental element taught and expressed. The athletic department at The University of Mississippi should look at incorporating elements specifically designed to articulate the connections between academic attainment and career development. Scenarios involving evaluations of the student-athlete experience, teaching the value of critical thinking, and demonstrating the ability to analyze situations creatively and effectively in problem solving are essential qualities to a successful early career non-athletic career.

PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

As I matriculated through this doctoral program, I have become accustomed to the saying “persistence beats resistance.” Achieving a doctorate has taught me about the intricacies of my attitude of perseverance. Being a first-generation college student,

my initial inclination was to abandon the process. There is something powerful about the process involved in the accomplishing of great feats. By learning how to effectively assemble my treatise has positively impacted me as a professional. Enhancing my knowledge of Higher Education rhetoric by understanding the elements of equity, ethics and social justice has been an enlightening educational experience. Leadership and influence necessitates going to underprivileged communities and being a mentor for how to overcome adversity. My journey throughout this program has produced an intense desire in me to defeat the societal restraints projected upon minority males, whom have suffered from being raised in an adverse environment. I now consider myself a social entrepreneur, using my platform to inspire and uplift the masses of youth who call for a voice to convince them that, persevering through adverse circumstances is essential to reaching one's goals. This doctoral program gives me the framework and credentials to assist underprivileged youth whom seek to expand their academic resume. Having grasped the concerns that exist and processing the knowledge acquired in completing the doctoral degree, I am equipped to encourage individuals feeling disenfranchised in their communities to persevere in their efforts to improve their situations. Being a young African-American male adamant about bridging the opportunity gap for underrepresented populations, this doctoral process motivates me to share my experiences as a practitioner scholar with adolescents desiring to change the trajectory of their adverse circumstances.

Institutions for higher learning have the responsibility to prepare students for

career employment opportunities. The experience of being a student-athlete motivated me to analyze early career non-athletic career success for African-American males at The University of Mississippi. It was my desire to research student-athlete transitions into the early stage of non-athletic careers. As my research advanced, I soon noticed that African-American football student-athletes from The University of Mississippi were struggling to advance beyond their student athletic success. In fact, one of the most notable findings was the impact that organizational structures had on the early non-athletic career success for student-athletes. Enrolling into this program, I suspected that the structure around The University of Mississippi's athletic program was a major determiner for student-athlete advancement into workplace environments. My experiences in higher education has afforded me the opportunity to study and understand the professional and developmental skills attained as a student-athlete and the components lacking, in order to transition into a professional career. While serving as an employee and a student-athlete at The University of Mississippi, the doctoral process has afforded an understanding of how issues surrounding equity, ethics and social justice have impacted policies and organizational structures within institutions of higher learning.

Dissemination of Findings

The results of my findings will be powerful revelations specifically to athletic departments at Southeastern Conference institutions of higher learning. This research

offers an in-depth understanding of the necessary resources and materials that are needed in order to enhance career readiness programs for the professional development of African-American student-athletes at Division I athletic programs. Sharing these results with institutions of higher learning will allow for athletic administrators and institutional leadership to examine non-athletic career development for minority male student-athletes. Additionally, the information presented can be extremely applicable for career journals and higher education publications. Findings from this research could also be valuable for intercollegiate athletic programs across all divisions of athletics as programs seek to enhance and or establish equitable practices for all student-athletes.

SUMMARY OF MANUSCRIPT

Examining the student-athlete experience and how early career non-athletic career success impacts employment opportunities for African-American male student-athletes, emerged from my personal experience as a student-athlete. An in-depth examination of The University of Mississippi's Life Skills Program, provided the framework for researching the effectiveness of the career readiness of African-American student-athletes. As athletic department personnel seek to implement more effective methods to improve the career readiness of student-athletes, the findings presented in this dissertation could be utilized to design a more successful future for African-American former student-athletes.

The research findings here provide evidence that The University of Mississippi

athletics department should consider restructuring the Life Skills Program. The research and details expressed by the interviewees addresses the deficiencies that persist in the Life Skills Program used for student-athlete development at The University of Mississippi. The scholastic and professional experiences conveyed by the former student-athletes demonstrates the necessity of cultivating more opportunities for African-American student-athletes to intermingle with the student body at large.

Concentrating on the development and career preparation techniques and skills necessary for social, psychological and economic advancement should become a primary focus for The University of Mississippi's athletic department. Preparing competent and career-ready student-athletes will necessitate cooperation between faculty, administrators and athletic department personnel to formulate objectives leading to educational outcomes. Assisting in the development of impaired career readiness of former African-American student-athletes will greatly enhance the ability of these students in their pursuit of gainful employment beyond the collegiate experience.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education

Ed.D., Doctorate of Higher Education, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, 2019

Dissertation: Former African-American Male Football Student-Athletes at Southeastern Conference Institutions and Their Transition From Athletics to Non-Athletic Careers:

M.Ed., Master of Higher Education, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, 2014

B.A., Bachelor of Arts, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, 2012

Professional Profile

- Develop and implement systems to effectively teach students the value of character development
- Present informational sessions to organizations in order to teach best male-mentoring practices
- Strategize and execute community empowerment events and forums
- Help to develop curriculum that assists in learning environment and classroom competence
- Worked specifically with underprivileged communities to enhance student-community relationships

Academic Honors and Awards

- 2014-2015 Danny Wuerffel Trophy- The Wuerffel Trophy award is for the nation's outstanding student athlete who exhibits leadership qualities and capabilities both on and off the field
- 2014-2015 Allstate AFCA Good Works Team Captain- Recognizes individual student-athletes who go over and beyond to help communities both home and abroad
- 2012, 2014 Chucky Mullins Courage Award- Given annually to the team leader who displays courage, leadership and integrity both on and off of the field of play

- 2014 Brad Davis SEC Post-Graduate Community Service Award