"I Have Grown": A Case Study of Student-Athlete Career Development at Clemson University

Kelly Coffin, Sarah Stokowski, Amanda L. Paule-Koba, and Michael Godfrey

Student-athletes are burdened with demands, expectations, and stressors that pose challenges to their personal development, rendering many student-athletes ill-prepared for career choices outside the sports milieu. Internships are vital to the skill development for all students. Clemson's University Professional Internship and Co-op (UPIC) Program offers on-campus internship opportunities for qualifying students. Informed by student involvement theory (Astin, 1984), the purpose of this case study was to examine Clemson student-athletes' perceptions of participating in the UPIC program. Although the student-athletes experienced challenges during their internships, the data revealed that the internships were instrumental in the professional development of the participants, specifically in the areas of communication, collaboration, and work ethic. Overall, 88.89% of student-athletes felt their internship was very relevant to their career goals. This case study provides an example of cross-campus collaborative programming that assisted in the career development of student-athletes and should be implemented at other colleges and universities.

Keywords: case study, career development, mentorship, programming, student-athletes

Kelly Coffin, MS, is the UPIC Program Coordinator in the Center for Career and Professional Development at Clemson University. Email: kcoffin@clemson.edu

Sarah Stokowski, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational and Organizational Leadership Development at Clemson University. She studies college athlete development, specializing in the personal development literacies. Email: stoko@clemson.edu

Amanda L. Paule-Koba, PhD, is a professor in the sport management program at Bowling Green State University. Her research interests include issues in intercollegiate sport, Title IX and gender equity, academic clustering, and recruiting in college athletics. Email: apaule@bgsu.edu

Michael Godfrey, PhD, is a senior lecturer in the Athletic Leadership Program at Clemson University. Email: mgodfre@clemson.edu

Introduction

In 2012, the University Professional Internship and Co-op (UPIC) Program began at Clemson University as a part of the engagement initiative from then-President James Barker's 2020 Road Map (Clemson University, 2011). Sponsored by the Center for Career and Professional Development (CCPD) at Clemson, the UPIC program was designed to address a number of goals including career exploration, gaining professional experience and building professional networks, and providing students with a means to defray educational expenses through compensation associated with experiential learning (Nunamaker & Cawthon, 2018). The pilot semester (2012) included 20 paid student internships on-campus. By the fall of 2019, the UPIC program offered 374 paid internship experiences on Clemson's campus.

Partnering with faculty and staff mentors across Clemson's campus, the UPIC program offers meaningful professional experiences to undergraduate students that are in line with their career aspirations. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE; 2015) has eight fundamental competencies to career readiness: career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology. The CCPD (n.d.) followed suit and established nine core competencies: communication, collaboration, leadership, self-awareness, integrity and ethics, brand, adaptability, analytical skills, and technology. UPIC interns become familiar with the competencies early on through internship program orientations, and the competencies are reinforced through site visits conducted by the UPIC staff and homework assignments associated with the UPIC internship course (Nunamaker & Cawthon, 2018).

The UPIC program is open to all undergraduate students who have a GPA of 2.0 or higher and there is representation of students from all colleges within the university. To participate as an intern, students must apply for a position, be vetted to ensure they met certain criteria, and interview. Once selected, the interns must complete the hiring process. For most students, the UPIC program provides their first employment experience. Therefore, students receive assistance completing required immigration and tax forms as well as how to set up direct deposit. These steps initiated the professional development process for each intern.

Over the years, the number of student-athletes participating in the UPIC program has grown. Currently, 6% of students that participate in the UPIC program are student-athletes. This increase is important given that only 2% of student-athletes will move forward with sport in a professional capacity (NCAA, 2020). Unlike students in the general population, student-athletes are burdened with many demands, expectations, and stresses that pose challenges to their learning and personal development (Comeaux, 2011). The demands of playing,

training, and traveling generally compete with adequate career preparation, rendering many student-athletes ill-prepared for career and life choices after sport (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010).

Further, the low career maturity of student-athletes is often influenced by the high athlete identity this population often exhibits (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Although sport participation teaches important life skills (e.g., conflict resolution, leadership, organization, time management; Bardick et al., 2009), student-athletes should strive to obtain relevant internship and professional work experience to assist this population in transitioning to a life beyond sport (Navarro et al., 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). Internships are vital to the growth of life and occupational skill development for all students (Turick et al., 2019).

According to Navarro et al. (2020), "Examining and synthesizing empirical research studies focused on the student-athlete higher education experience is crucial to developing high impact programs that best serve this unique population" (p. 165). However, although student-athletes are a unique population, "programming that encourages campus-wide interaction and engagement" is warranted (Navarro et al., 2020, p. 165). Astin's (1984) student involvement theory is a basic framework that states that student immersion on campus leads to efficient learning outcomes. The framework revolves around that of "involvement," citing that students "invest" in their learning environment (Aston, 1984, p. 518). Within the theory, Astin (1984) addressed specific sub-populations of college students, including student-athletes. Although Astin (1984) believed that athletic participation often leads to student-athletes being isolated from the campus community, ultimately, the greater the investment students make into their collegiate experience, the more likely students are to experience personal growth and development. Informed by student involvement theory (Astin, 1984), the purpose of this study was to gain insight into the perceived experiences and outcomes of participating in the UPIC program. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do student-athletes perceive their experience participating in the UPIC program?

RQ2: What are the mentors' perceptions of student-athletes' personal growth through the UPIC program?

Brief Literature Review

Student-athletes are a unique student population with distinctive challenges (Comeaux, 2011; Navarro et al., 2020). Due to the sheer amount of time and dedication to their sport (Rubin & Moses, 2017), student-athletes often exhibit high levels of athlete identity (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Moiseichik et al., 2019). Research demonstrates that a high athlete identity often leads to low

levels of career maturity (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Moiseichik et al., 2019). Additional obstacles (e.g., accessibility, collaboration, financial) often detour student-athletes from participating in career development programming (Brown, 2013; McCarthy, 2016). Thus, student-athletes are often unprepared to resume a life after sport, feeling that they are "not ready to the next phase" (Stokowski et al., 2019, p. 412).

Student-athletes that reported a positive experience adapting to transition to a life after sport express being "prepared" and "ready for the future" (Stokowski et al., 2019, p. 415). Programming that assists student-athletes in career construction (Savickas, 2002) allows this population to "explore career opportunities, [make] informed decisions, and [design] potential career trajectories" (Navarro et al., 2020, p. 7). Participation in high impact practices (HIPs) can help students maximize their individual development and assist students in achieving desired learning outcomes (Kilgo et al., 2015). Internships are one form of a HIP that assist students and should involve reflection and constrictive feedback to support life skills and career goals (O'Neill, 2010). Navarro et al. (2020) suggested "cross-program collaboration and strategic partnerships" (p. 6) as a method to deliver effective student-athlete programming. On-campus internships provide an opportunity for students to communicate with each other, create teams of diverse members, strengthen their weaker skill sets, and continue to build upon their strengths (Kelley-Hall, 2011).

Social support is critical to increase student-athletes' career maturity (Stokowski et al., 2019). Although research has shown that faculty (Comeaux, 2011) and academic advisors (Stokowski et al., 2020b) do not view student-athletes favorably, integrating student-athletes within the campus community can positively influence the experience for this sub-population of college students (Navarro et al., 2020). Studies have also demonstrated that with effective mentoring, student-athletes' interaction with faculty and staff members can have a positive impact on the perceptions and learning outcomes of all parties involved (Rubin et al., 2020; Stokowski et al., 2020a).

Methods

Given that this study examined a unique program (UPIC) at one institution (Clemson University), a case study approach was utilized. As stated by Merriam (1998):

> A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in the process rather than the outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research. (p. 19)

Further, case studies often employ different types of data sources to ensure trustworthiness (Elo et al., 2014; Merriam, 2009). The data collected and analyzed for this study came through qualitative content analysis. With permission from the UPIC director, the primary researcher was provided copies of the site interview transcripts and the students' final internship reports. The in-person interviews were conducted by a UPIC site coordinator and included the student-athlete intern and their mentor(s). The site coordinator asked the same reflective questions of each intern and mentor and recorded their answers, which were later transcribed. The structured interviews lasted 30 minutes on average and took place at the internship site. Students were also asked to evaluate their overall experience at the end of the program by completing a final internship report.

Data collected from 13 student-athletes (see Table 1) and each of their mentors (see Table 2) were included in this study. All interviews were completed during the fall 2019 semester. The researchers selected fall 2019 because this was the last complete semester prior to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To protect the confidentiality of the student-athletes and the mentors, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and all identifying markers were removed before review. Additionally, as this is a case study and the participants could be identified by providing details within the results (e.g., career aspiration, gender, sport, major), no potentially identifying markers were shared in our results. When coding the data (interviews, final evaluations), open coding was utilized (Khandkar, 2009). To assist in establishing trustworthiness, a research group consisting of three experienced qualitative researchers examined the interview transcripts and reviewed the student evaluations in order to determine the final codes (Merriam, 2009).

Table 1. Student-Athlete Participant Demographics

Student	Sex	Sport	Race	Major	Internship
Andy	M	Basketball	Black	Sports Comm	Communication
Amber	F	Rowing	White	Marketing	Communication
Beth	F	Rowing	White	Marketing	Publications
Chris	M	Baseball	White	Management	Health
Emma	F	Rowing	White	Nutrition	Health
Irene	F	Rowing	White	Intl Health	Communication
Jasmine	F	Track	White	Sports Comm	Communication
Kylie	F	Track	Black	Psychology	Health
Melinda	F	Track	White	Management	Publications
Roxie	F	Rowing	White	Marketing	Brand
Savannah	F	Track	Black	Psychology	Diversity
Sam	M	Baseball	White	Comm	Finance
Valerie	F	Track	Black	Health	Health

Table 2. Mentor Demographics*

Mentor	Sex	Classification	Area
James	M	Staff	Student Affairs Publications
Mary	F	Staff	Athletics
Patricia	F	Staff	Emergency Services
Jennifer	F	Staff	Parks, Recreation, Tourism Management
Linda	F	Faculty	Nursing
Anna	F	Staff	Development
Barbara	F	Staff	Health Services
Susan	F	Staff	Athletics
Jessica	F	Staff	Presidential Communications
Nancy	F	Staff	Health Services
Margaret	F	Staff	Controller's Office
Sandra	F	Faculty	Communication/Branding
Ashley	F	Faculty	Communication
Michelle	F	Staff/Teacher	Education, Human Development
Amanda	F	Staff	President's Office
Helen	F	Faculty	Nursing

* Students may be paired with more than one mentor

Results

Student-Athletes

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the perceived outcomes of the UPIC program. RQ1 examined the perception of the internship experience from the student-athletes' perspective. The content analysis of the student-athletes' site visit interviews and the open-ended responses of their final internship evaluations revealed that the internship was instrumental in their overall professional development. Professional development referred to the participant's views on working on complex problems, creating solutions, reflecting on their work quality, and responding to feedback provided by their site mentor.

The participants reported having a positive experience and were satisfied with their internship opportunity. According to the final internship evaluations, 88.89% felt their internship was very relevant in helping them pursue their academic and career goals. The majority of student-athlete respondents (77.78%) indicated that their relationship with their site mentor was excellent. Overall, 77.78% found the overall quality of the internship to be excellent.

Professional Development

Professional development was viewed as a major outcome of the internship experience. Many of the participants felt that through participating in the internship, they better understand their potential career path and the skills necessary to be successful in the workplace. A student expressed her view on her growth:

> During my time as an intern, I was surprised at the amount of growth I was exposed to. I feel as though I am far more knowledgeable about what goes on in a professional workplace and also what having a job entails. I am more interested in pursuing a job at a college in their communications department after completing this internship.

Another student stated that:

> My personal and professional development from this internship included enhancing my communication skills and becoming better at using computer-based software such as video editing software Camtasia and Excel. It also helped me understand how much it helps to be a nice person and to make as many connections as possible.

One student shared becoming self-aware, stating, "I feel like I have achieved a good work ethic during this time as well as gaining many skills in areas I did not know I had."

Professional development, the overarching theme in this part of the study, reflects career-related work preparation for "life after college and sport." Professional development of the student-athletes recognized three subthemes: communication, collaboration, and work ethic.

Communication

The CCPD (n.d.) definition of professional communication, "engaging in dialogue that leads to productive outcomes and points of connection by effectively articulating oneself to individuals within and outside of one's industry or area of expertise" (para. 5) was utilized. The interns' feedback suggests that they gained practical experience in improving their communication styles (see Table 3).

Based on their internship site, communication requirements varied. Interns noted key areas of communication improvement: listening, delegating, public speaking, providing feedback, writing, and perceived non-verbal cues. In their responses, the student-athletes indicted a need to be cognizant and aware of their surroundings, and that communicating within a team setting differed from communicating within a professional environment. Additionally, several student-athletes felt outside of their "comfort zone" when challenged to give presentations in front of an audience.

Table 3. Student-Athlete Communication Development

I worked with another student worker to do diversity interviews where we asked people who work in diverse departments at Clemson about their experience. Doing this made me have to be able to listen and talk about other people's personal stories as well as being able to communicate with a partner on a project.
My communication skills showed this year when asking other group members to get their work to me by a certain time. Although at times, many people could take someone who is their age and giving them directions as bossy, it is important to read your audience and communicate in the correct way.
I have grown in terms of interacting during professional development meetings. Also, I have had to give impromptu speeches and push myself to be better, to get outside my comfort zone.
I have become comfortable giving feedback and delegating tasks.

Table 4. Student-Athlete Collaboration Development

Our student team worked to execute our department Summit. We were able to find solutions to problems because we each brought our own backgrounds and knowledge of different areas to achieve the same goal.
Dealing with multiple interns in a small work area, I had to adapt with working with a lot of new people and adjusting to their ideas and not just mine.
When collaborating this year with my mentor, she would get me all the information that would be expected to go out in the newsletter, and I would piece the information together. This was a constant tug and pull for us this semester and in order for anything to get done we had to collaborate and do our part in finishing work.
Collaboration with parents can be challenging. I am learning how to get through difficult conversations and learning how to effectively communicate with them.

Collaboration

CCPD (n.d.) defined collaboration as "developing authentic and mutually beneficial relationships by valuing everyone and taking responsibility for one's role within a team" (para. 6). Data from the student responses detailed how they experienced and practiced collaboration (see Table 4).

Through collaboration efforts during their internships, student-athletes learned to compromise and cooperate, develop rapport, be supportive of one another, and follow through. Depending on the internship site, some student-athletes worked with a group of people with different leadership styles and varying career goals. Effectively participating in a group with different personalities, different approaches to tasks, and different learning methods is an important skill to acquire.

Work Ethic

NACE (2020) defined professionalism/work ethic as

> Personal accountability and effective work habits, e.g., punctuality, working productively with others, and time workload management, and understand the impact of non-verbal communication on professional

work image. The individual demonstrates integrity and ethical behavior, acts responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind, and is able to learn from his/her mistakes. (para. 8)

The results from student feedback (see Table 5) reflect that several interns learned more about creating and maintaining a strong work ethic through their internship.

Table 5. Student-Athlete Work Ethic Development

I am learning how to set goals for myself and how to manage time. I have been juggling this internship as well as practice and school work.
The office can get busy, and schedules don't always work in my favor, so being able to be flexible with my project timelines, meetings, and communication methods is important.
Since this is my first internship, I had to figure out how to schedule things, manage my time. I have had to work around my sport and classes.
I take pride in my work and in representing the department and the Center.
I asked a new question every single day at this internship. This was my version of a feedback loop because I have learned how to not be afraid of asking questions and this helps me understand how I am doing at the job. I can also tell how my performance has improved because I am given more responsibility and my supervisor trusts me more.
When discovering my personal brand through my internship work, it allowed me to know how to act and perform in other areas in my life in order to reflect the personal brand that I want, I am, and I plan to represent.

The feedback received from the student-athletes showed that time management was a critical skill where they progressed. Interns noted that they had to create schedules in order to manage their internship along with athletic and academic obligations. Also, at least one intern stated that she had to be flexible with scheduling to assist in meeting the needs of her co-workers.

Another dimension of a strong work ethic is personal branding. Branding oneself includes soliciting feedback, taking pride in work, and building an authentic network (Gorbatov et al., 2019). By participating in the UPIC program, student-athletes began to build their personal brands, which will allow this population to gain career satisfaction and increase the chances of employability upon graduation (Gorbatov et al., 2019).

Challenges

Throughout the data, all of the participants cited challenges they experienced throughout their internship. The student-athletes that participated in the UPIC program felt ill-prepared in certain situations. Specifically, the student-athletes stated they had weaknesses in regard to time management, technology, communications, building autonomy, and confidence (Table 6).

Table 6. Student-Athlete Open-Ended Feedback: Areas of Challenge

My creativity has been challenged and my public speaking has been challenged for the greater good.
I was not told exactly how to do the project. I was working through things with a checklist and realized I needed to create a spreadsheet. I am learning how to set goals for myself and manage my time. I have been juggling this internship as well as practice and schoolwork.
It took me forever to learn how to do things a certain way.
Outlook, Excel, and other technology has been challenging at times.
Interacting with a webmaster on campus, I had to decide when it was time to remind versus giving them time; team management in a way.
I think the biggest challenge for me was confidence in myself and my ideas and contributing to discussions when decisions were being made.
Using the Adobe products was a learning curve.

Growth

The growth the students experienced were both professional and personal in nature (e.g., relationship building, a feeling of support, increased confidence). Areas of growth were noted throughout the data. All participants readily identified areas in which they improved professionally. Students' open-ended comments provided context for the areas of growth and appreciation as seen in Table 7.

Table 7. Student-Athlete Open-Ended Feedback: Areas of Growth

I had to learn how to approach people in different ways based on personalities.
I feel I have a lot of time management skills now because of balancing my commitments.
I believe this internship has strengthened my community assessment and project planning skills, both of which can be directly utilized when I am in the Peace Corps.
I have grown as a leader in terms of interacting during professional development meetings.
I am beyond thankful for my mentors.
My mentor is always around and is approachable.
I feel I am stronger in collaborating and working well with others. I like working on a team.
I realized I might not want to be the middleman between smaller companies and big companies. I now realize recruiting might be a good fit.
I now realize what all goes on behind the scenes and the fact that my mentor wants me to succeed.
I learned the importance of thank you notes and professional etiquette, networking, and representing yourself well.

Mentors

RQ2 examined the site mentors' perception of student-athletes' internship performance and development. The content analysis of the mentors' interviews and the open-ended responses of their final internship evaluations indicated that mentors observed increased professional competency in their interns. Progress in professional competency (NACE, 2015) included moving along a continuum from one level of proficiency to the next (e.g., awareness, basic, intermediate, advanced, expert).

Mentors' responses about their interns were favorable. Seventy percent of mentors stated that their intern's performance was outstanding. Eighty percent indicated that they would definitely hire a candidate similar to their intern. Fifty percent felt that their student-athlete intern was slightly better or much better than their previous interns.

Professional Competency

For this study, professional competency is defined as skills, knowledge, or attitudes/behaviors utilized in professional practice (CCPD, n.d.). One mentor commented on their intern's technology ability:

> My student worker is good with the technology she needs to use and can figure out any challenges that she may face with technology. She uses exactly what she needs to use to complete a given task.

Another mentor commented that her intern was improving in certain areas so she had to adjust the tasks given to the intern:

> I have had to ramp up what I have given her. It is a progression – starts small and we move into larger things. I want her to continue to work on new things and continue making strong efforts. She has a great brand and she is really positive and very willing to help.

Competency, the main theme found from this part of the study, was present in most internship experiences. Specifically, the mentor feedback revealed that, overall, the interns had positive progression in two subthemes: skill sets and growth in self-awareness

Skill Sets

The skill sets that interns improved upon were wide-ranging, which is not unexpected given that the interns worked in various departments across campus and had unique mentors. For most of the interns, it was their first interaction with their site mentor. The mentor responses (see Table 8) were positive and identified areas in which their interns had grown their skill sets (e.g., adaptability, self-

Table 8. Mentor Open-Ended Feedback: Improved Skill Sets of Interns

She has become more self-aware. She takes feedback very well, which is great.
I have seen my intern manage with adaptability very well and she has been able to handle it all. Leadership is an area she has grown in as well due to the nature of her working independently.
My intern has grown in leadership. She has demonstrated initiative when completing tasks. She is able to work independently without assistance. She is a self-starter.
Attention to detail and time management are areas he has grown in.
He has grown a lot in terms of communicating with people and he has learned how to interact a bit more.
She has learned how to use a Mac and the other technology and has grown much more comfortable using them.
I feel she is more confident now. She knows people better now and feels more confident in taking on projects; thinking through projects without having a checklist. She is great at asking questions and this will be super important in their field.
My intern is punctual, very intelligent, and is a quick learner.

awareness, technology, collaboration). The internship experience allowed each student-athlete to learn more about their professional fields by completing projects or project-based tasks and assuming specialized responsibilities.

For student-athletes, leadership in the workplace was different than what was experienced on the playing field. Mentors assisted the interns in transferring athletic skills to the workplace environment. Such transferrable skills assisted student-athletes in understanding their strengths, motivating others, and being an active member of a group. One intern was involved in planning events for a department on campus. Her mentor was encouraged by the leadership initiative she took and her ability to work independently and efficiently.

Data analysis revealed that technology was an area of improvement identified by the interns. Mentor feedback confirmed this. Several of the internship sites required specialized software or equipment. Mentors either provided training or encouraged their intern to seek out ways to learn about the technology used in their specific office. For one intern, the main part of her internship was virtual reality and using robots. She began her internship with no experience in either of these areas, and her mentor was pleased with the new skills her intern acquired.

Mentor feedback revealed that multiple interns showed improved adaptability in several workplace situations. For example, a mentor shared that they had a certain project planned for an intern to work on; however, the office had to change the project scope soon after the intern started. The intern had to pivot and adapt quickly to meet the objectives of the new project.

Growth in Self-Awareness

Clemson's CCPD (n.d.) defined self-awareness as "understanding one's strengths, limitations, emotions, and biases in various situations and articulating how one's interests, skills, and values align with educational and professional goals" (para. 11). Being self-aware enables the student to make better decisions about their future because they can match passions, goals, and talents with potential career tracks. Several mentors shared how their interns matured in better knowing themselves (see Table 9).

Table 9. Mentor: Intern Growth in Self-Awareness

I feel she is more confident now. She knows people better now and feels more confident in taking on projects; thinking through projects without having a checklist. She is great at asking questions and this will be super important in their field.
I feel like my intern has found his voice.
My intern knows people and is an authentic type of leader. She has personal confidence and speaks up and addresses issues when need be.
My intern is so organized and professional. I would not hesitate to take her under my wing in the future.
She is amazing at sharing her needs and matching them with where she sees a project utilizing her strengths the most. She is a natural collaborator but brings to life things that are important for me to be aware of, her team, and herself.

Self-awareness includes the ability to set goals, articulate interests, skills, and values, and the ability to be reflective. One mentor wrote:

> My student articulates very clearly her goals, and over time can clearly see where she has areas of improvement. She shared her strengths, limitations, and goals with me and she actively strived to attain goals and improve upon limitations. My student worker was/is conscience of her work and seeks to excel in all that she undergoes.

Another mentor indicated her appreciation for being able to mentor a student-athlete in a professional setting:

> I am thankful for this opportunity. As a woman of color, I was thrilled to be able to mentor my student. I think it is vital for young ladies like my intern to be able to engage and connect with mentors who look like them.

The mentor and the intern were able to "engage and connect," which indicates a level of emotional intelligence present when self-aware.

Continued Growth

The data demonstrated that the UPIC program provided interns with opportunities for growth and development. The mentors offered constructive feedback in regard to skill acquisition that could assist the students in furthering their personal and professional development. Specifically, the mentors expressed that the interns could improve in the areas of branding, collaboration, confidence, and communication (see Table 10).

Table 10. Mentor Open-Ended Feedback: Areas for Continued Growth

Keep the initiative but slow down and think through how to motivate people to get things done and respond positively.
Having that collaboration piece – working together.
Continue to build on the communication within an office setting – asking questions and communicating progress.
I want my intern to continue to work on new things.
I want my interns to continue to work on interacting with other people, especially in a tight-knit athletic environment.
She is very observant and quiet, and I want her to work on communication.
I would like for her to work on various areas of communications moving forward.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although athlete development programming that prepares student-athletes for professional roles is increasing (Turick et al., 2019), there is a need to assess such programming for continued improvement and to ensure objectives are being met (Navarro et al., 2020). The UPIC program is a wonderful example of a cross-campus collaborative programming that assisted in the career development of Clemson student-athletes. Often, the lack of access to programming and the absence of cross-campus collaborative efforts detours student-athletes from participating in athlete development initiatives (McCarthy, 2016).

Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic experience. Such involvement takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel. Students who are involved in college will enhance their personal development, resulting in greater levels of satisfaction and improved learning outcomes (Astin, 1999). Through their on-campus internship experience, participants in this study identified a major theme of their learning: professional development.

On-campus internships strengthen students' weaker skill sets (Kelley-Hall, 2011). Although the student-athletes experienced challenges during their internships, the data revealed that the internship was instrumental in the professional development of the participants, specifically in the areas of communication, collaboration, and work ethic. It would appear that students that participated in the UPIC program are learning key competencies to career readiness (CCPD, n.d.; NACE, 2015). Additionally, an internship should support career goals (O'Neill, 2010), as the results in the present study indicated, 88.89% of the student-athletes felt their internship was very relevant to their career goals.

It is crucial that student-athletes participate in HIPs to help this population adapt to a life beyond sport (Stokowski et al., 2019). Previous research has called for universities and athletic departments to increase the opportunities athletes have to both participate in internships and network with individuals who can help them in their future careers (Paule-Koba, 2019; Stokowski et al., 2019). The UPIC program met both of these calls by providing many student-athletes with their first employment opportunity. Further, HIPs have been shown to reduce athlete identity, which in turn can increase career maturity (Moiseichik et al., 2019) and the likelihood of a positive transition to life after sport (Stokowski et al., 2019). Programs similar to UPIC have the potential to increase the career maturity for the student-athlete population and should be implemented at other colleges and universities.

The UPIC program started small and grew as more individuals saw the merits, benefits, and positive results of this program. In doing so, the program created a framework that other universities can use to assist student-athletes in obtaining practical experience(s) to ensure a smooth transition to a life beyond sport. University administrators, both inside and outside athletics, should note the results obtained from this study and create opportunities for student-athletes to gain crucial career-related experiences while also balancing their academic and athletic responsibilities.

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