

ATHLETE EXIT AND ROLE TRANSITIONS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to research and determine the factors of communication that leaders within organizations use that affect the exit process of collegiate athletes. The research focuses on former NCAA Division I athletes who have exited their respective sport in the last 5 years and includes details about their exit process and how the exchanges between them and their coaches and/or leaders in the athletic organizations impacted their macro role transition out of sports. A major goal of the paper was to generate a list of best practices for coaches and other leaders within athletic departments to aid athletes in the process of exiting their sport and help them mitigate mental and emotional struggles as they leave.

Keywords: macro role transitions, athlete exit, Leader-Member Exchange, role communication

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INTRODUCTION

The highly structured routine and lifestyle of collegiate athletes is extremely demanding and requires a person who is both strongly committed to long term goals and intently engaged in the day-to-day tasks required of them. One example of this is NCAA athlete Vedika Anand who realized when she started competing as a Division I athlete at Wagner that her most daunting task was to sustain both her physical fitness as well as her mental fitness (NCAA.org, 2023). Athletes who spend their entire lives bettering themselves to achieve excellence in what they do may have a rude awakening when it is all over.

The macro role transition that collegiate athletes experience when they end their years of eligibility and are required to exit their sport can cause an array of emotional responses and can potentially affect their mental wellbeing. Role transitions can be defined as the psychological and physical movement between sequentially held roles (Ashforth, 2001). In order to avoid a crisis transition, meaning when a person is not prepared for the change events that occur when transition happens, there needs to be intentional communication strategies in place to support the person exiting and help them to avoid mental and emotional distress (Stambulova, 2017). Organizations, such as the NCAA and its associated institutions, seem to speak on the wellbeing of athletes often. “We will push for higher standards so we can credibly uphold the ideals of student-athlete well-being and academic success.” (NCAA.org, 2013, para.3). With the NCAA having a fixed timeline for athletes to compete, it is crucial that more research focuses on the macro role transitions athletes go through when they exit their sports and the communication strategies surrounding this event to intentionally ensure the long-term wellbeing of these athletes.

Role transitions are common in life and occur often in the workplace or within an organization throughout time (Ashforth, 2001). People may get promoted to a better position or

may move to new roles dependent upon what an organization needs, and the individuals involved are required to learn and adjust to the new set of expectations and demands. Because such transitions often happen within organizations with more than just a few people, there is often support available to the individuals who experience the role transition. This may be provided by coworkers, supervisors, human resource managers, or outside affiliates. But what happens to an individual when they are to exit their organization completely? There is extensive literature on both role transitions within organizations (i.e., Ashforth, 2012 and Nicholson, 1984) and organizational exit within the corporate workplace (i.e., Lee & Jablin, 1992 and Davis & Myers, 2012). Much fewer portions of research and literature contain the details of exiting organizations regarding unique populations such as collegiate athletes, though some exist (i.e. Gertz, 2024). Studies researching the lives of student-athletes should be prioritized better. “By collecting and analyzing data through these studies, we can better support the physical, mental and emotional well-being of all student-athletes on and off the field” (NCAA.org, 2024).

Literature regarding organization exit suggests that all people involved with organizational exit are affected, leaders and those remaining in the organization (Godager, et. al., 2021). This should prompt all members involved within collegiate athletics to consider available research on organizational exit and the communication strategies involved in order to support their current members and operate more effectively when athletes leave. Literature that exists concerning athlete exit suggests similar ideas as those shown in literature regarding organizational exit and includes themes such as how one’s understanding of their own identity is closely related to the difficulties that may accompany organizational exit (Gertz, 2024). Lally, while referencing multiple works, states that athletes who strongly identify with an athlete role may experience post-retirement identity issues (Lally, 2006). This reveals one small facet of the

unique complexities involved in the life of a college athlete and unveils the need for greater research.

Thankfully, athletic career research has seen a great expansion (Stambulova, 2017). This is important when considering the parallels between organizational exit and athlete exit from their respective sports, knowing there are many similarities to compare and contrast when moving forward in this area of research. There remain several gaps in research regarding the specific factors of communication that influence an athletes exit experience and there is a lack of detail on how they adjust to life after their highly structured life in athletics is over. Continuing to build upon the research is important knowing that over 520,000 student athletes competed in NCAA sports in the 2021-2022 season (NCAA.org, 2022). This large group of people invests countless hours into practicing and playing their respective sports and eventually will approach the end of their career looking back at a long chapter of their life. The length of each one's athletic career may vary but can easily become connected with one's identity when their way of life was impacted for a long period of time and can be easily connected due to the nature of team sports and identifying with them. Ashforth discusses the details of identifying by including details on how individuals perceive themselves as psychologically intertwined with the fate of a social category or role, which includes sharing a common destiny and successes or failures related to such role identification (Ashforth, 2001). Collegiate athletes need to be supported in the exit from their respective sport in order to avoid a crisis-transition. The aim of this paper is to review literature regarding organizational exit and athlete exit, and to provide research and an analysis of what unknown factors of communication that may affect the exit experience for athletes, and to discover what communication strategies should be focused on when supporting an athlete through the exit experience from their sport. Part of this goal is to generate a list of

best practices for teams and organizations to follow as they assist in the exit process of their athletes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational Exit

Organizational exit is commonly researched within the field of communications and can be applied to a plethora of organizations, regardless of what those said organizations do. Jaesub Lee and Fredrich Jablin, explore in their work “A Cross-Cultural Investigation of Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect as Responses to Dissatisfying Job Conditions”, the complexities that accompany organizational exit. Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous (1988, p.601 as cited in Lee and Jablin, 1992) states that exit refers to “leaving an organization by quitting, transferring, searching for a different job, or thinking about quitting.” This exit from an organization may be predetermined or more spontaneous in nature. Blake E. Ashforth, author of the book “Role Transitions in Organizational Life”, explains that studying such role transitions for people who leave an organization are important because careers are beginning to resemble a series of short-term appointments or projects with multiple employers or in multiple networks (Ashforth, 2001). This process of leaving an organization, no matter how long the member was there, can elicit an array of emotions from both the current members of the organization and the member who is exiting the organization. Predetermined departure from an organization is marked by fluctuation between eagerness for the future and desire to remain in the more familiar present organizational role (Davis & Myers, 2010). Eagerness for an individual can mean excitement for the next chapter of their life in a new role and may feel like a fresh start. The desire may also be present to remain in the organization they are in because it is familiar and comfortable. Change is difficult for many people and can be even more difficult when a person is required to make a change from familiarity.

All members involved in an organization are affected in some way by organizational exit, whether it be themselves or someone they work with. Experiencing a leader's exit may have implications for the remainder of time in an organization for those members who stay in that organization (Godager, et. al., 2021). Members that remain in an organization lose a part of their operating system by dropping a member and those who exit are moving away from an organization and system they may have known for quite some time. An array of emotions and feelings could accompany the organizational exit process that may require an individual to make sense of when they leave. If this process is not taken seriously, it allows for the possibility of a crisis transition to occur, the outcome of ineffective coping when experiencing a transition in life (Stambulova, 2017). An article written by LaFarge and Nurick examines the concept that people within organizations may consciously or unconsciously recreate family dynamics with those involved in an organization, which could cause emotions to arise if they leave. They state that, "The exit itself is likely to be experienced transferentially and to elicit ambivalent emotional responses that are more powerful and complex than those that might be predicted by the details" (LaFarge & Nurick, 1993, p.362). There may be a sense of loss and potential grief that occurs when one leaves an organization where relationships were built and, in some cases, fostered.

The depth of relationships formed within an organization may vary and the support given to those who leave looks different in many places. Research continues to dive into many populations when researching organizational exit, such as military exit (Naphan & Elliot, 2015) and employee exit (Lafarge & Nurick, 1993). One unique group of individuals who experience organizational exit seems to be overlooked in current research, and that group is collegiate athletes. They are a rare sample of the general population who experience a distinctive organizational exit at some point during their career. To show a detailed example of how unique

and rare this population is, the percentage of female high school basketball players who have the opportunity to go on and play NCAA Division I basketball is 1.3% (Estimated probability of competing in college athletics, NCAA.org). This fact shows the small percentage of the general population who extend their sports career to the college level in a particular sport. The time and effort are demanded from most within organizations and especially demanded of college athletes. This may cause individuals to closely link their identity to their sport and lead to issues before, during, and after organizational exit occurs. This presents the challenge for those preparing for exit to de-identify themselves from their sport and may require concrete forms of assistance. Support is crucial to allow student-athletes a smooth transition out of their sport and needs to be further researched and developed to aid in this process.

Athlete Exit

Athlete exit can mean people leave their sport for good due to the end of their eligibility, injury, or other reasons that led them to leave. This experience happens for many after they have played their sport for many years and for some who played at the collegiate level for some time. The NCAA has a five-year rule where a student-athlete cannot compete in any D1 collegiate sport for more than four seasons within a period of five calendar years (*What is the NCAA age limit?: NCSA*. NCSA College Recruiting, 2023). The pandemic that began in 2020 did allow athletes who participated in collegiate athletics during the pandemic an extra year of eligibility if they desired to take it due to many games and competitions that were canceled cutting peoples' chances to play their sport short. This shift in some athletes' plans caused some collegiate athletes to change their academic plans to remain eligible to play an extra year if they chose to take it.

College athletes currently involved in their years of eligibility are required to balance a lot in their lives. “The typical college athlete is balancing multiple identities – that of a student, an athlete, a son/daughter, and/ or a boyfriend/girlfriend” (Burns et. al., 2011, p.281). A typical day in the life of a student-athlete in college could look like going to class for 4 hours, practice for 3 hours, weight training for 1 hour, film for 1 hour, and finding time before, between, and after all of that to study, eat, see friends and family, and sleep. “Competitive athletes are pushed routinely to the limits of their physical abilities” (Carfagno 2014, p.45). It is a demanding lifestyle that requires self-discipline and a great understanding of time management. Because there is such a demand of time from student-athletes, they typically develop a routine. This might mean waking up at the same time each day to eat breakfast before class, arriving at practice 30 minutes early to stretch, or planning time at the beginning of the week for friends. Once routine is established, it can become easier and more comfortable to deal with the demands of being a college athlete. Carfagno alludes to the research that a highly demanding training schedule can have tremendous benefits when tempered with periods of rest and recovery (Carfagno, 2014). All of the aspects of a college athlete’s life are in some way affected by their sport, and it can make it really easy for them to identify strongly with their sport due to the time demands and impacts in those areas of their life. The way others talk to athletes who are still competing during their years of eligibility can also add to identifying oneself with their sport. Finding identity in your sport when it requires you to adjust your life in so many ways along with how people speak to you about your role as an athlete is not surprising but can lead to issues when that sport is no longer the main demand affecting every aspect of life. An article written by Gertz explores what Socialization out of Sport (SOS) looks like through a quantitative research lens and the benefits of forming non-athlete identities to aid in the SOS process (Gertz, 2024, p.14). The athletes in

the study completed a survey regarding things like life satisfaction, mental health, emotional support, and athletic identity. Gertz shares, “The reception of personal support from athletic support staff members during student-athletes’ final year was important for subsequent mental health of recently retired Division I student-athletes” (Gertz, 2024, pg.40).

One feature of identification in sport is that of being part of something greater than yourself. Sports can create a sense of belonging and support to the individuals involved through the development of organizational culture, defined by Edgar Schein as ‘a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration’ (Schein 2010, p.18). Vince Lombardi, a famous football coach, once stated, “Individual commitment to a group effort – that is what makes a teamwork, a company work, a society work, a civilization work” (Family of Vince Lombardi c/o Luminary Group, 2024). Everyone working together for a common goal can bring excitement, joy, and purpose and is often a point of emphasis in locker rooms. When an individual is a part of a team, they may relish in the reality of their current state, feeling connected and supported, but may not consider the radical change they will experience when they leave that setting for good. In a study conducted by Patricia Lally exploring identity and athletic retirement, many of the athletes who participated experienced childhoods and school years that were very devoted to team sports (Lally, 2007). Athletes who experience exit from their sports after a life full of sports may need a great deal of support. “Research should continue to examine the environmental drivers of athlete satisfaction, but a growing body of research suggests that researchers also need to take the athletes themselves into consideration” (Burns et. al., 2011, p.280). One way that athletic departments and teams can help the athletes themselves exit from their sport is through the

research and implementation of an exit program or with intentional communication strategies to support all areas of the human being leaving their beloved sports.

Exit Programs

An exit program is a program that simply facilitates and assists an individual in the exit from an organization. These programs have been used in the corporate world, academic world, and in athletics. For example, Ephrata High School in Washington implemented a “Tiger Futures Program” that includes career pathways, portfolios, and a final exit interview for their students. An article written by Christine Lynn Gruver (2001) called “The Development and Design of an Exit Program for High School Career Pathway” shows the potential benefits that exit programs can bring to people who go through them. Some of the benefits of participating in an exit interview include shaping the future, time to reflect on the past, and a chance for the individual to take ownership of their next steps (Gruver, 2001).

Another portion of an exit program worth considering would be the use of exit interviews. Exit interviews, in simple terms, are information-gathering sessions with departing members of an organization in a formal or informal setting (Lefkowitz & Katz, 1969). The interviews allow the member who is exiting to share their experiences in the organization and share their thoughts on how to improve the organization as a whole. “Seeking feedback from departing employees has been a staple of human resource management since the 1920s in the United States, and training programs to improve this conversation abound in all corners of the industrialized world today” (Gordon, 2010, p.60). This method that is commonly used allows both parties to be engaged in the exit process and may help the exiting employee find some closure and feel that their opinion is valued while allowing the employer to find areas in which they can improve their operations, finding a win-win exit experience for both parties involved.

The use of exit interviews are used in some athletic departments for athletes who go through the exit process, but little research exists on the details of how common this method is used.

Some athletic departments may have implemented exit programs for their athletes, but it seems to be less common and there is a lack of research and data on the frequency with which exit programs are used in collegiate athletics. Leaders within organizations can use exit programs as a way to communicate with members in a structured fashion as they experience the exit process and benefit the members with preparation for the skills they may need in the future (Gruver, 2001, p.14). This may allow the time and space for intentional interactions between coaches and their athletes or between administrators and the athletes in their organizations. An opportunity exists in research to take what we know about the systems in place that work in organizational communication regarding exit, such as exit interviews, and use them throughout college athletic departments to assist athletes in the macro role transition they make when they leave their sport and enter the next phase of their life.

As mentioned before, a great cavity exists in research regarding athlete exit and the macro role transitions they make. The research that exists pertaining to corporate organizational exit has great potential to fuel and aid in the research of athletes who exit their sports. Effective communication strategies in organizational exit recognizes the importance of relationship and individual differences between the interviewer and the interviewee during the exit interview process (Gordon, 2010, pg. 69;76) The concepts found to have been successful in the workplace can be applied to athletic organizations. Vince Lombardi once said, "Running a football team is no different than running any other kind of organization - an army, a political party, or a business. The principles are the same" (Family of Vince Lombardi c/o Luminary Group, 2024, para.9). Research and the implementation of findings in this area are necessary to help athletes

improve their exit experience. The goal of this study is to determine what factors of communication could be emphasized in the potential development of an exit program or what intentional communication strategies by leaders within sports organizations at the college level could use to assist athletes who exit their sport at the collegiate level. Leaders within athletic organizations have an opportunity to assist athletes in numerous ways. Communication and exchanges between leaders, such as coaches and administrators, and athletes can be impactful and may affect how one experiences the exit process as a whole.

Theory

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory is a theory of communication that views the dyadic relationship quality between leaders and members as the key to understanding leader effects on members, teams, and organizations (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015). Collegiate athletes, the majority members within athletic organizations, develop relationships with the leaders of those organizations. Those leaders may include people such as their coaches or administrative staff. These relationships and the communication involved have the ability to impact an athlete's life forever and should be handled accordingly.

Coaches and administrators are part of the business of collegiate athletics and stake their job security on the success of their athletic program and department (Holmes, 2010). Collegiate athletes, who are typically 18-22 years old, leave the dependence of their parents and family at home and join the new "family" of their team. Team culture and believing everyone involved is part of a family helps coaches and administrators get those involved to buy into the idea that achieving success and excellence is a group effort, which in turn, can improve all areas of the business of collegiate athletics when it leads to results of success (Shin, Kim, Choi, & Lee,

2015). People want to invest in winning programs and invest in people who give everything they can to achieve success and excellence.

The exchanges that coaches and administrators have with the athletes in their organizations can happen organically, but a lot of the time, there are intentional structures in place to make these exchanges happen (Aly, 2014). Coaches may create weekly meetings with their captains or require all athletes in their program to meet with assistant coaches throughout the season for film and personal check-ins. Administrators typically have secretaries that help manage schedules and create a sense of harmonization for the administrators time capabilities within their department where athletes may need to make appointments in order to meet with them (Koranteng, Owusu, Ntiamoah, & Owusu, 2016). They may also attend events where all athletes are required to attend to speak on current topics or issues and to spend time afterward getting to know the athletes. In an article by Erdogan and Bauer, they provide details about the dynamic relationships that can exist between leaders and members in the LMX approach by stating, "...leaders form high-quality, trust, affect, and respect-based relationships with a subset of their team, while with other members they tend to have lower quality exchanges..." (Erdogan & Bauer, 2013). These exchanges can have significant implications, positively or negatively, on how athletes appraise their overall experience and can make or break their exit experience from their respective sports.

Transitioning from the role of an athlete to the role of not being a college athlete is a multi-faceted experience. Leaders within athletic departments, such as coaches and administrators, have a crucial role in making sure the exchanges between themselves and their athletes who are exiting are intentional and full of support as these once "family members" step into new roles outside of their department and venture into new things. The success of athletic

departments is often closely related to the financial support they receive from donors and if programs and departments seek alumni retention and support, it is necessary they look at how they are supporting their athletes in the exit process from their organization. In an article written by Meer and Rosen, they explore the details of alumni donations from former athletes stating one of their findings that, "...Varsity athletes whose teams were successful when they were undergraduates subsequently make larger donations to the athletic program" (Meer & Rosen, 2008). Success can mean the record a team had while competing, but success can also come in the form of the relationships built between leaders within the organization, coaches and administrators, and their members, athletes.

Blake E. Ashforth, in his book *Role Transitions in Organizational Life: An Identity-Based Perspective*, explores factors that affect the ease of role learning and the importance of how that learning is facilitated (Ashforth, 2001). Ashforth, through his research of role transitions, found that both mentor and manager social support is instrumental in facilitating role transitions (Ashforth, 2001, pg. 189). He also found that organizational support may facilitate learning if developmental opportunities, adequate resources, and tolerance for mistakes is available to those experiencing role transitions (Ashforth, 2001, pg. 190). This recognition of the role that leaders within organizations play connects deeply with the ideas that LMX presents in the importance of the exchanges between coaches and administrators and the athletes within organizations.

LMX theory compliments the qualitative nature of this study. The process of interviewing former athletes provides an inside look to the individual and unique relationships that were formed with the leaders within their said organizations and will provide insight to the factors that influenced the appraisal of their experience. This theory demonstrates the importance

and influence relationships can have on people within an organization and will lead to a deeper understanding of the workings in the athletic realm. How a coach or administration communicates to their athlete about the exit process can influence whether or not an athlete feels prepared to leave. If there are intentional communication strategies in place by the leaders of an organization and social support given in the process of exiting, this can help mitigate the potential crisis-transition and feelings of restlessness or isolation that some athletes may experience (Gertz, 2024).

Overview

Collegiate athletes live a very unique life that requires a lot from them. The participation in both academics and athletics required the management of many roles and aspects of their life. Almost everything in their life is affected by their sports and academics, such as what they eat, how much they sleep, and what amount of time in their day is allotted to friends, family, and sports. College athletes are required to go to class, attend practice and weight training, and balance the norms of being a young adult on top of it all. Those coaches, administration, family, friends, and community members often ask how athletes' seasons are going or talk about other aspects regarding their sport. This can feed into an athlete really tying their identity into their sport. Athletes may also fail to ponder what their future holds as they experience a shock to their everyday lives and routine. I experienced this personally as I completed five years of competing at the Division I level. The communication around the exit consisted of: "Enjoy the moment!" and "So many lasts coming up!". But very few people aided in the process of asking questions or giving advice about finding community after I was with teammates and coaches everyday year-round or helping me understand what a "normal" workout looked like for the average working adult.

The routines and talk around being a college athlete allow for consistency, structure, and often personal pride in the life of an athlete. Walden, in his article “Communicating Role Expectations in a Coworking Office”, found that teleworkers could not, as they say, “talk shop” when they worked in separate spaces because it was very routine driven and explicitly verbalized (Walden, 2019). This idea of being in separate spaces than those people who you were once around all the time as a part of a rigorous routine in the same space could make it feel like the world has shattered around the life of an athlete when the routines and speech around their identity is sharply cut off by officially exiting one’s sport. Every aspect of an athlete’s life after exiting can feel extremely fluid and fragile. The lack of a rigorous routine can lead to confusion, loneliness, and be accompanied by other mental health difficulties (Gertz, 2024). We do not yet know all of the factors that play into the exit experience of athletes, but it is important to consider current research and build upon it to ensure those who experience this unique type of exit from an organization are supported in every way possible.

Research Questions

1. How do athletes experience exit from their sport in relation to the communication from and relationship with coaches and other leaders within their athletic organization?
2. How do communication strategies by both coaches and institutions affect how former athletes speak about their exit experience?
3. What communication do athletes feel is necessary from leaders within their organization, such as coaches and administrators, to aid in their exit role transition?

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to learn about the aspects of communication involved when an athlete exits their sport permanently and discover the ways in which the exit process can be improved through better communication from leaders, such as coaches or the administration, to better support those athletes leaving. I was a collegiate basketball player for 5 years and played the sport since I was in 3rd grade. Many people in my life reminded me that the end of my career was near but did not provide me with specific ways to cope with these change events. I struggled greatly in my exit experience mentally and emotionally and was inspired to figure out why and look to find a solution. In this research study, I planned to determine the factors of communication that influence the exit experience of athletes by using the qualitative design of phenomenology. Each individual is unique and using the qualitative method of interviewing allowed the individual to share their experience without restrictive questions (Appendix B). I also chose this method to account for the endless possibilities of what communicative factors influenced the exit experience of the athletes interviewed and give each individual an opportunity to speak to their perspective on what went well and where they feel their exit process did not go well (Maxwell, 2013, p.30). Phenomenology, a tradition that conceptualizes communication as a dialogue or the experience of otherness (Craig & Muller, 2007), allows for a deeper look into the factors that influenced former athletes and helps reflect my research questions of the communication between coaches or administration and the athletes involved in the exit experience from collegiate athletics.

Participants

The interviews conducted involved 15 former Division I collegiate athletes who have exited their sport permanently within the past five years (Appendix C). This sample went

through the exit experience of their sport entirely and had unique experiences to share in the qualitative interview process. I recruited former NCAA Division I athletes through the use of emails and text messages sent to Division I sports organizations and/or athletes asking for interest in the participation of this study. I was an athlete myself and have a lot of connections within the field through individual athlete relationships, connections with coaches, and an overall awareness of who is who in the field. This aided in my recruiting process for participants in my research study and allowed my sample to be rich. I did not struggle to recruit participants, but if I would have, my plan was to reach out to institutions and/or coaches/administrations to ask for referrals.

The interviewees consisted of 11 female athletes and 4 male athletes from 6 different NCAA Division I schools (Appendix C). Representation of sports included women's softball, women's basketball, women's volleyball, women's soccer, men's track and field, men's golf, and men's football (Appendix C). While inquiring about total years of participation in their sports, the range of years began with 8 total years up to 20 total years. The average number of years participating in a sport throughout an athlete's lifetime was roughly 15 years. Most athletes leave collegiate athletics in their lower 20's after they obtain a college degree. This means that between 70-80% of collegiate athletes' lives thus far have included them participating in their sport. My goal was met by interviewing 15 former collegiate athletes from any sport, both male and female, to allow for a rich sample that pulls in the different experiences and perspectives that come with college sports from an array of different athletes. These athletes were former NCAA Division I athletes who competed in various sports throughout the Midwest region of the United States. I chose NCAA Division I athletes because most are required to spend the majority of their year training and spend a great deal of their time living out the roles that accompany

participating in NCAA Division 1 athletics. If the athletes were NCAA Division II or III, the majority have an off season where they are not required to be on campus due to the lack of financial support for their housing and cost of living. NCAA Division I athletes are required, in most instances, to train year-round if they are on a full scholarship with housing and cost of living paid for year-round. The time requirement for these athletes to compete at a high level is significant and this may show a greater attachment to the identity as an athlete as well as provide more time throughout the year for athletes to have interactions with their coaches and leaders within the organizations. This requirement often stems from the financial expectations that athletes on scholarship may have due to housing and tuition being covered. Institutions can require these athletes to be on campus and train with their respective teams if the institution pays for their housing arrangements and other costs of living. Snowball sampling is an effective tool in qualitative research because it allows researchers to gain access to unique populations who may be hard to reach otherwise (Maxwell, 2013). I chose the snowball sampling method because of how closely connected athletes are to each other and to increase the efficiency of recruitment. I was able to recruit 13 of the 15 interviewees through my own connections and conducted interviews with 2 athletes of which were recruiting through snowball sampling.

Procedures and Data Collection

Individuals who agreed to participate in this study were asked a series of predetermined questions in a one-on-one interview face-to-face either in person or via a video chat site such as Zoom (Appendix B). The majority of the interviews, 14, occurred over Zoom, and 1 interview was conducted in person. The final interview I conducted was a quasi-member check in which I stuck to the question protocol and asked the participant after each question if they would agree with or find commonalities with the findings that were present among the majority of

interviewees thus far. The interviewees completed a demographics questionnaire prior to the interviews in order for a deeper understanding of my sample to occur (Appendix A). Each former athlete completed a consent form that stated the interview will be recorded and the identity of that individual will be protected in the final presentation of the data. The consent form also included the risks involved while participating, which may have included the surfacing of certain emotions when asked about their experience. I mentioned at the beginning of each interview that if the interviewee decides they no longer wish to participate, I would end the recording and delete it. The recordings of each interview were on voice memos and were protected on a locked iPhone. The interview recordings were transcribed through the voice to text feature on Word documents that were also on a password protected computer to allow for the determination and analysis of themes related to the exit experience of athletes.

Data Analysis

After reading through the transcribed interview recordings, the categorizing strategy was using the available data and coding it into categories and themes that showed prominence in the appraisal of the athlete exit experience and connections with the communication from coaches and other leaders within athletic organizations (Maxwell, 2013, p.105). Allowing the opportunity for the data to “speak for itself” and allow themes to emerge organically as they presented themselves reflected the phenomenological approach used in this study. I used the highlight feature of the Word documents to identify common themes as well as field notes using a paper and pen to determine commonalities between former athletes. By approaching the analysis this way, I was able to avoid the bias of adding my own thoughts toward the research by coding themes that emerged solely from the transcriptions, allowing for the interviewees experience to be presented in the codes and themes. The field notes did not include identifying information and

were only available to me in the privacy of my home. Those field notes will be shredded once the research paper is completed. Using inductive analysis allowed for the raw data to speak for itself in an unconfined context, which is a goal for this study (Thomas, 2006). I used the data analysis to answer the research questions regarding the appraisal of the exit experience of athletes and the areas in which these athletes could be better supported through communication from their coaches and/or administration. In order to bolster reliability and validity in this study, the research questions were referenced through the analysis process, and I reminded myself often the objectives of the research by reading through the research questions as I analyzed. I also referenced the quasi member-check interview I completed to reference the agreement of that particular interviewee that common experiences and responses were in fact true and agreeable. The analysis process took place using Word documents that are secured on a password protected computer. Names were protected in the analysis process and in the final paper using pseudonyms and/or generic words for people, such as participants. After the analysis was complete and the final research paper is solidified and submitted, all documents including the participants names were deleted and/or shredded.

The codes for the analysis were determined by the common themes that showed continuance throughout the interviews. The coding for emergent themes occurred at the conclusion of all the interviews, with the initial interviews providing several key themes that were noted in field notes and later coded in the transcriptions. The codes focused on similar experiences of athletes initially and provided an opportunity to capture the voice of the former NCAA Division I athletes. For the coding process itself, I used the highlight feature and coded “Positive Communication from Leaders” in pink; “Surface Level Communication from Leaders” in blue, “Lack of Personal Communication from Leaders” in yellow, “Desire for Personal

Meeting” in green; “Need for Network and Connections” in orange; “Mental Health Struggles” in red; “Timeline Variance” in grey; Structures in Place in purple. The categories for the codes in relation to the research questions emerged based on the collection of codes and the relation to each topic. Some of the codes determined were applicable to multiple research questions and were mentioned throughout multiple parts of some interviews. The research questions as they related to several categories allowed for the development of common themes in the findings of the research.

Every athlete that competes in the NCAA experiences a handful of similarities when it comes to their experience, some expected and some unexpected. Most athletes that compete at the collegiate level have a relationship in some way, shape, or form with their head coach. The unexpected was that many themes repeated themselves throughout the interviews as they were analyzed and coded.

Researcher Reflexivity Statement

I am a former collegiate athlete who had a difficult time exiting my sport and making the transition to a new chapter of life. This may have affected how I conducted the interviews and interpreted the data collected regarding the exit experience of others if I allowed my experiences to create a lens through which I executed the research process. I believe that my own experiences as an NCAA Division I college athlete assisted me in the research process because I have the background knowledge of the unique rhetoric used and experiences had in collegiate athletics. This allowed me to relate to interviewees and better understand them as they shared their unique experience exiting their sport. When I conduct the interviews, I reminded myself not to share any part of my own experience unless asked by the interviewee or if it is appropriate in the natural flow of conversation. This reminder and self-control helped to not place my personal bias on

others and helped to not influence the tone and direction of the interviewee's responses. A grounded theory approach to this qualitative research study allowed for an inherent openness and flexibility in pursuing new discoveries amongst this unique sample of collegiate athletes (Maxwell, 2013). I interpreted the data in an objective manner by reading through the transcriptions to discover themes and aspects related to my research questions and allowing the data to speak for itself. A goal of this research project was to compile a list of "best practices" for coaches and administrators to use and reference when assisting their student-athletes in the exit process from their sports. I felt this would have helped me greatly mentally, emotionally, and physically as I completed my eligibility and hope that the findings of this research project can help those to come.

RESULTS

After conducting 15 interviews with former NCAA Division I athletes, the results show diverse experiences amongst people with very common themes. All participants in the study had exited their respective sport within the last 5 years, a study design choice in order to allow for a fresh recall of experiences. All the interviewees experienced some effect of the Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020.

In the interviews, the question was asked if athletes struggled with role identification after not participating in team activities when they were officially done. 13 out of the 15 interviewees said they struggled with role identification after not participating in team activities. Andrew shares a little bit about his struggles by saying:

Where do I fit into the world if I am not on a team, if I am not contributing with my performance? Who am I without my sport? What is my self-worth if I am not working out or contributing to something?

This quote represents how connected an athlete can be with their identity and shows the thoughts of those who experience significant change within the exit process. The routine of spending so much time, energy, and effort on one's sport can create a deep connection of identity given the roles that collegiate athletes are placed into. Anna, an athlete who participated in women's softball at the collegiate level for 5 years said, "Not a lot of people understand what a college athlete goes through...it was hard." Athletes may feel like there are few people they can turn to due to understanding of what their life entails. When the routine, structure, and role was taken from them, the majority of participants responded with confusion and uncertainty. Annika, a volleyball athlete shared her feelings as she experienced the exit process by saying, "I think I was more prepared (to exit) then realized later that wow...I wish I could go back. I'm not

prepared for this.” This shows that athletes may not even know what to expect as they exit their sport and may need extra support in this process. There was another athlete, Brian, who shared the weight of the changes he experienced by saying, “...When you finally realize that it’s over, you do go through a bit of an identity crisis.” This represents the potential for a crisis transition to be present in athlete’s who exit their sport. The interviews presented challenges with role identification, variances with communication from leaders, and suggestions as to how to aid athletes in there exit from sports.

How Athletes Experience Leader Communication

The first research question I posed was, “*How do athletes experience exit from their sport in relation to the communication from and relationship with coaches and other leaders within their organizations?*” Three main themes emerged throughout the interviews with former athletes. They are as follows:

1. There was a lack of personal communication from coaches and administrators regarding the athlete exit experience
2. There was a structure in place from coaches and administrators to celebrate exiting athletes with a special day or event
3. The timeline of communication before, during, and after the athlete’s exit followed a trend of little communication before, sentimental during, and hardly any communication after the athlete was done

Personal Communication

12 of the 15 athletes I interviewed shared the common theme that communication leading up to their exit from their coaches and administrators was not personal in a way they maybe had hoped or had expected. Most of the communication was in passing or scratched the surface of

what these athletes were feeling. One athlete mentioned their coach, whom they had played for a while, asked what their major was several times the month leading up to their exit and graduation. This lack of attention to detail in the lives of the athletes caused them to continue the rest of their seasons as best as they could knowing the coaches may be preoccupied with the next set of recruits. Jenna shared her experience with the lack of communication regarding her exit from coaches and administrators with an understanding of why by saying, “I would say there really wasn't talk about it because that is like the very critical time of peoples’ seasons...and there were obviously very important things happening.” Jenna sharing her experience with this shows the lack of personal communication received from coaches as athletes near the end of their seasons, but for a valid reason. She recognized that coaches have a lot of important things to think about toward the end of their seasons and recognized that may be why communication from them leading up to her exit was limited.

Katie, a women’s basketball athlete, said:

Honestly, I feel like it was kind of general and I don't want to say kind of swept under the rug (conversations about exiting) but obviously every coach is kind of focused on that summer and the next upcoming season with recruiting...and then the preparation for the tournament so I kind of feel like it was just kind of a whatever thing.

This experience of feeling like the conversations were almost non-existent, or just a “whatever thing”, expose more concretely the code of “Lack of Personal Communication.” Anna, a women’s softball athlete shared her frustration of the lack of communication by using a tone of disappointment in saying, “It is such a bummer...almost 10 years I’ve had a relationship with these coaches (through recruitment and college athletics).” Her experience represents the desire

that more personal communication would occur after having built a relationship with the coaches for 10 years.

Structure

During the interview process, each athlete was asked if they had any structure in place to celebrate the exiting athletes. Every athlete in the sample said their university had some sort of “senior day” or “team banquet” or “athlete awards ceremony” where outgoing athletes were celebrated for their time at the university. Because of the timeline requirement for my sample, some athletes did not get to experience an event like this personally due to the Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020. All of the athletes in the interviews praised their athletic departments for taking the time to recognize and celebrate seniors and those athletes who may be exiting their sport for other reasons. Emma recounted a few things on her day of recognition saying, “There was a little ceremony...and I got a few gifts and flowers, and they recognized us at our last game.”

Timeline

In the heart of the interviews, athletes were asked to describe their communication from coaches and administrators leading up to their exit, through their exit, and after their exit. A common theme that several athletes mentioned was that leading up to the exit, they were nearing the end of their sports seasons which meant the focus and communication was on winning and staying present in the moment. This was found by the coding of the timeline in an athlete’s exit experience in regard to their communication from their coaches. It presented itself several times throughout the interviews and many of the athletes had coaches who wanted to win and compete as long as possible at the end of their seasons. Amongst the sample, there was not a lot of communication from coaches regarding the upcoming exit of athletes or anything said to them to

help prepare them for the upcoming life changes. Two athletes mentioned they had very intentional conversations with their coaches after their exit and the other thirteen athletes experienced some small-talk questions and conversations.

Communication from coaches during the exit itself, after the last moments of the athlete's last competition, there was a common theme of thanking the athletes who were exiting and touching on the impact those athletes made on their respective programs.

Brad recalled his moments after competing in his last game by stating, "When the game ended, we had like a celebration...with coach and he thanked us for everything."

The communication from coaches and administrators to athletes after the exit is where unfortunate things began to surface at an alarming rate. The athletes who have, as one athlete put it, "Poured their heart and soul into their sport" for so long, reach a point of serious change and crisis of identity and the majority felt left to fend for themselves. Kelly, one of the women's basketball players shared:

You can only put a Band-Aid on it for how long and then there is nothing really that you can do when you are done. At some point you've got to take the Band-Aid off again. This seemed to be the ineffective coping mechanism she tried as she pushed her emotions aside after she was finished to avoid the hurt; while later realizing she would need to process those emotions at some point.

Below are a few quotes from athletes regarding how they experienced communication from leaders within their organizations regarding their exit from the sport they spent 70-80% of their life competing in:

- I've kind of noticed over my last couple of years...it's just like the lack of seriousness toward the new chapter and just not being an athlete anymore. I just feel like once you get

there, it's kind of like 'See ya! You made it' and you are just kind of left on an island.

(Katie - Women's Basketball)

- I mean the head coach wise...I felt like it got asked a lot, but it was never like a conversation. It was just asking because they checked it off their list of like 'what's your future plan' and not like what it actually is and like if there was anything they could do to help because head coaches, they hold a lot of power and they know a lot of people so at times it would be nice to you know have that and feel that support from them versus them just checking it off their list of something they want to ask you in your individual meeting every month. (Sydney - Women's Basketball)
- I was dropped, really, too soon after...I just poured my heart and soul in for years...it just seems like we were let go too soon. (Anna - Women's Softball)
- I don't know. Literally left after the game. That was it. Went home and...yeah...I was just kind of on my own at that point. (Chase - Football)

Multiple Communication Strategies from Leaders

The second research question I posed was, "How do communication strategies by both coaches and institutions affect how former athletes speak about their exit?" Three common themes emerged throughout the interviews, and they are as follows:

1. A lack of communication from coaches and administration led to uncertainty in the exit process for athletes and caused an array of mental struggles
2. Surface level communication from coaches and administrators led to frustration and feelings of not being cared for

3. Appreciative communication and intentional communication from coaches and administrators was found to be helpful and aided in a smooth transition for athletes leaving their respective sport

Lack of Communication

Athletes who experienced a lack of communication by their coaches and administration spoke about significant feelings of uncertainty and mental struggles. One athlete, Brittney, who participated in women's basketball for 4 years, said, "I feel like some genuinely don't care about what is going on after." This quote represents the common theme that emerged throughout the interviews of both a lack of personal communication and the timeline with which said communication happens or doesn't happen.

Another common theme of uncertainty based on my coding and categorizing was how to approach the workforce with little or no experience. This theme was primarily coded as the need for network and connections. Athletes spend the majority of their collegiate careers in the classroom, weightroom, locker room, and on their respective playing surface. Brian, a football athlete who desired some direction after his exit said:

There was no real plan. It was kind of just like 'thanks'... but they don't really tell you what goes on next. It's kind of a weird transition...you don't get any direction. You just don't get any guidance.

This recognition of no guidance was coded into the theme of lack of communication which is represented in the quote from Brian. Most jobs when marketing job openings require experience that normal students can get through part-time work or internships. College athletes do not always have the time to gain that experience and it can be hard to find a job willing to take

someone with little to no experience. Micheal, an athlete who experienced the effects of the time consumption that college athletics produces, mentioned the following:

I think one negative that I will say about college sports is not necessarily having a great opportunity to take an internship...you are expected to be at workouts in the morning and afternoon and so there's not a whole lot of opportunity...there's not a whole lot of leniencies as far as work.

Michael sharing his experience shows one of the downfalls of the time consumption that collegiate athletics requires and represents the lack of communication that exists in relation to allowing job experiences to occur for athletes. It was shared by the majority of the athletes in the interviews that coaches may be able to help athletes make that jump into the workforce with no experience because coaches are typically well connected with alumni, others in the community, and typically have connections all over the country due to the dynamic nature of the college coaching profession. It is pretty uncommon for a college coach to be coaching in their hometown, so most of the time, they have connections to former players, other college coaches, and friends throughout the United States. Coaches could be a significant resource for athletes who never had the chance to gain field experience by vouching for their work ethic and skill set to potential employers. Andrew, a football athlete who competed in college for 5 years, said, "I guess there is a little bit of uncertainty which everybody goes through but there was a little bit of a feeling of 'Ok, you are done playing, like thanks...see ya later.'" This quote represents both a lack of communication and the timeline in which communication occurs or does not occur for athletes as they exit their sports.

Surface Level Communication

Surface level communication was a common experience amongst the majority of the athletes interviewed. They would mention that administrators would say hello in passing or maybe never even speak to the athletes. Coaches have the opportunity to speak to the athletes more than administrators and that was recognized by many of the athletes. Most of them understood it is a business and that coaches and administrators have very busy lives, but these athletes competed at a high level, which usually means the experience of culture talks and teams being a family. After all, the athletes and coaches spend more time with each other than they do their own related family members in most instances when in season. This can easily make one feel very close to everyone in their athletic circle and can make it difficult to leave when the time comes, as 13 out of the 15 athletes alluded to when speaking on their struggles with role identification. Annika, a volleyball athlete, shared, “It’s not even that I am struggling with missing volleyball, it’s more of the team aspect and role identity of it.” When coaches and administrators would talk to their athletes on a surface level basis, for example Brian sharing his experience of an exit interview with someone he had never met after he completed his sport by saying it was “more of a check the box versus actually a check-in with you as a person”, it led to an understanding that this can be hard for athletes to comprehend because they had felt a part of a family for so long and potentially known the coaches they were with, as one athlete put it, for “10 plus years”. Frustration would arise and the feeling of being cared for began to dwindle.

Katie spoke to this saying:

I feel like it shouldn’t be something that’s just grazed over...I went into my exit meeting...I just felt like it was kind of, I don't know, it was below my expectations. I just wish that coaches would be more involved in the process...and just being a little bit more

vocal about being there for us and supporting us and if there's anything you know they can do to help us...I think would be super helpful.

This quote represents the theme emergence for the desire that athletes have for more than just surface level communication. Katie's voice is represented in her recognition that more could be done, and it would be very helpful to athletes if more were done to communicate to athletes in the exit process.

Appreciative and Intentional Communication

The few athletes that experienced appreciative and intentional communication felt the transition to the next chapter was much smoother than those who received little communication or "wishy washy" surface level communication. Jackson shared in his interview that his relationship with his coach really did feel like family, and he still communicates with his former college coach to this day. Below is a quote of Jackson bringing light to his very positive experience with the communication from his coach:

He (coach) obviously wanted to see me succeed...I can't speak highly enough for him so from on his part before, during and after, I still talk to him...he was probably what made my college experience as high as I view it.

Jackson's experience was easily represented in the theme of appreciative and intentional communication due to his extremely positive experiences with his coach and how that communication allowed him to appraise his experience in collegiate athletics and out of collegiate athletics so high.

Necessary Communication from Leaders

The third and final research question that I posed was, "What communication do athletes feel is necessary from leaders within their organizations, such as coaches and administrators, to

aid in their exit role transition? From this question, three major points of emphasis arose throughout the interviews. They are as follows:

1. Communication to athletes through a personal exit meeting with coaches and/or administrators
2. Assistance in the connections to the workforce process
3. Communication to bring awareness to and prepare athletes for the lifestyle changes that will occur when they exit their sport.

Personal Meeting

Athletes who exit their sport are usually required to complete an exit meeting with compliance. This meeting is very standard and may ask questions about how the experience was for the athlete but not on a personal level. Andrew recalled in the interview that the meeting was “with a compliance person I had never seen or met before.” There were several other athletes who mentioned they had an exit meeting where the coach, in a synopsis, said “So what’s next for you?” The athletes shared that it was nice that they were showing some interest but were frustrated when that was about it for the personal questions. Some athletes, due to the Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020 shared that they did not get any meeting at all due to all the uncertainty that accompanies a world-wide pandemic. Chase, an athlete who exited their sport during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 shared his unique exit by stating in his interview, “I don’t know. I think it's super different than I think a normal end of your college career just because of the circumstances of Covid.” Later on in the interview, Chase was asked if he his university celebrated his exit in any way, and he shared his circumstance by saying:

No, but that was because of Covid. I know normally, yes, normally there is a senior day and like a dinner at the coach's house...So I don't want to like say we don't do that. We do. That was just my experience.

Connecting Athletes to Job Force

As mentioned prior in the breakdown of the study, athletes typically spend 70-80% of their lifetime on average participating in their sport. When they reach the college level, the majority of their time outside of their classes and schoolwork is consumed by practice, weightlifting, film, competition, and travel. Because collegiate athletics requires so much of an athlete's time, there are rarely opportunities for those athletes to work part-time or participate in internship programs to help build their resumes. This can be really frustrating for an athlete who is exiting their sport and looking to enter the workforce with limited experience and a small resume. Athletes throughout the interviews recorded that it would be helpful for coaches to help them make connections to those in the field currently to build a network and show that they have developed the skills necessary for the job they may be applying to through their time and experience as a college athlete.

Coaches and administrators of athletic institutions are usually very well connected with other athletic departments and people from all over the country due to the nature of the profession. Many former athletes go on to work back in their hometowns or move to different cities or states after they complete their collegiate athletic experience. There is a great opportunity for those who have the connections and resources to share them with the young individuals who are close to becoming young professionals. Andrew, an athlete who participated in football at the NCAA Division I level, said, "...Trying to get connected as best as they can "

was one way to help athletes get the wheels turning and make forward progress in the job search that occurs after college.

Two athletes from separate NCAA Division I institutions mentioned they had a very successful experience with this in college where their athletic departments connected them with former athletes in the workforce as sort of a mentorship program. This was seen to be very helpful for both athletes in making the transition to the workforce smoother. Chase shared his college experience with professional development and confidence of feeling prepared to enter the workforce by saying:

I did a bunch of professional development stuff so in terms of like getting a job, I wasn't worried about that... We have a program that's literally professional development... You learn resume building and connections with alumni... If you needed help, there was someone there... I think the resources were super accessible.

This quote represents the benefits that accompany communication surrounding connecting athletes to the workforce in some way.

Preparation for Lifestyle Changes

One of the hardest things any person goes through is a significant change of routine. Human beings are creatures of habit, and they tend to like to keep things the same and avoid big changes. When an athlete exits the sport that has affected so much of their life, they may experience changes beyond what they could have thought in preparation for exiting their sport for good. A handful of athletes recorded that they struggled with numerous lifestyle changes such as exercise, nutrition, time management, and relationships. Hanna spoke to a deep part of her experience leaving her sport and brought to light an area she felt would be important to talk about by stating the following: "I think definitely nutrition and talking about that, especially for

females, because we just grow up having body image issues.” Two of the football athletes interviewed shared their changes regarding working out. They shared it was very different going from a lot of muscle after lifting so much to living out their everyday life without the muscle capacity and physique of an NCAA Division I football player.

Anna athlete shared her changes in relationship with those around her. She shared about her thoughts regarding the relationship she had with her father saying:

I think what was also hard was the relationship with my dad...it wasn't solely based on softball...but like wow...what is our relationship going to look like? How are we going to bond...this father-daughter relationship without softball?

Real life experiences and thought processes were shared in the interviews regarding what happened to athletes as they exited their sport for good, and each individual shared unique instances of lifestyle changes they wrestled with.

Covid-19 Pandemic Implications

The NCAA decided to grant athletes an extra year of eligibility and many athletes had to consider whether they would continue on in their respective sport for an extra year or not.

Expiring eligibility, an extra “Covid year”, and injury were all included in the sample of peoples exit. Below are two quotes from athletes in which one decided to take their extra year and one

who decided to be done. Kelly, a female athlete who took her “Covid Year” said:

For me it was kind of a no brainer, when I first enrolled in college it was 4 years, I mean that's really all you get, and then all of the sudden...with covid, it was like you have one more year in college, why would you not use it?

One of the male athletes, Andrew, who did not take their “Covid Year” shared:

I actually had one season left with the 'Covid Year'...I was about ready to be done. I had battled some injuries over the course of my career and played a lot of games and I think I was kind of ready to take the next step.

It is safe to say that the worldwide pandemic that began in 2020 had an impact on the lives of many and did make an impact on collegiate athletes for various reasons. The trickle effect of athletes taking their "Covid Year" impacted the lives of high school athletes who were in the recruitment process to play in college as well as the young athletes who were currently on rosters through another year of potentially limited roster spots and competition time. Brian, a male athlete who decided to not take their extra year factored this in while making their decision.

Brian shared the following:

I struggled with it because selfishly, everybody wants to compete more, and I viewed it as if I decided to stay, then I am only pushing a difficult decision on the class below me...If I came back and stole a year of their eligibility, then I am just kicking the can down the line.

Hearing the experiences of athletes who competed during the Covid-19 pandemic meant hearing the unique ways that each university handled such a time of uncertainty. The opportunity to compete an extra year granted by the NCAA was both a positive and a negative to some. The chance to play an extra year meant that these athletes could compete one more season in the sport they loved so much, but it also meant it affected those younger athletes on their team and even the high school athletes who were in the process of recruitment by those teams to limit their opportunities to compete. The 2024-2025 season will be the last academic year that athletes competing will have a chance to compete using their "covid year" of eligibility. After learning about the ripple effects that this unique group of individuals dealt with along with the

complicated thought processes that accompanied the chance to compete an extra year, it is important that research moving forward will consider all unique circumstances, big or small, when inquiring about the exit of an athlete.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to examine the factors of communication from leaders within athletic organizations to determine and compile a list of best practices coaches and administrators can use to assist athletes in the exit process from their respective sports. The first two research questions I posed were written with the goal in mind of learning how athletes experience exit in relation to the communication from their athletic organization leaders and learn how athletes appraise and speak of their experience in relation to that communication, or potentially, the lack thereof. The third research question was written with the goal of helping determine a list of best practices for coaches and administrators to aid athletes in the exit process.

Scholarly research regarding athlete exit is slim, but there is a lot of general research (Ashforth, 2001) on organizational exit as well as macro role transitions, which can easily be compared to and connected with the exit collegiate athletes experience when they leave their respective sports. Organization exit research examines crisis transition, meaning the outcome of ineffective coping when experiencing a transition in life (Stambulova, 2017). Brittney, a women's basketball athlete spoke to her thoughts on coping with the transition of leaving athletics as she said, "What am I? What is my next step?" Many athletes throughout the interviews shared their experiences with identity issues of where they fit into the world now that they are not an athlete and mental health struggles such as anxiety. Sydney, a women's basketball player shared her experience with the routine change of exiting her sport in relation to her mental health by sharing, "I felt that anxiety...I was just like so anxious about it and I'm like I feel like I am not doing enough all the time." The same crisis transition that happens for some individuals in the workplace when they experience a transition in life poses the same potential

risks for those who compete in athletics. Kelly, one of the women's basketball athletes, shared, "It was super hard...when that final buzzer hit....it was 'what do I do now?' Like, it's done. Everything that I've been doing since I was in kindergarten is over. I was super sad...depressed for a couple of days."

I, personally, would describe my transition as a crisis transition out of athletics. It was very hard for me to step away from something I loved so much and even harder to step away from people I loved so much. The daily routine change, which many athletes in the interviews touched on, causes a sense of not doing enough when you finally get some free time. A handful of athletes, especially the female athletes, brought up their experiences with anxiety and with body image issues after they left collegiate athletics. Coping with all of this can lead to a quick downhill spiral and can be very detrimental to one's physical, mental, and emotional health. It is crucial that research is assessed, and athletes and former athletes are in some way prepared and cared for by the "family members" on their respective teams.

Collegiate athletic departments try to develop strong cultures in order for greater "buy in" to their programs from all involved. Terms like "family" are often used to show a deep care for those involved with an athletic team. One specific article within organizational communication research shows that people within organizations may consciously or unconsciously recreate family dynamics with those in an organization (Lafarge & Nurick, 1993). The article by Lafarge and Nurick goes on to say that organizational membership is characterized by a simultaneously nurturing, frustrating, stifling, and exhilarating environment which can make it feel like those involved are part of an extended family of sorts (Lafarge & Nurick, 1993). The article stated that this view of relationships within an organization can happen by a conscious effort, but more often than not, they occur unconsciously. This environment is easily created with coaches and

athletes who spend more time together than they do with their own families at home. A myriad of hours are spent together practicing, traveling, and competing. It was not surprising to hear that many athletes had feelings of frustration, confusion, and loneliness of being dropped so quickly from the communication with those whom they saw as family for the last 4-6 years. The exit process can elicit many emotions for athletes who leave their athletic families.

The Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX Theory) within communication describes the importance of the exchanges between leaders of an organization and their members and how those exchanges affect the members within an organization (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015). Research regarding the LMX theory of communication in relation to athlete exit is limited and the hope of this study was to begin to fill in the gap of research. The results from this study highlight the experiences athletes had with their coaches and administrators throughout their exit process from collegiate athletics. The responses in regard to the everyday exchanges that athletes either had or did not have with the leaders within their athletic organizations resulted in some sort of impact for each athlete. The athletes voiced what they thought would have helped them exit their sport regarding communication from leaders within their organizations and they shared their recommendations for changes to be made to assist those athletes who have yet to experience exit from their sport.

The results of the interviews were expected and not very surprising as I began the research and listened to the exit experience of the athletes who participated. I was grateful and surprised to learn there were a few athletes who had extremely positive communication experiences from the leaders within their organizations, but not surprised to hear the majority of athletes felt a lack of communication after they exited their sport.

Macro Role Transitions

Macro role transitions are very important as they can elicit many responses from individuals. This process should be taken seriously as it can bring forth feelings of stress to the individual experiencing it (Ashforth, 2001, p.220), particularly, in this case, for athletes who are to exit the sport they spend most of their life competing in. The athletes throughout the interviews shared numerous times how difficult it was to exit their sport and how they felt confused and anxious. Annika, a volleyball athlete, said, “It’s a huge transition...like your life is completely different and kind of turned upside-down.” The macro-transition that Annika experienced was recognized by her as something that is “huge” and changed a lot about her life and daily routine.

The average time calculated for interviewees participating in their sport was 15 years, meaning they spend almost 3 quarters of their childhood and young adult life participating in their sport. Andrew, a football athlete, shared that, “It’s essentially like quitting a full-time job, it was a strange feeling.”

Finding one’s identity in their sport after spending so much time competing and practicing can lead to a deep identity built within what they do. The macro role transition out of athletics is both connected to one’s personal identity as well as the significant changes to schedule and routine. This is in line with theorizing from Ashforth (2001), who argued the transition athletes make out of sport can be an extremely difficult process that elicits an array of emotions and should be taken seriously by all involved.

Current research regarding athlete exit contains a lot of information on professional athletes who approach retirement. Patricia Lally examines the concept of identity and athletic retirement. She recognizes that many of these athletes lived out childhoods and formative years

of their lives devoted to their respective sports (Lally, 2007). A very recent quantitative study examines the idea of Socialization Out of Sports (SOS) and how loss of identity and purpose can be harmful to the overall well-being of a former athlete (Gertz, 2024). Gertz explores very similar concepts to those researched in this article and her thorough work should be read and considered by all interested in bettering the lives of athletes. One major finding from Gertz's study was the impact that closure has for an athlete's mental wellbeing. Compared to the findings of this qualitative study, personal meetings with coaches to not feel "dropped so soon" as one athlete put it, could easily be categorized into aspects leading to closure for an athlete. Sydney, one of the women's basketball athletes shared, "I just sometimes didn't feel like I had a purpose. I'm like 'What am I doing?'" This is such an awkward time in my life."

This study allowed athletes the space to speak to their exit experiences due to the qualitative nature of conducting interviews. The data from this study aids in our understanding of theory and the process of role exit by shedding light on a unique and, in my opinion, under researched population. The NCAA conducts research of their current athletes and graduating athletes but may want to consider adding to their research that of former athletes in order to improve this process of exiting one's sport. This may benefit not only the mental and emotional wellbeing of those who competed for the NCAA, it may also lead former athletes who did experience a positive exit to support NCAA institutions financially. Either way, there is a great opportunity to fill in a gap in research regarding former NCAA athletes as well as an opportunity to take the research that does exist, along with the research and data from this study, and positively impact the lives of those who competed for so much of their lives.

Athlete role exit has its unique complexities but could be compared to those experiencing retirement and the exit from a workplace organization. Both events are change events that affect

the structure and routine of the lives of those involved. It is important to recognize the humans involved and consider what these change events could elicit mentally and emotionally.

Recommendations

The goal of this study was to examine the communication strategies by leaders within athletic organizations and to compile a list of best practices. Based on the findings from the study, I have compiled a list of practices that coaches and administrators should consider implementing in order to help their athletes avoid a crisis transition out of athletics and mitigate, as much as possible, the array of negative mental and emotional responses that may accompany such a significant life change. Sydney shared her thoughts on the disconnect she feels is present by saying, “I feel like a nobody right now and I think if coaching staffs and administrations knew, there is no doubt that they would want to do things to assist.”

1. *Prioritize Coach-Player Connections* (FOR COACHES) - Based on the data regarding the mental and emotional struggles athletes experienced in their exit, I recommend that coaches spend some time and effort to make sure their former athletes are doing ok by scheduling a personal meeting with them after they exit their sport. I also recommend a follow-up within the month or months after they are finished based on the fact that a handful of athletes mentioned it took them 1 year, myself included, to feel as though they were in a good mental space regarding their exit. This could easily be written into one of the assistant coach’s job titles to take intentional time and have a plan to communicate with the former athletes. Just as there is a coach in charge of recruiting on most coaching staffs, so too should there also be a coach in charge of alumni retention and relationships. This recommendation came from the data that found that athletes relationships and communication with their coaches mattered and that the timeline to feel better about

making the transition out of sport is longer than most people may think, as evidenced by the following quote from Brian.

- It did take a me a good year...until I felt like I was in a good mental space. (Brian - Football)

2. *Job Network Connections* (FOR COACHES AND ADMINISTRATORS) - The data showed many athletes not feeling prepared to exit due to their own lack of experience in their respective job fields caused by the endless hours their sport consumed over their athletic careers. In light of this, athletic departments should consider having a structure or system in place to prepare athletes for their careers in the workforce and provide any and all resources possible that can help these athletes connect with former athletes or the general public who are currently in their respective work fields.
3. *Exit Program or Resources* (FOR ADMINISTRATORS)- The majority of athletes who participated in this study experienced lifestyle changes that they did not feel prepared for. As a result of this, I recommend that institutions implement some sort of exit program that addresses the lifestyle concerns after not participating in collegiate athletics such as exercise, nutrition, finding community, etc. This recommendation came from the data that showed athletes struggling with lifestyle changes after they exited their sport as well as the data that revealed the need for more resources to be readily available to athletes as they exit. This recommendation is evidenced by Kelly who shared her curiosity about what life will be like regarding community life and about how and if she will interact with her community by saying:

You're known in the community as an athlete and now, it's like, well what are people going to think about me when they see me now? Are they going to say hi to me anymore or was it just a sports thing?

It may benefit athletes to have the option of which events they attend to tailor to their specific needs, or it may be of benefit to require all senior athletes to attend some sort of program to prepare them for the significant changes that wait around the corner. The NCAA has stated a main priority of theirs as an association is to “identify, co-create and distribute best practices to student-athletes and members” (NCAA.org, 2021). Athletes who exit are technically no longer a part of the NCAA, but the time leading up to their exit, they are NCAA athletes and should receive best practices to exit their sport and step into the next chapter of their lives. Administrators have the power and position to make change happen within their organizations, such as implementing an exit program that is available to all student-athletes. They have access to resources that student-athletes may not even know exists and should present those resources and opportunities to athletes as they prepare to exit their sport based on the feedback from the data collected in this research.

Athletic departments, based on the timeline data found in this study, should prioritize their communication strategies to athletes the year leading up to the exit with the athlete through the year following the exit of those athletes. Based on the data that little or no communication leading up to the exit for athletes led to confusion and frustration, coaches and administrators should spend intentional time preparing their athletes to exit, whether that looks like an exit program or personal meetings. Based on the data of athletes sharing the timeline of their personal struggles to feel stable and feel as though they have processed their feelings and adjusted to a

new lifestyle, I recommend leaders within organizations could consider reaching out to athletes 1 week after their exit, 1 month after their exit, 3 months after their exit, 6 months after their exit, and 1 year after their exit. These check-ins can happen in the form a phone call, text message, facetime, or in person if possible. Asking questions based off the data of struggles with role transitions for former athletes and how leaders within athletics can provide more resources to athletes may be a help to some athletes as they exit. Questions could be:

1. How are you adjusting to life without sports?
2. Is there anything I can do to help ease this transition for you?
3. How are your connections within the workforce going? Is there anyone you would like help reaching?

The questions asked and who is asking them will be unique for each school and each team but based on the data and recommendations from former athletes, it is important that some intentional communication occurs to assist athletes in the process of exiting their sports.

Limitations

This study conducted has several limitations. One limitation is the number of former athletes interviewed and the range of exits that occurred. I had the opportunity to interview 15 former NCAA Division I athletes, but the sample could have allowed for greater numbers and therefore a greater range of experiences. Another limitation was the gender distribution of the athletes. I interviewed 4 male athletes and 11 female athletes. Gender differences may play a role in how one appraises and experiences exit from their sport. My recommendations based on the limitations of my study would be to increase the sample size and vary the gender distribution. The sample design for the study included a very unique set of athletes who experienced the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020. I recommend future research to seek

participants who experience exit after the pandemic and include athletes who may be experiencing the effects of the transfer portal. This will add an added facet to differing relationships with coaches and administrators if athletes transfer to multiple schools within their years of NCAA eligibility. The changes that the recent transfer portal rules have enacted, along with the introduction of NIL money, caused a stir in the relationships built within athletic institutions and what collegiate athletics looks like in recent years. Student-athletes, most commonly in the past, committed to a university and spent their years of eligibility in the same place. With the introduction of NIL opportunities, athletes deciding where to play their sport and making the decision of if they will transfer from their current school or choose to stay now includes the facet of making money with NIL. The ability to transfer without many consequences in order to go to a school that can offer more money to athletes could affect the ability to build strong relationships between leaders within athletic organizations and the athletes who compete for them. It will be important to consider this while conducting future research, while keeping in mind there are things in place to counteract the ability to transfer often and conversations occurring to help retain athletes, making this research still relevant and applicable.

CONCLUSION

Collegiate athletes live very unique lives compared to their peers. While they are attending classes full time just as their peers are, they are also participating in some of the hardest years of their lives. From 4am alarms for conditioning to 5-day road trips for competition, college athletes' lives are greatly impacted by their schedule and routine. These athletes on average are spending 70-80% of their lives participating in their sport. When the time comes for college athletes to officially exit their sport, many emotions and mental challenges may arise after such a big change occurs in their lives.

College coaches and administrators are considered leaders within athletic organizations and with leadership comes responsibility. These coaches and administrators operate in a business where performance and wins lead to success both socially and financially. In order to achieve this success, athletes must “buy in”. Many athletic organizations call themselves a “family” and have pillars of what will lead their organization to success, much like any other business organization would. Athletes who “buy in ” and sacrifice much of their time, energy, and effort to achieve something greater than themselves may feel their world shake when it ends. Coaches and administrators have a tremendous opportunity to support these “family members” in their transition to the next chapter of life. As many athletes in the interviews mentioned, leaving collegiate athletics is a very difficult thing to do for many reasons and each situation is unique to the individual and to the athletic institution as a whole. By conducting this qualitative study, former athletes were given the chance to share their struggles and suggestions for the future to help aid those athletes who may be approaching their exit sometime soon.

The emphasis on athlete mental health has grown tremendously in the last few years and continues to be a topic of conversation within athletics. It is my belief that these conversations

need to continue beyond the athlete's career. The exit from something that has affected and consumed so much of people's lives can cause severe mental struggles along with physical and emotional changes after not participating in collegiate athletics. I am very passionate about this topic because I was one of those athletes who struggled greatly when I exited my sport. My hope is that research in this area will continue, and athletes will receive the necessary communication from the leaders within their organization to avoid crisis transitions and mitigate the array of negative mental struggles and deep cutting emotions that come with leaving something you love.

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APPENDIX A: PRE-INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

1. What is your gender identity?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer to self-identify: _____
 - Prefer not to answer

2. What is your race or ethnicity? [Check all that apply]
 - Black or African American
 - African
 - American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - Asian/Pacific Islander
 - Hispanic or Latino
 - Middle Eastern
 - White – not Hispanic
 - Prefer to self-identify: _____
 - Prefer not to answer

3. What is your age?
 - Please specify: _____

4. Did you play collegiate sports?
 - Yes
 - No

5. What sport(s) did you play?

- Please specify: _____
- 5. How many seasons did you play your sport(s)?
 - Please specify: _____
- 6. How did your exit occur?
 - Eligibility Ended
 - Injury
 - Quit
 - Asked to leave
 - Other (please specify): _____
- 7. When did your exit occur? (Month and year)
 - Please specify: _____

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTION PROTOCOL

Opening Questions

1. How recent was your exit experience? And from what sport and university did you exit from?
2. How many years did you participate in your sport overall since you began playing?
How many years at the collegiate level?

Intro Questions

1. What was your experience leading up to your exit? Describe your communication with others and from others the month prior.
2. Did your university celebrate your exit in any way? (Before, During, After) Please describe any experiences you had. (Ex: senior night, banquet, etc.)

Transition Questions

1. How did your exit occur and how did you communicate to others about your exit? (Expiring eligibility/injury/etc.?) What did you experience as a result of this?
2. How did people around you communicate to you about your exit (i.e., Coaches, administration, family/friends) leading up to it, through it, and after you exited?
3. Immediately following your exit (from the moment you participated in your last competition to 4 weeks after), describe your interactions with coaches and administration. Did you experience any challenges with role identification after not participating in team activities?

Key Questions

1. Describe your mental and emotional experiences after your exit. Were there any positives or challenges as a result of exiting?

2. Did you feel supported through this process? If so, by who or what? Describe what sorts of communication from coaches/admin/family/friends/etc. you experienced.
3. Did your university have an exit program or something in place to aid in the process of exiting? If so, please describe.

Closing Questions

1. If your university did implement an exit program or was looking to improve their communication to athletes as they leave their sports, what do you think would be helpful for them to include? (i.e. – Finding community, exercise/nutrition, etc.)
2. Where do you feel you are now mentally/emotionally regarding leaving your sport? Do you stay in contact with anyone from your program? How have those relationships been affected?
3. Is there anything else you think would be helpful to share regarding the athlete exit experience?

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

NAME	SPORT	YEARS PARTICIPATING AT THE NCAA D1 LEVEL	YEARS PARTICIPATING IN SPORT OVERALL
Jenna	Women's Basketball	5	15
Chase	Football	5	14
Brittney	Women's Basketball	4	14
Katie	Women's Basketball	5	19
Sydney	Women's Basketball	5	18
Annika	Volleyball	4	12
Hunter	Men's Track and Field	5	12
Anna	Softball	5	17
Brian	Football	5	14
Jackson	Men's Golf	4	20
Andrew	Football	5	8
Kelly	Women's Basketball	5	18
Lilly	Women's Soccer	5	18
Chelsea	Women's Basketball	3	11
Samantha	Women's Basketball	4	20