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## Leadership Development Programs in College Athletics: An Exploration of the Student-Athlete Experience

Jeffrey O'Brien  
*University of Central Florida*

Sarah Stokowski  
*Clemson University, stoko@clemson.edu*

F. Michelle Richardson  
*Coppin State University*

Brandon E. Martin  
*University of Missouri*

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# Leadership Development Programs in College Athletics: An Exploration of the Student-Athlete Experience

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*Jeffrey O'Brien*

*University of Central Florida*

*Sarah E. Stokowski*

*Clemson University*

*F. Michelle Richardson*

*Coppin State University*

*Brandon E. Martin*

*University of Missouri-Kansas City*

*Larry Proctor*

*Grambling State University*

*C. Keith Harrison*

*University of Central Florida*

Leadership development training is in demand at institutions of higher learning as students are seeking formal leadership opportunities to enhance their college experience. No longer is leadership development training seen as an ancillary offering, but rather, institutions are embracing the need to provide skill-building leadership training to better prepare students for the workplace. Although the majority of NCAA Division I institutions have leadership development programming (e.g., Navarro et al., 2020), little is known about the benefits of such programming on the student-athlete population. Informed by the student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) this study employed phenomenology methodology and semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Division I stu-

dent-athletes (n=12) who participated in athletic department sponsored leadership development programs. Throughout the data, three themes emerged: personal growth and development, skill development, and engaging pedagogies. Results from this study can aid athletic departments implementing leadership development programs.

*Keywords:* athlete development, experience, leadership, programming, student-athletes

Since 2000, leadership development programming for student-athletes at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA; n.d.) membership institutions has become an essential component of college athletic departments. In fact, 87% of athletic departments participating at the NCAA (n.d.) Division I level has some facet of leadership development programming available to student-athletes. Given the significant number of athletic departments offering leadership development programs, research that examines the impact such programming has on the student-athlete population is warranted.

Developing leadership skills and abilities of students has always been a core function of American higher education (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008). Harvard University was founded in 1636 for the purpose of developing young men with the skills and knowledge necessary to lead their communities and the nation (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008). Although the curricular focus did not include courses or training on leadership development, the larger mission of these early colleges focused on producing leaders, specifically clergy, lawyers, and teachers (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008). Historically, developing leaders has been accomplished informally, through extra-curricular engagement and occasional incorporation into coursework in business colleges (Connaughton et al., 2003). Leadership development in higher education continued in

this manner for more than 100 years by focusing on developing students for leadership roles in their professional lives beyond college (Komives et al., 2011).

In the 1970s, student affairs administrators started a quiet revolution in student leadership development by developing and delivering leadership workshops and courses (Komives et al., 2011). Student affairs organizations such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) served as the connection point for student affairs administrators to share ideas and initiatives, and student leadership development became a notable topic in the 1980s and 1990s (Komives et al., 2011). Over the last quarter century, “leadership education has evolved from a fragmented set of atheoretical (even anti-theoretical), uncoordinated activities with little common language or practices to a field with established theoretical frames, conceptual models, standards of practice, and diverse pedagogical strategies” (Komives et al., 2011, p. 2).

Since 2000, leadership education has experienced explosive growth in the United States, with several hundred colleges and universities offering curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular opportunities for undergraduate students to build their leadership skills (Greenwald, 2010). Leadership development programming has emerged in a variety of formats, including curricular offerings for academic credit and degrees as well as co-curricular or extra-curricular offerings (e.g., workshops, lectures, trainings). Today, several hundred campuses offer co-curricular and extra-curricular leadership programs for students, although these programs are often marginalized by their institutions. Leadership Studies represent an emerging field in higher education, and, predictably, this discipline is experiencing growing pains as academics attempt to define terms, create standards, develop learning outcomes, and ensure proper measurement of programs (Greenwald, 2010). In ad-

dition, despite the wealth of research on effective student leadership development programs, research that looks at different sub-populations of students (e.g., female, male, students of color, student-athletes) is limited (Aviolo, 2011; Komives et al., 2011; Northouse, 2010).

Two intersecting areas of campus life that have long played prominent roles in the development of American higher education include leadership development and college athletics (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Thelin, 2000). The dramatic rise of college athletics has not been driven by a larger vision of American higher education or a desire to enhance campus life (Duderstadt, 2002). Instead, college athletics grew out of the void campuses experienced in the mid-19th century regarding extracurricular activity for students. In contrast, the current population of college student-athletes qualifies as a unique subset of the undergraduate student population for which little empirical evidence exists to guide leadership educators working with this population. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of college student-athletes who have participated in leadership development programs provided by their athletic department.

## **Review of the Literature**

Leadership training is no longer seen as an ancillary offering; rather, institutions are now embracing the need to provide skill-building leadership training to better prepare students for the 21st century (Aviolo & Gardner, 2005; Greenwald, 2010). College athletics departments have embraced leadership training and represent an area of campus that has engaged in a range of leadership development training activities, including the development of leadership academies for student-athletes and coaches (NCAA, n.d.). Since 2000, leadership development programming for stu-

dent-athletes has become an essential component of college athletic departments. Further, The NCAA houses a leadership development department charged with providing a wide range of leadership development training and workshops for college student-athletes, coaches, and administrators (NCAA, n.d.). Although NCAA membership institutions provide more formalized opportunities for student-athletes to develop leadership skills through the Student Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), such opportunities fail to include the vast majority of student-athletes (Navarro et al., 2020).

Student-athletes face unique needs and athletic departments have an obligation to prepare student-athletes for a life beyond sport (e.g., Navarro et al., 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). However, the majority of student-athletes exit the walls of higher education unprepared to adapt to such a life (Stokowski et al., 2019). Research (e.g., Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Moiseichik et al., 2019) has demonstrated that student-athletes often exhibit low levels of career maturity. Further, due to the time student-athletes dedicate to their sport (Rubin & Moses, 2017), rarely do student-athletes have the time to participate in career construction opportunities (Navarro et al., 2020). It is crucial that student-athletes experience development opportunities outside of their respective sport (Astin, 1984).

Student-athlete specific programming is warranted; however, Navarro et al. (2020) noted the importance of cross-campus as well as interdisciplinary collaboration. According to Navarro et al. (2020) there are several objectives (personal enhancement, social responsibility, leadership development, career development) that are crucial components of leadership development programming for the student-athlete population. Career development programming should begin in the second year; however, programming in other forms (e.g., personal enhancement) should begin a student-athletes freshman year (Navarro et al., 2020). Programming

should not be an isolated event, but rather a process (Navarro et al., 2020). According to Davis and Horne (1986), career development programming not only assists with athlete transition but also enhances the overall educational experience.

Like Navarro et al. (2020), Comeaux et al. (2011) suggest that purposeful engagement with student-athletes during their first year in college is critical to their successful adjustment to college. Such purposeful engagement extends to the culture of an institution and the opportunities for all students to feel welcomed on campus. Chen et al. (2010) concur and examined the differences between student-athletes' and non-athletes' social and academic experiences. Chel et al. (2010) found that student-athletes often have limited campus experiences outside of their athletic responsibilities and, in many cases, are discouraged from seeking social experiences outside of athletics. This isolation from the greater campus community serves to decrease student-athletes connection to campus and this populations commitment to completing their degrees.

The present study is informed by student involvement theory (Astin, 1984). Astin's (1984) theory is simplistic in nature and infers that the more involved a student is on their campus, the better the student's overall college experience. Student involvement theory also speaks specifically to the student-athlete population, warning that athletic related responsibilities may detour student-athletes from having a complete student experience (Astin, 1984).

Although leadership development has become a priority on many college campuses, there is limited research that examines the impact of leadership development programming on the student-athlete population. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of college student-athletes who have participated in leadership development programs provided by their athletic department. Specifically, this study strives to answer the following research question: What are the lived ex-

periences and perceptions of student-athletes in student-athlete leadership development programs?

## **Methodology**

As the present study sought to better understand the experiences of student-athletes participating in leadership development programming, this study employed phenomenology methodology. Phenomenology is defined as the study and exploration of the lived experiences of people in a specified setting (Creswell, 2013; Lavery, 2003). Semi-structured interview method was utilized for this phenomenological inquiry. In phenomenology, open or semi-structured interviews offer the best opportunity to capture the essence of the phenomenon (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Additionally, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed for follow-up questions to be asked (e.g., Creswell, 2013). The research protocol consisted of six demographic questions and seven questions related to the research question (see Appendix A). This study received IRB approval, all participants were asked to sign an informed consent statement and the participants agreed to allow their interview to be audio recorded. Thus, after each interview the primary researcher transcribed the interview for meaning. All interviews were conducted by the primary researcher and took place face-to-face in an office on the campus of the participants. Additionally, the participants and the institutions were assigned a pseudonym in an attempt to secure anonymity.

Saldana's (2009) coding process is frequently used in phenomenology. The data was coded using a two-cycle coding process (Saldana, 2009). Attribute coding, descriptive coding, structural coding, and in vevo coding were utilized throughout the first cycle of coding. As such the setting (attribute coding), the research question (descriptive coding), as well as the words and phrases (structural coding, in vevo coding) of the participants was consid-



ered throughout the first cycle of coding. The second phase of Saldana's (2009) coding process used pattern coding in which the researchers find patterns within the first phase of coding and in essence finalized the themes.

To assist in the trustworthiness of the study Dittmore and Stokowski's (2019) recommendations were utilized. The primary researcher, an expert in leadership development participated in a bracketing interview in which they responded to the research protocol in an attempt to remove potential bias. Member checking took place as the participants were e-mailed copies of their interview transcript to ensure their words were accurately reflected. Additionally, the data was coded by a research team which consisted of six individuals with terminal degrees and qualitative research experience.

### ***Population Selection and Recruitment***

Through the use of purposeful sampling (Padilla-Diaz, 2015), participants in this study consisted of 12 Division I FBS (non-Power Five) student-athletes who participated in a leadership development program through their respective athletic departments within the last two years (see Table 1). The participants were from two NCAA Division I institutions; each institution provided leadership development programming through their athletic departments. The eligibility criteria for prospective participants included: demographic diversity (e.g., gender, race, sport), athletic status (i.e., current student-athlete, former student-athlete no more than two years removed from eligibility), and participation in the athletics department-provided leadership development program within the last two years (consisting of multiple sessions over the course of an academic year).

Northeast College (NC) is the pseudonym for the private, mid-major institution located on the East Coast (United States). The goals of the program were culture cultivation, growth and respon-

sibility, and self-awareness. Participants in the NC leadership development program met six times over the academic year with three meetings per semester or roughly once per month. Approximately 50 student-athletes, representing all of NC's athletic programs, participated in the NC leadership development program. Program content included: emotionally intelligent leadership, living your core values, conflict resolution, effective communication, strengths-based leadership, overcoming obstacles, and developing a personal leadership philosophy.

Southeast University (SU) is the pseudonym for a public group-of-five institution based in the Southeastern United States. Utilizing a two-tiered approach, SU host a formalized leadership institute for student-athletes. The first tier included student-athletes who were sophomores and juniors. Tier two included juniors and seniors. The selective program strived to teach skills that included: accountability, autonomy, core values, character, conflict management, empathy and problem solving.

Table 1  
*Student-Athlete Participation Demographic Breakdown*

Pseudonym	Institution	Sport	Race	Gender
Amy	NC	Basketball	White	Female
Jacob	NC	Soccer	White/Norway	Male
LaTonya	NC	Basketball	Black	Female
Tim	NC	Baseball	White	Male
Micah	NC	Track/Field	Bi-Racial (Black/White)	Male
Ethan	NC	Ice Hockey	White	Male
Ashanti	NC	Track/Field	Black	Female
Candice	NC	Track/Field	Black	Female
Veronica	SU	Rowing	Hispanic/Peru	Female
Brooke	SU	Rowing	White/Canada	Female
Samuel	SU	Football	Bi-Racial (Black/Italian)	Male
Malcolm	SU	Football	Black	Male

## Results

### *Themes*

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of student-athletes who participated in leadership development programs provided by their athletic department. Throughout the data, three major themes appeared: personal growth and development, skill development, and engaging pedagogies.

### *Personal Growth and Development*

When the participants were asked to share their experiences regarding their participation in the leadership development programs, 90% of student-athletes' discussed the personal growth and development they experienced through their programs. Within the student-athletes description(s) of their experiences, the participants shared that they learned things about themselves of which they were previously unaware: the impact of their behaviors on others; their core values and how to live them, the value of maintaining healthy relationships with peers, and the type of leader that they want to be. The student-athletes experiences allowed them to be vulnerable in the presence of their peers in a way that pleasantly surprised them.

Ashanti was surprised that she was selected to be a part of her athletic department's leadership development program and struggled with maintaining confidence in herself. She learned things about herself through her program of which she was not conscious. Her personal growth included feeling validated as a leader and this feeling reinforced her core values. Ashanti's comments supported this description:

I think we did our top three values, like community service programs before where we have to figure out what my values were, but I never really ranked them and having been in col-

lege now and then redoing my values really made me think, like, maybe the things I value, I shouldn't value this much. Or, I should really be focusing on this because this is what matters the most and not only did we figure out ourselves what our values were but we had people talk about our values and what our other teammates who were there thought our values were or what our quality traits were and I feel like that was super helpful because up until then I felt, I always felt I knew a lot, I could do a lot, I could survive any field but I really felt like when I was a second year student that I was kind of alone, and I didn't really feel like I had enough support but when everyone else started talking about what they thought my values were or what they thought my characteristics were, it made me feel good. I was put in this program for a reason.

Jacob felt that his experience was “enlightening” and explained that being challenged to reflect on his choices and the manner in which he had been leading, was a particular source of growth for him. Not only did Jacob re-consider his behavior, he began to see how his choices impact his teammates.

Candice initially approached the leadership program as unnecessary, explaining that she learned quickly that she was not as complete of a leader as she believed and felt her overconfidence in her leadership style hindered her relationships with her teammates. Candice explained:

I realized that in the program that I was not what I thought I wanted to be in terms of being a leader because I was really- I wasn't really like in tune with other people's emotions, like I always tried to block out emotions from leadership and make it more of a straightforward, cold type of relationship but I realized through the [NC Leadership Academy] that, like, you need to appeal to people in different ways so, like, motivation for one person on your team might not be the same motivation for other people, like, creating a relationship with the different people I think that's something I learned so I just go about speaking to your whole team as like, as if they're the same person and they have the same needs.

Malcolm felt his personal growth was stalled by his reluctance to speak up and share his perspective on important matters. Malcolm described his experience:

It's been nothing but great, it's taught me lessons about how to open up and be a leader because, at first, I always stayed back in the crowd. I knew things were wrong, I knew I should speak up sometimes, but I just felt like it wasn't my place, but the leadership programs here taught me how to open up, taught me that it's not wrong to take that step even if you're younger. If you know the right thing to do, and you have the right mindset, you can always speak up. And the leadership program opened me up as a person and made me the better man I am today.

### *Skill Development*

All of the participants in this study shared the benefits they derived from learning tangible skills they could apply in challenging sport-related or social situations involving teammates and coaches. The participants described having a safe space to attend to their personal growth and overall foundation as leaders.

Micah talked about two important skill development areas that helped him improve as an effective communicator and identify as well as adapt to a wide range of people and communication preferences. Prior to his experience in his leadership development program, these were concepts that he had never considered.

Candice offered that her leadership development program was “eye-opening,” as it uncovered holes in her leadership approach. Once she identified these deficiencies, the program provided the structure for her to develop strategies to effectively addressing similar situations in the future. Candice explained:

It made us think about things that we wouldn't necessarily think about and I think it affected me in the way that I could conduct myself afterwards so I'd remember things I'd learned in the leadership program and try to apply it to my real life

whether it became like my personal relationships, or professional relationships and so I tried to use that as a guide towards effective leadership and active leading.

Samuel noted that he learned several valuable life skills through his participation in his leadership development program that in fact changed the trajectory of his life. Samuel expressed:

They're teaching how to lead what we are good at doing when you can, uh, cause at first I kinda had an idea of what I was good at, but it was very um shallow. I'm good at football that's why I'm here, right, um but, I'm good at personal skills, I'm good at communicating, I'm good at this, because they taught me that. Like I found out what actually I was good at this, and now I'm able to better use my strengths in the classroom, or like on campus.

Brooke explained that she has always been an achiever, someone who gets things done, and had a leadership style that was linear and fast-paced. Her leadership development program taught her about emotional intelligence and how to be an emotionally intelligent leader. Brooke reflected upon her experience:

Listening would be a big thing. I became a very good listener because before I used to be a do'er. I would only half-listen, and especially only being a captain I caught myself being like "okay, yeah" because there was so much going on. Or I would try to pick out the super-important things or what I thought was important, and missing what was actually truly important from the other side.

Ethan felt he was just starting to develop his off-the-ice leadership style and appreciated that his program empowered him to identify his leadership strengths, consider carefully the leadership approaches that felt most authentic to him, and to be intentional with his approach. Ethan expressed that his leadership development program provided a framework for him to figure out what was going to work best for him. Ethan learned, "There is no one way to lead."

*Engaging Pedagogies*

All of the participants used specific examples that affirmed how important it was for them to be actively engaged in teaching and learning. Tim indicated that his leadership development program felt like a collaboration among the participants and the facilitators, a forum to exchange ideas and feelings about the topics. Tim enjoyed “just hearing from everybody else, because that’s probably the best way to learn.”

LaTonya stated that she is an introvert and has frustrated teachers and coaches throughout her life due to her quite demeanor. As an introverted leader, she talked about how much she benefitted from being continually challenged to get up and partner with a peer (whom she did not know) well. LaTonya’s experience is an example of building programming that understands various personality types and learning styles. LaTonya described her experience as:

very interactive as opposed to being in lectures all day, the interactive kind of course and I felt like I learned just as much as I would as being in a regular class. It got me into talk to people and I don’t do that in my regular life.

Malcolm observed that being in a more “intimate setting” with peers whom he’s developing relationships, added to his comfort in sharing. He also felt that small groups and pairs activities helped build group cohesion and allowed everyone space to share. Amy was intrigued by having the opportunity to continually hear the perspectives of her peers and was struck by the variety of beliefs and strategies shared for each topic area. Further, the learning dynamic in Amy’s leadership development program allowed her to meet and bond with student-athletes from other teams.

## Discussion

Student-athletes have little time to invest in endeavors outside of sport (e.g., Rubin & Moses, 2017; Stokowski et al., 2019). Astin (1984) warned that the amount of time student-athletes spend in their sport hinders this population's ability for campus involvement opportunities. Student-involvement theory believes that campus involvement will enhance the student-experience (Astin, 1984), the present study found that student-athletes that participated in leadership development programming reported a positive student experience.

Leadership skills are vital to student success and serve a major function of higher education (Aviola & Gardner, 2005; Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Greenwald, 2010; Navarro et al., 2020). Although leadership is constantly evolving (Komives et al., 2011), athletic departments have an obligation to assist student-athletes in realizing their true leadership potential (Navarro et al., 2020). Further, the majority of Division I programs have some sort of leadership programming available to student-athletes (Navarro et al., 2020; NCAA, n.d.); however, often the impact of such programming on the student-athlete population is unknown. For the participants, being involved in a leadership development program was beneficial. Once again, demonstrating the importance of student involvement, particularly for the student-athlete population (Astin, 1984).

Student-athletes are often unprepared to transition from intuitions of higher learning (e.g., Stokowski et al., 2020). Scholars have long advocated for effective programming to assist student-athletes adapt to a life beyond sport (e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Comeaux et al., 2011; Navarro et al., 2020; Stokowski et al., 2020). The present study demonstrated that student-athletes that participated in leadership development programming through their respective athletic departments experienced personal growth



and development, skill development, and an increased sense of engagement. More specifically, such programming assisted this population in learning how to communicate, meeting new people, gaining confidence, and essentially transferring leadership skills into every facet (e.g., athletics, classroom, community) of the student-athlete experience.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Implications***

Leadership development programs should be available and encouraged for the entire student-athlete population. Although the Navarro et al. (2020) suggests that SAAC can provide leadership opportunities, the results of the present study demonstrated that not only should student-athlete appointed leaders (e.g., SAAC) take part, but in fact, all student-athletes should take part in leadership development as this population has the potential to become emergent leaders (Northouse, 2010). Given that engagement is critical to the first-year experience (Navarro et al., 2020; Comeaux et al., 2011), perhaps a formalized leadership development curriculum should be a part of all student-athlete summer bridge programming. Further, the participants seemed to enjoy the interaction provided in the leadership development programming at their respective institutions. Although the current trend (e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Comeaux et al., 2011) calls for self-directed virtual programming and modules, personal interaction appeared to be vital to the participants.

### ***Limitations***

As the present study is qualitative in nature, this study cannot be generalized although the results maybe applicable to student-athletes. Further, this study only looked at two Division I intui-

tions outside of the Power Five. This study also failed to analyze the leadership development curriculum of the programs.

### ***Future Research***

To begin with, all student-athlete programming (throughout the NCAA membership) should be assessed to ensure its effectiveness. Such assessments would allow stakeholders a keen insight into the student-athlete experience and allow for program modifications to be made. Perhaps the NCAA or even athletic conferences could provide member institutions with instrumentation that would assist in program assessment and evaluation. Further, research is needed regarding leadership development curriculum and how specifically these programs should be structured to ensure optimal impact. Additional work is also recommended, perhaps even a longitudinal study that continues to evaluate and monitor student-athletes who took part in such programming and the impact it has had on their lives post-graduation. Statistical data would also be helpful and would allow researchers to compare student-athlete participants based on various demographic factors.

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## Appendix A

### ***Part I: Demographics & Background***

- Q1: How many years were involved in your athletic department's leadership development program for student-athletes?
- Q2: What college athletic team are you a member of?
- Q3: What level of NCAA competition does your team compete?
- Q4: What class year are you at your institution?
- Q5: What do you identify as your racial background?
- Q6: What do you identify as your gender identity?

### ***Part II: Leadership Development Program Experience***

- Q1: Please describe your experience in your student-athlete leadership program:
- Q2: Please describe what you felt was the most impactful aspect of your experience in your student-athlete leadership program:

- Q3: What did you learn about yourself from your experience in your program?  
What do you feel the goals of the program are? What is it trying to accomplish?
- Q4: What did you learn about yourself from your experience in your program?
- Q5: What did you learn from your experience that you have been able to apply to your leadership on campus?
- Q6: How would you describe your ability as a leader?
- Q7: What changes would you recommend to the program?