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Student-Athletes' Decision-Making Process for Selecting an Academic Major

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how collegiate student-athletes experience the decision-making process for selecting their academic major at a midsize, Division I university in the Midwest. With four participants from four different sports, this study's results centered around four research questions: what was most important to the student-athlete when selecting a major, what challenges they ran into, what role others played in their decision-making process, and how the student-athletes' athletic identity manifested in their decision-making for their major.

Results of this study indicated that student-athletes value the practical application to a career that their major can provide for them and struggle with how their major can fit into their limited time as a student-athlete. In addition, family was influential to student-athletes in the decision-making process, but ultimately, participants demonstrated that they go through the development described in Baxter-Magolda's theory of self-authorship during college and make their decision for themselves. Student-athletes were found to have differing ties to their athletic identity, which means that there is not a clear-cut answer as to which type of major a student-athlete may lean towards choosing. Recommendations for future research and recommendations for higher education professionals are provided.

Degree Type

Dissertation/Thesis

Degree Name

Master of Science (MS)

Department

Counseling and Higher Education

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Keywords

student-athlete, major selection, advising, decision-making, self-authorship, NCAA

Subject Categories

Academic Advising | Higher Education | Higher Education Administration | Student Counseling and Personnel Services

Student-Athletes' Decision-Making Process for Selecting an Academic Major

Gina S. Pearson

Department of Counseling and Higher Education

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Recommendations for future research and recommendations for higher education professionals are provided.

Keywords: student-athlete, major selection, advising, decision-making, self-authorship, NCAA

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my support system throughout my undergraduate and graduate experience. Thank you to my husband and family for being my rock throughout this process, trying to learn as much as you could about what I was going through, and for being my safe haven from work and school. Michael, this thesis and graduate degree would not be possible without the sacrifices you made for our small family unit. I love you and love the life we're creating. To both my immediate and extended family, thank you for instilling the value of education into me and showing me how to be an educator no matter what I do. I am a product of you, and I could not have asked for a better family to be born into.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I believe it takes a village to get through research, graduate school, and life in general. I want to give a huge thank you to those who have supported me in many different capacities. Your impact on my life means the world to me.

To Dr.Coleman, thank you for your support and guidance throughout the entire thesis process. The amount of time and care you place into all of your students does not go unnoticed.

To Téa, Dionne, Maddie, TJ, CJ, Jake, Anders, and Diego, thank you for being the best cohort and immediate village someone could hope for. Each of you have changed me for the better and are my favorite one big team.

To Bobbi and Tom, thank you for the time you have dedicated to this research and helping me get through it. I appreciate the flexibility and passion you two have to help the students you interact with.

To the ladies in the EIU Office of Financial Aid & Scholarships, thank you for being there for me each and every day throughout graduate school and showing me how to be a confident woman working in higher education.

To the CHE faculty members at EIU, thank you for seeing things in me that maybe I didn't always see in myself. Your encouragement and commitment to your students is something I wish to embody in whatever I do in the future.

To Xochitl, thank you for coming back to our hometown to go through your master's degree, too. There was nothing better than having my best friend back for two years to make memories and go through our struggles together.

To Callie, Kira, and Paige, thank you for trying to understand the frantic and stressed text messages I would send you every week about my thesis. I love getting to experience our different life stages together.

To the academic advisors at the University of Kansas, thank you for opening up my eyes to a career in higher education. Without you all, I would have never known that a first-generation student like myself could get a master's degree in something called college student affairs and go on to work at a university.

To my sorority sisters in Alpha Delta Pi, thank you for demonstrating to me what true friendship looks like, how to be a woman in leadership roles, and for pushing me to go after my goals. We live for each other.

To all of the students and others that I have interacted with on even a small basis, thank you for saying that one thing that I needed to hear in that moment, the perspective you brought, and the impact you have had on me.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

There were over 490,000 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes who competed during the 2020-2021 school year (NCAA, 2021). As with other students, these student-athletes have been faced with the decision of what academic major to choose. This choice of major influences their college experience on a practical, day-to-day level, but it also influences their experience post-college. It is estimated that 20-50% of students enter college as “undecided” on their major, but there are a variety of reasons as to why students may be indecisive and even a lack of concise definition of indecision (Gordon, 1995; Gordon & Steele, 2015). There is clearly a decision process that students have to go through in determining their major and eventual career, and this process may not be a linear path.

Student-athletes have a unique position on a college campus and have experiences that other students may not. Student-athletes are frequently isolated from the rest of campus due to the time sports take up, how they are seen in class by their peers, or because of the different academic centers and facilities that are established specifically for their use (Cranmer & Myers, 2017; Hazzaa et al., 2018; Rubin & Moses, 2017). Student-athletes may also face *academic clustering*, a phenomenon defined as when “25% or more of the team enrolled in a specific major,” and can also include groups of similar majors (Fountain & Finley, 2011, p.28). This phenomenon is not as prevalent among other student groups (Syventek et al, 2017), so the decision-making process for a student-athlete on what major they should select has additional factors that make theirs a different experience from their non-student-athlete peers.

Knowing that student-athletes have different experiences makes hearing directly from them on what and how they experience the decision-making process for their major even more significant. Student-athletes may not have as much time or opportunities to explore academic majors or internships due to their athletic obligations (Haslerig and Navarro, 2016). Additionally, student-athletes may not understand how or if their career goal aligns with their major, which can create a disconnect in this population when seeking jobs after college (Paule-Koba, 2019). While there is extensive research on undecided students and student-athlete experiences, there is a lack of research on how student-athletes specifically navigate the decision-making process of choosing a major (Beggs et al., 2008; Cranmer & Myers, 2017; Ellis, 2014; Schneider et al., 2010; Woltring et al., 2021; Workman-b, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how NCAA student-athletes experience the decision-making process for selecting an academic major at a midsized, Midwestern, Division I public university. With student-athletes as a unique population on campus, the study sought to provide some background into what these students go through as they determine their academic path by selecting a major. This study also contributes to the broader research on collegiate student-athletes that already has addressed issues such as academic clustering, career readiness, belonging, and more. Likewise, this study contributes to the research on academic advising and exploratory students by adding the experiences of this specific population. Overall, this study sought to provide clarity from the perspectives of student-athletes on what they find as valuable,

significant, and influential in regard to selecting a major, so that educational professionals can evaluate their programs and approaches with this student population.

Research Questions

This study answered the following research questions on the collegiate student-athletes' experiences and their process for selecting an academic major.

1. What factors do collegiate student-athletes perceive as the most important when deciding on a major?
2. What challenges do collegiate student-athletes face when making a decision on their major?
3. What role do others play in the student-athlete's choice of academic major?
4. How does a student-athlete's identity with athletics manifest in their decision-making process for their major?

Significance of the Study

The phenomenon of academic clustering, or teammates choosing the same or similar majors, is prevalent amongst collegiate sport teams (Foster & Huml, 2017; Fountain & Finley, 2011; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010; Schneider et al., 2010). While there are varying opinions as to why academic clustering exists and what the positive and negative impacts of it are, it is important to note its potential existence within this student population to understand their experiences when selecting a major. The decision-making process for choosing a major is something every college student must go through, but student-athletes face pressures that the rest of the student population does not such as lack of connection with those outside of their team, pressure to maintain NCAA eligibility, and navigating intense practice and game schedules while transitioning from high school

to college (Cranmer & Myers, 2017; Rowland, 2014; Woltring et al, 2021). Academic professionals in higher education may work with this student population, which makes it important to understand their perspectives and experiences to inform better practice. In addition, with the vast majority of student-athletes not competing professionally after graduating college, it is important to look at how they select their major in order for professionals to best prepare them for life and career after college (NCAA, 2020).

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study was the number and lack of diversity of the participants obtained. While results and conclusions were able to be found from the data, a larger and more diverse pool of student-athletes would have created a more holistic view of student experiences. A second limitation of this study was the potential lack of rapport between the researcher and the participants. The researcher was not a student-athlete, so there may have been some social group exclusion which limited participants' willingness to fully discuss their experiences to someone who may not relate to them.

A third limitation was the scope this study was able to have due to the nature of the research site. This study was conducted at a midsize Division I institution in the rural Midwest. The level of athletic performance between teams at the research site, as well as between this research site and other institutions, could create a difference in the pressures facing the student-athletes. The results of this study may not be applicable to individuals at a larger division I institution in a larger athletic conference, or at a Division II or III school. The interviews for this study were conducted in the spring of 2023, shortly after students returned from winter break. Student-athletes who were in the midst of their sport season had less time to participate in a study and were not represented in this study.

Finally, the email communications sent to the potential participants were coming at the beginning of the semester when students were receiving a lot of other emails from the university which may have impacted who replied to participate in the study.

Definition of Terms

Academic clustering: A phenomenon where members of an athletic team enroll in a specific major or group of similar majors, typically 25% or more of the athletic team (Fountain & Finley, 2011).

Self-authorship: When individuals have “the capacity to internally define their own beliefs, identity, and relationships,” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xvi).

Student-athlete: A term with many different definitions, but for this research is a full or part-time college student who participates in a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic activity at their institution.

Summary

This chapter explained this study and how it sought to understand the collegiate student-athlete’s decision-making process for selecting an academic major and why it is critical to understand by those who work with student-athletes who may be struggling with the decision of choosing a major. Through researching and analyzing the literature surrounding the history of the NCAA, student-athletes, and academic clustering, research questions were created. The chapter reviewed limitations for the study as well as defining terms that will be used to discuss the issues on this topic. This study has significance to the broader research done on collegiate athletics and academic professionals who may work with this student population.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Students face decisions every day in college, with their academic major selection being one of the larger decisions they have to make. Student-athletes are a population that has their own unique experiences on a college campus, especially when it comes to academics. Through reviewing the literature existing on student-athletes, academics, majors, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), a better understanding of what has happened and is happening at institutions across the United States with regard to experiences of student-athletes can be had. This literature review will aid in obtaining a better understanding of these experiences and assist in the objective of this study which is to capture the experiences of student-athletes in the decision-making process for selecting an academic major.

NCAA History

The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) was founded in 1906 out of concern for the safety of young football players during a particularly brutal athletic time in the early 20th century (NCAA, n.d.-a). In December 1905, 13 schools held a meeting to discuss reforming football playing rules, and then at the end of the year 62 colleges and universities came together to charter the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States, later known as the NCAA (NCAA, n.d.-a). As the organization responsible for coordinating athletic activities among member schools, almost every institution that participates in collegiate athletics is a member of the NCAA and participates in its operations. Collegiate athletics grew during the subsequent decades and the sanity code was implemented to regulate financial aid, recruitment, and academic

regulations in effort to keep amateurism as a central value of collegiate sports (NCAA, n.d.-a). The term student-athlete was coined because university athletics were becoming commercialized and athletes needed to be distinguished as students so that they were not seen as employees who needed compensation (Bass et al., 2015). In 1973, the NCAA divided universities into divisions and different amounts of scholarships were permitted to be awarded to the student-athletes at each level's institutional members. The most scholarships were permitted in Division I schools and then Division II while Division III schools were not permitted to award athletic scholarships (Bass et al., 2015). Student-athletes in Division III schools are assumed to be the most integrated with the rest of student population partially because they do not receive athletic scholarships (Bass et al., 2015).

While student-athletes at Division I and II institutions could be eligible for scholarships, they were not able to make money off of personal sponsorships like professional athletes. This changed when the NCAA implemented an interim policy that allowed student-athletes to “benefit from their name, likeness, and image,” on July 1st, 2021 (Hosick, 2021, para 1). This ushered in a new era of collegiate athletics where amateurism no longer fits the general definition of, “one who engages in a pursuit, study, science, or sport as a pastime rather than as a profession,” because student-athletes can now profit like a professional could (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Despite this new opportunity, the NCAA continues to hold the stance that it “promotes amateurism to create a level playing field for all student-athletes. The young men and women who compete in college sports are students first, athletes second,” (NCAA, n.d.-b, para. 11).

Eligibility requirements for student-athletes vary by institution. The NCAA breaks down the requirements by division, but individual institutions are allowed to implement additional requirements for the athletes enrolled at their institution beyond the minimum set by the NCAA (University A, 2020). Division I institutions need their student-athletes to complete 40% of coursework for their degree by the end of their second year, complete 6 credit hours and meet specific school GPA requirements to be eligible for the next term and can have five years of eligibility and financial aid (NCAA, n.d.-c). Division II student-athletes must declare their degree program by their first semester of junior year, meet a minimum 2.0 cumulative GPA, and complete at least nine credit hours in the last full-time term of enrollment (NCAA, 2016). Division III institutions have even less requirements and students simply must be in good academic standing and making progress towards their degree at 12 credit hours (NCAA, n.d.-c). At the research site, student-athletes must declare a major by their junior year, be enrolled in at least 12 credit hours per semester, get permission to drop a class, and must attend all classes unless excused for a game (University A, 2020).

Collegiate Student-Athletes' Unique Position

Student-athletes find themselves in a unique position as a distinct student population on campus. This section focuses on the isolation experiences these students face such as social isolation from their peers and athletic programs' separate admissions processes. In addition, this section discusses the separate and unique services available to student-athletes such as athletic facilities including academic centers and athletic specific support staff and coaches.

Isolation Experiences of Student-Athletes

The unique position of student-athletes on a college campus begins even before they officially enter college with the athlete recruitment process. For a student-athlete, their isolation from the other groups of students on campus may begin before they even step on campus as an official student because of the various regulations and eligibility rules that other students do not need to worry about or be influenced by (Gayles & Baker, 2015). For example, student-athletes can have distinct campus visits: official and unofficial. The NCAA defines an official campus visit by a prospective student-athlete as a visit that is paid for by the college, including meals, lodging, and transportation (NCAA, n.d.-d). An unofficial campus visit is one that is paid for by the prospective student-athlete or their parents (NCAA, n.d.-d). Both of these types of visits can include three tickets to sporting events paid for by the university (NCAA, n.d.-d). The non-athlete student population would not necessarily receive these types of inclusions in a typical campus visit unless the admissions office was providing opportunities beyond their norm, thus making the experiences of the student-athletes unique to the general student population. Student-athletes may experience the same opportunities as the general prospective student populations such as campus tours or presentations, but they are still unique with the official and unofficial visits set by the NCAA.

In addition to the isolation in the recruitment process, student-athletes represent their university and help generate revenue, while also being able to make money off their own likeness and image when they get to campus. With so much money involved in collegiate athletics there can be less of a focus on being a student. Their experience is most likely not going to be the same as many of their peers on campus. Student-athletes

feel separated from the rest of campus, and often negatively (Rubin & Moses, 2017). Student-athletes in Rubin and Moses' (2017) study spoke about their classrooms, where there was sometimes a row of students in the same sport at the back away from others. The student-athletes would often turn to each other for help on assignments since they spent most of their days with each other. In addition, some felt that the other students either loved them or hated them. While this experience is not something all students will face, there are different groups on campus, Greek life for example, that may also be somewhat separated from the general campus population, but there is not the division that student-athletes have, especially at sports-focused institutions. Student-athletes are often socialized in friend groups made up of only of other student-athletes and away from the rest of their peers, contributing to their feelings of isolation from the campus community (Cranmer & Myers, 2017).

Support Staff and Facilities

Recognizing the student-athlete's unique position, there are a variety of support services in place for them. The first support system that student-athletes interact with on an almost daily basis is their coaching staff. Due to their close proximity, coaches have a lot of influence on the students on their teams and can recognize things that can help them. Bjornsen and Dinkel (2017) found two perspectives to discuss coaches' perspectives: first, coaches believed that more programming should be in place for student-athletes to help them obtain internships and mentoring. Second, coaches felt that first and second-year students needed support to help them explore academic majors (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). Although coaches are typically not academic staff, being aware of their perceptions is important for those supporting the student athletes as the

students on their teams may hear things coming from the coaching staff and value their opinions greatly. Many student-athletes had somewhat accurate expectations of what their relationship with their coach would be like because of their participation in athletics prior to college, but this was not true for all kinds of support, such as the athletic advisor which is unique to collegiate athletics (Woltring et al., 2021).

An athletic advisor is a support staff member that student-athletes have which differs from their institutionally provided academic advisor whom the general student population will interact with. Athletic advisors may serve in a similar capacity to the departmental advisor, but they are more aware of additional elements including NCAA rules and eligibility. These staff members play an important role with this population, as student-athletes reported that these advisors are influential in their overall satisfaction with the academic services of the institution (Hazzaa et al., 2018). Even though they might be influential, it is not always in a positive way. Many student-athletes reported preferring to work with their faculty or academic advisor on academic and major or career concerns because they felt those staff would have their personal academic best interests in mind over the needs of the athletic program despite athletic advisors viewing their profession as one that is dedicated to help student-athletes (Huml et al., 2014; Rubin, 2017). In addition, senior student-athletes were found to be less satisfied with their athletic advisor's attention to their personal and academic needs than sophomores (Huml et al., 2014). Student-athletes will have different experiences with this support staff depending on the university, location, age, and other factors, but their satisfaction with any office or person may play a large role in where they seek advice and support.

Besides athletic advisors, advising facilities were found to be even more influential in measuring student athletes' satisfaction with their college academic experience (Hazzaa et al., 2018). Specialized facilities may be found in specific locations on campus dedicated for academic services for student-athletes and there is a large increase in spending across the nation for athletics services, and facilities are part of this spending. According to Wolverton et al. (2008) from 1997 to 2008, "the budgets for academic services for athletes at more than half of the 73 biggest athletics programs in the country have more than doubled, on average, to more than \$1-million a year [per institution]," (p. 1). Student-athletes may find themselves in an academic center separate from the rest of campus and seen as a more desirable destination because of the resources within it and the newness of the building, further isolating them from their non-athletic peers. Instead of going to the writing center where other students may go, the student-athlete likely has tutors available to them through the athletic academic center that can fit their busy schedule better. Despite the isolation from the rest of campus and differences in support staff from the general student population, student-athletes still placed extreme value in their academic centers and held them in high regard (Rubin & Moses, 2017).

Academic Major Exploration

This section focuses on the decision-making process for academic majors for college students. General themes of major declaration and exploration are explained in the context of all college students, which includes student-athletes. Additionally, specific research on the unique experiences of student-athletes when selecting a major and the beliefs held by this population are presented. Lastly, academic clustering is defined and

NCAA data on student-athlete majors and how they may experience academic clustering is provided.

Major Decisions

Whether a student at a university is a student-athlete or not, there is a decision-making process all students must go through for declaring a major and graduating college. At one large, public institution, 93% of the 30 participants undecided on their major were considering at least one major during their first semester (Ellis, 2014). These students may have been undecided not because they lacked enough information about the majors at the university, but because they were not ready to fully commit to one (Ellis, 2014). Factors that could influence an undecided student's indecision on their major include the financial stability or instability of their desired career, lack of prioritization on the importance of a decision, and the outlook on job stability (Workman, 2015-b). Parental influence on their student's academic major is another factor that undecided students have mixed feelings about; some students reported uncomfortable pressure from their parents, and some reported their parents' involvement as a positive factor when picking a major (Workman, 2015-a). At one large, public university in the Midwest, out of over 800 individuals who completed a survey, the student's academic major matching their interests was ranked as the most important to them in the decision-making process (Beggs et al., 2008). All these factors may be true for student-athletes, even if it is not unique to them.

Student-Athletes' Major Decisions

For student-athletes specifically, there are a variety of perceptions and experiences that influence how they select a major. Foster and Huml (2017) investigated

the relationship between athletic identity and the academic major chosen by student-athletes. Their results provided two major insights that frame this relationship. First, student-athletes with a strong athletic identity were more likely to pick a major that was less challenging academically. Second, student-athletes with a strong athletic identity were not more or less likely to be undecided on their major than student-athletes who did not have a strong athletic identity. For example, the NCAA diploma dashboard shows that 16% of student-athletes majored in science, technology, engineering or math (STEM), while 27% of the general study body majored in one of these fields (NCAA, n.d.-e). Despite this difference between student athletes and non-athletes in some of the most difficult majors, Comeaux et al., (2017) found that the student-athletes who majored in STEM believed that their involvement in sports had a positive impact on their academics.

A great deal of the research done on major selection was done from an outsider perspective or from speaking with student-athletes who have graduated. Haslerig and Navarro (2016) interviewed football players who were using their fifth year of eligibility for a graduate degree. They discovered that the student-athletes did not have many opportunities to explore majors in their undergraduate experience and they reported having missed out on internship opportunities. In addition, student-athletes' coaches felt that their athletes were not given the same opportunity to explore different majors during their first year compared to the general student population (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). At the graduate level however, fifth-year athletes who were graduate students reported putting serious thought into their graduate degree programs and selected them because they believed it lined up with their career goals (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016).

Academic Clustering

Research has been done on academic clustering within collegiate athletic sports teams (Rowland, 2014; Schneider et al., 2010; Svyantek et al., 2017; Watkins et al., 2022). Fountain and Finley (2011) defined *academic clustering* as, “25% or more of the team enrolled in a specific major,” and many other scholars have used a similar definition (p. 28). For this research, academic clustering may also include a group of similar majors, such as marketing, management, and finance all falling under the theme of business. Academic clustering can happen within any student population, but student-athletes may see this happen more among their population for specific disciplines. For example, the NCAA diploma dashboard based on 2019-2020 data reported that collegiate student-athletes were twice as likely to graduate with a degree related to athletics or fitness compared to the general student body (NCAA, n.d.-e).

Division I college athletes are 8% more likely to graduate with a degree in business than the general student body with 1 in 4 student-athletes graduating with a degree in business (NCAA, n.d.-e). Men’s baseball has the highest percentage of student-athletes graduating with a degree in business at 39% (NCAA, n.d.-e). Schneider et al. (2010) discovered that 59.58% of football players in the Big 12 conference majored in communications, business, or a social science. At Kansas State University specifically, where men’s football is highly regarded, Schneider, et al., found that 50% of the student-athletes majored in business.

One case study on academic clustering provided some possible insight behind why clustering may occur (Rowland, 2014). Student-athletes shared that they had to sacrifice majoring in something of interest to them in exchange for maintaining athletic

eligibility (Rowland, 2014). This finding is consistent with the research of Navarro (2014) indicating that student-athletes' major choice process was influenced by the pressure to maintain eligibility. Once declaring their major, the student-athletes in the case study reported feeling stuck because of the limited amount of time they had remaining to finish their degree and the credit hours left or not transferring between majors (Rowland, 2014). Student-athletes used language describing their major and career choice as a plan B, back-up plan, or something to fall back on if a career in professional sports did not work out (Rowland, 2014).

Student-athletes' major decisions are influenced by their experiences specific to their internal athletic environment, including their teammates, athletic advisors, and coaches (Navarro, 2014). Since student-athletes are twice as likely to graduate with a degree related to athletics or fitness, it could just be because their athletic interest led to their career interest (NCAA, n.d.-e). However, this may not always be true when it comes to major selection. Paule-Koba (2019) discovered a disconnect between what student-athletes said their career goals were, and what they ultimately chose as a major as 31.7% of the 605 student-athletes studied had a major that did not align with their career aspirations. However, Paule-Koba (2019) found that these students indicated they chose their major because they always wanted to be in a career field related to it. The researcher argued this contributes to the literature on academic clustering because the idea that student-athletes cluster in a major because it relates to their future career field can be false. These student-athletes may be in a major that does not align with their career goals and not realize it (Paule-Koba, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Two theories were utilized to provide a theoretical framework for this study. The first is Holland's theory of vocational and career choice and the second is Baxter-Magolda's theory of self-authorship. Both of these theories will provide depth to the interview and data analysis process. Theoretical frameworks can be useful in developing methodologies, but it is also important to note that, "No theory, or theoretical framework, provides a perfect explanation of what is being studied," (Anfara & Mertz, 2014, p. 15). This is why these theories will be useful in making meaning of the participants' experiences.

Holland's Theory of Vocational and Career Choice

Holland's theory of vocational and career choice evolved from the mid-1900s to the end of the 20th century with multiple authors contributing to, and building on Holland's original research (Nauta, 2010). This theory asserts that a person's personality plays a large role in their vocational choice and satisfaction and that these personalities can be categorized (Holland, 1959). Similar to other theorists, Holland revised his theory multiple times since its origination based on more research, including the 1966 revision that included more definitions of his concepts and descriptions for his personality types and environments that began in his 1959 version (Nauta, 2010). By 1973, Holland finalized the personality types and environments into the six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (Holland, 1973). These types have specific characteristics associated with them, but for the purposes of this research, the descriptions are not necessary. In addition to the types, Holland assumed that if one's personality type matches their environment type, they will do well in that vocation

(Holland, 1973). This is the idea of congruency. Holland stated, “a person with a clear sense of identity is more likely to accept or find work that is congruent with his or her personal characteristics,” (Holland, 1996, p. 403). For example, someone who is an enterprising type may find themselves in a career in business because it allows them to publicly speak and meet and influence people. Holland’s research has been extremely influential in career services at higher education institutions (Nauta, 2010).

For this research, Holland’s theory of vocational choice was used when interviewing participants and analyzing the results. Holland’s concept of personality being influential to vocation shaped the research questions. Holland’s idea of congruency was used when analyzing how participants answered the research questions and discussed how they chose their major. The researcher looked for themes across participants related to if their personality and congruency influenced their choice of major.

Baxter-Magolda’s Theory of Self Authorship

Marcia B. Baxter-Magolda’s theory of self-authorship was influenced by the works of Robert Kegan who dealt with the idea of people going from making meaning from outside themselves to making meaning from inside themselves that secures an internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2014; Kegan, 1998). Baxter-Magolda developed a longitudinal study that followed male and female college students into adulthood and defined *self-authorship* as, “the capacity to internally define their own beliefs, identity, and relationships,” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xvi). She posited that adults move from following formulas set by external authorities to entering into a crossroads phase where those formulas are not working anymore or are no longer satisfying. Once the individual

goes through the crossroads phase, they then become the author of their own life and finally, establish an internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 40).

In a college context, this could potentially look like a student following the rules and expectations their parents set for them when they first get to college, but then they realize their parent's formulas do not work anymore, and they then decide what is best for them to become their own self. Since Baxter-Magolda developed this theory, many others have explored it to look at different populations and scenarios. Bowman et al. (2020) looked at college students and discovered there was a correlational relationship between the students with increased ability to self-author their lives and those who took initiative towards experiences that challenged them.

For this research, Baxter-Magolda's theory of self-authorship guided the analysis from the interview questions. Participants' answers to the questions were analyzed to see if the participants were following external authorities, such as their athletic advisors, parents, coaches, or anyone else they mention as opposed to their own internal sense of authority. Language indicating that the student either did or did not demonstrate self-authorship were coded during data analysis.

Summary

This chapter provided a history of the NCAA, including some of the rules and regulations participating institutions must follow. Student-athletes' unique position on a college campus was discussed because of the isolation they may experience and the specific support staff, facilities, and academic centers available to them, but not the general student population. In addition, academic major exploration for general students, student-athletes specifically, and academic clustering were highlighted. Holland's theory

of vocational choice and Baxter-Magolda's theory of self-authorship were described and were used to shape this study. Chapter three will discuss the methodology used for this study.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted to investigate the experiences of collegiate student-athletes and the factors they experience around selecting an academic major. This study utilized semi structured interviews to collect data, which was then coded. This chapter describes in detail the design of the study, sample, research site, instrument, data collection and analysis, and treatment of the data.

Design of the Study

This study used a phenomenological qualitative methodology to obtain information about the experiences of student-athletes when selecting a major. This design was selected because of the ability for phenomenological research to look into the “what” and “how” of an experience amongst individuals (Creswell, 2007). In addition, phenomenological studies are good at describing the essence of commonalities in a universal experience, which makes it an excellent design for this type of study that looked at a decision process every student-athlete has to go through (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative, is more suitable for constructing a picture as to what is going on, instead of hypothesizing beforehand (Fraenkel et al., 2015). This study design allowed the full complexity and experience of the student-athletes to be explored.

Participants

The study consisted of four student-athletes in their junior or senior year at a Division I midsize, Midwest, rural university. Juniors and seniors were selected as it was assumed that they would be able to better reflect on their experience choosing their

major, whereas a freshman or sophomore may not have yet declared a major or had sufficient time to reflect on that experience. These participants were identified by contacting members of the institutional sports teams through the athletic academic support staff. Participants were contacted with an email invitation to participate in the study distributed by the athletic academic staff. The researcher reviewed interested participants to see if they were eligible and set up a time to interview. Participants selected a pseudonym to provide confidentiality and protect their identity. In addition, participants were informed of their ability to abstain from answering any question they did not feel comfortable with or to withdraw from participating in the study at any time.

Participant One: Kennedy is a 20-year-old junior. She is a white female on the women's soccer team. She knew before coming to college that she wanted to major in exercise science on the pre-physical therapy track and later added a nutrition and dietetics major, making her a double major. She hopes to go to physical therapy school after graduation.

Participant Two: Sam is a 22-year-old senior. He is a white male on the men's baseball team and a transfer student from a community college. He began as a business major at his community college, and then switched to exercise science once he transferred. He hopes to find a job related to baseball after graduation.

Participant Three: Rachel is a 20-year-old junior. She is a white female on the women's volleyball team. She is an electrical engineering major with a minor in mathematics. After graduation, she plans to work in engineering.

Participant Four: Melanie is a 21-year-old junior. She is a white female on the women's track and field team. She originally came to college as a biology major

on the pre-medicine track but switched to psychology. She is now graduating with a major in psychology and minor in both pre-law and business marketing. After graduation, she hopes to go to law school and become a lawyer.

Research Site

This research was conducted at a midsized university in the rural Midwest (University A). As of the fall 2021 semester, the university had an enrollment of almost 4,000 full-time undergraduate students with approximately 2,400 females and 1,600 males (University A, 2022). In fall of 2021, there were 474 student-athletes (University A, 2021) on the university's 19 sports teams, with 10 women's teams and 9 men's. This site was chosen out of convenience and appropriateness for the nature of the study.

Instrument

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted as the instrument for obtaining data for this study. Semi-structured interviews are good for providing a framework for how to elicit data, while also allowing flexibility in the responses of the participants (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This type of instrument was selected because it allows for participants to expand upon their answers and provides a richer description of their experiences. In addition, if conducted intentionally, it can allow for greater rapport between the researcher and the participant because of the ability to ask genuine follow up questions and not adhere to an extremely structured format that could create a power dynamic between an older researcher and the participant who is a younger student.

Appendix A provides the full interview protocol.

Data Collection

Data was collected through the use of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The interviews were done virtually through the Zoom virtual conferencing software in order to best accommodate scheduling for the student-athletes. Interviews were recorded using the auto-transcription feature with corrections done by the researcher during the first review of transcripts. Participants were encouraged to be in a place that provides them with privacy and the researcher was in a secure location as well. Participants were given the option of scheduling their interview in-person, but all preferred to do it via Zoom.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed into a Word document in order to analyze the participant responses. Once complete, the transcripts were provided to each participant for review in a process called ‘member checking’ to provide greater accuracy by providing the participants the ability to edit or expand on their answers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interview questions were guided by the research questions of the study; therefore, the analysis of the responses was conducted with the major research questions as a guide. Data was analyzed through thematic analysis where both specific phrases and implicit or explicit ideas were summarized into codes for the purpose of analysis (Guest et al., 2011). The researcher also coordinated with the members of the thesis committee on the interpretation of the findings to reduce bias and improve accuracy through the support of knowledgeable professionals and additional perspectives (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Treatment of Data

The data, including Zoom recordings, transcriptions, results, and analysis, were stored through a password-protected folder in OneDrive during the study and then all data was transferred to a password protected USB drive. In compliance with IRB policy data will be kept for three years after completion of the study before being deleted. After three years, all documents, recordings, and materials will be deleted and removed from the USB drive.

Summary

This chapter discussed the methodology for this study. This study design is a semi-structured interview to provide a qualitative analysis of student-athletes and the selection of a major. Participant recruitment and selection as well as information about the research site was provided. Interviews were conducted through a virtual conferencing platform to provide maximum ease to participants. Finally, the methods used to collect, analyze, and treat the data were provided.

Chapter IV

Results

This chapter will provide and discuss the findings from four semi-structured interviews with the research participants at the same Division I institution. Results were coded into themes under each of the four research questions. The interview questions were tailored to address the research questions and the participant responses were analyzed looking for relevant shared themes.

Research Question #1: What factors do collegiate student-athletes perceive as the most important when deciding on a major?

The four participants' responses revealed two primary factors that they considered in the selection of their major: passion for the academic discipline and practical application for career. When asked questions surrounding why they chose their major, all of the participants seemed ready to talk about it, as if they had answered this question many times. Some of the participants gave responses to this research question that seemed standard and rehearsed, while others gave responses that showed deeper reflection of what they had experienced surrounding their choices. All of the participants' responses fell into the two themes no matter what their experiences were that led them to the point of these factors being important to them.

Passion for the Academic Discipline

Three of the four participants indicated they had a passion and connection to the career field of their major and this was important to them when selecting a major. This passion was either discovered prior to coming to college, or discovered through taking coursework for a different major that did not connect with them. All three of these

participants demonstrated how their major was one they had a personal interest in prior to actually taking any classes as a student in that major. For these individuals, the interest they had in their major was of utmost importance in order to not waste their limited amounts of time as a student-athlete and to connect their love of the discipline outside of the classroom to inside the classroom.

Melanie indicated that she started as a biology major on the pre-medicine track, and then switched to psychology. She originally chose biology because of the influence her mother had on her in pushing her to go into the medical field. Once she realized that pre-medicine was not something she actually had an interest in, she decided to switch to psychology. She shared,

I chose psychology because I was like, this is something I would actually enjoy putting my time into instead of biology, which, with the short amount of time I have as a student-athlete, I didn't want to spend my time stressing even more about a subject I didn't even like.

Although Melanie ultimately came to this conclusion, she shared that it was a tough decision for her to make mentally and that there were a lot of emotions behind it because she always thought she would do biology and pre-medicine. However, for Melanie, her enjoyment and interest in psychology outweighed her previous choice of biology and propelled her to switch her major.

Sam indicated that there were connections between his interest in lifting and his major of exercise science, which led to his selection of his major. He spent significant time outside of baseball lifting weights, and he associated this with what he would be learning in exercise science. Sam changed his major like Melanie did, he was originally a

business major at his community college before switching to exercise science before he got to his current institution. He stated, “I switched to exercise science that summer because I decided that this would be a little bit more, I don’t know, interesting, I guess.” While Sam did not make as strong of a connection to the enjoyment of the major as Melanie did, he still indicated that it was one of the larger factors for him.

Kennedy shared that she had a love for helping people which translated into her choices of exercise science on the pre-physical therapy track and nutrition and dietetics as her majors, making her a dual major student. She indicated that she was in physical therapy growing up after an injury from her sport and was the type of person who loved to do her exercises and loved to go to physical therapy. Her sport exposed her to her interest in physical therapy. For the nutrition and dietetics piece, she shared, “I love learning on how to eat healthy and everything, and how food can improve your performance. And that was something for me to like, spark an interest.” Her interest in physical therapy began before she got to college, and she has not switched her major since she started in college.

Practical Application for Career

Another major factor in decision-making for all four of the participants was how applicable their prospective major was to a career. Some participants indicated that they did not know exactly what career they wanted after they graduated, but they still knew that the major they considered would give them skills in whatever field they decided to pursue. Other participants had a clear path they were seeking, such as engineering or graduate school, so they wanted to select a major that was clearly applicable to those areas. As these participants were deciding on a major, all of them wanted to select a

major that had a practical application for a job. None of these participants based their decision solely on the love of learning the academic discipline, but rather what they could take with them from their experiences in the major.

The practical application piece was most clearly highlighted in Rachel's responses around her decision to choose electrical engineering. She shared that her focus was on finding something "technical" multiple times. When asked what she was looking for in a potential major, she shared, "I think something that was technical, and I could use to have a good career after school." While Rachel recognized that there were other majors she could have chosen, such as pre-engineering, physics, or engineering technology, she shared, "I ultimately chose that [electrical engineering] because I thought it would benefit me the most in the end." Rachel did not indicate that her sport had a practical application for her career, but that her major did.

While Melanie indicated that she switched to psychology instead of biology because of her interest in it, she shared that in addition to her interest in the field, another factor for her was what career path she could have with that major. She shared, "I was looking at the career path, like what I could do with this major, how much my salary would be with potential jobs, and if I really would enjoy it [and] like the job." Melanie also discussed that she wanted to go to law school after graduation and felt that psychology would help her in understanding people better. Additionally, she thought that she could use the things she learns in psychology no matter what area of law she decided to go into. To her, choosing psychology was applicable to what she wanted to do as a career. Similar to Rachel, Melanie did not indicate that her sport was what gave her the practical application for her career, but that her major did.

Kennedy also shared a focus on preparation for a post-graduate program. She discussed preparing for physical therapy schools and using exercise science as her steppingstone to apply to go to graduate school. She repeatedly mentioned the hands-on experience she was gaining through her major, and that she knew she would be getting this experience prior to choosing this major. “It was like my sole choice of why I wanted to do it because I was learning about physical therapy and like rehab and exercise training in a way that’s going to help me prepare for physical therapy schools.” The hands-on lab experience in exercise science was a large appeal for her in choosing her major.

Sam saw the value in choosing a major that could be used in everyday life, no matter which career he ended up going into. While he was unsure of what exactly he wanted to do as a career, he shared that he wanted to choose a major that could be used in a variety of careers. When Sam was deciding on switching from business to exercise science, he reflected on how if he really wanted to go into business, he felt like he could do that without needing to major in it. He shared, “So why not choose something that I’d actually use in everyday life, just in case I end up not going towards being like a strength coach, or something.” The practical skills he could learn in exercise science, such as how the body works, were something he found value in. Sam was learning things in his major that gave him practical experience that helped him feel a clear connection between what he was doing for his sport, his major, and how both were helping prepare him for his career.

Research Question #2: What challenges do collegiate student-athletes face when making a decision on their major?

Three themes emerged as challenges for the participants in selecting their major: their time commitment to their sport, their NCAA eligibility and scholarship, and the curriculum at their institution. Issues of time were repeated the most often by all of the participants and was the primary theme that emerged for this research question. As participants reflected upon the challenges they faced, many seemed to recognize that the challenges were ones they predicted and considered prior to selecting their major. However, it was evident that some participants faced difficulty in reflecting upon the challenges they experienced during the decision-making process instead of the challenges they currently face as they are in their major.

Time Commitment to Sport

All four participants shared that a challenge for them in their decision-making process was centered around the large amount of time that they have to devote to their sport. The issue of time was repeatedly brought up amongst the participants and was at the forefront of their minds. Some participants, like Rachel and Kennedy, were aware prior to selecting their major(s) that their time would be limited. For Sam and Melanie, their limited amount of time as a student-athlete is what pushed them to consider other majors and what was most important to them. The time commitment to their respective sports was a challenge from an academic standpoint.

Rachel shared that it is probably more than 20 hours a week that she spends on volleyball, even if that goes against what she thought were the NCAA rules on her time. Other participants echoed that they spend most of their time on their sport, and then the

rest of their time on academics. As Rachel was deciding on her STEM major of engineering as a high school student, she talked with her older brother who was also an athlete and STEM major and she stated, “It’s definitely something that I could tell was very time consuming for him, so it’s a battle that I chose to go through.” In addition, she shared, “He told me that it would be pretty difficult to do a Division I sport and also study a STEM major, so that was something that I was going to try, and I mean, I made it this far.” Rachel knew before getting to her institution that there would be a battle for her time between the major she wanted to choose, and her desire to play volleyball in college. For her, the time commitments did not deter her from choosing engineering, even if it presented as a challenge.

Kennedy’s addition of a nutrition and dietetics major, making her a double major, has provided her with significant challenges to her time. She is actively involved in service organizations, soccer, exercise science, nutrition and dietetics, and finding internships to fit both majors. When asked what it is like to be a student-athlete and double majoring, she shared, “It’s extremely hard and time consuming because I still want to try and graduate in four years.” Similar to Rachel, the prospect of being pressed for time was not a deterrent in the majors Kennedy selected.

Sam also experienced issues of limitations on his time as a result of balancing his sport and academics. He stated that baseball is a year-round sport, and his decision to switch his major to exercise science at the same time that he transferred institutions presented him with a few challenges. Some of his credits did not transfer over to exercise science since they were business classes, and he fell behind his anticipated schedule to

graduate. This meant that he had to take more difficult courses with his upper-level exercise science courses.

I was cramming in all the higher-level courses. Say, like anatomy. I probably should have taken that like my sophomore or freshman year... and it's kind of a difficult course, so that kind of made the time towards the other classes kind of go down because, you know, I don't have much time to study.

Sam shared that he was planning to utilize his fifth year of athletic eligibility after graduating in four and a half years while he was looking at master's programs. When discussing the time constraints he faces currently and how he views graduate school, he stated,

Some of those classes are pretty difficult, but if I take out all the hours I spend on baseball, I feel like it'd be easy because that's the biggest challenge for me is staying up on academics because of how much time I spend playing baseball and practicing.

Sam shared this in a hypothetical manner, because he intends to do a one-year master's program in order to utilize his remaining sport eligibility.

The time commitment to sport also presented as a challenge for Melanie as she was going through the process of switching her major from biology to psychology. She shared that it was a very overwhelming experience for her. She stated,

I was just overwhelmed with my time and it was just making me realize like, what do I want? I guess, in a way, when I changed it, it was realizing how I was going to manage my time with track and school, so I think it pushed me to change my major.

Also going through her head as she was deciding was, “Like risk reward... I’m going to lose a lot of time, like my free time, studying biology. But is it worth it? Because I don’t even like studying biology, so I was just overwhelmed with that.” Melanie knew she did not want to waste her time on something that she did not like. The balance between school and sport pushed Melanie to reconsider other options for her major.

Athletic Scholarship & NCAA Eligibility

Beyond time constraints, three participants also shared the challenges they faced in worrying about their athletic scholarships and NCAA eligibility as they thought about their majors. The three participants had their NCAA eligibility in the back of their minds as they chose their majors and knew that it could present difficulties in the realm of academics, transferring, and internships. One participant found an additional year of NCAA eligibility as an opportunity to continue in their sport and find a graduate degree. The other two participants recognized the guardrails they would have to operate in because of the NCAA requirements affecting their scholarship or ability to continue playing their sport while going to school.

Rachel described that she considered several majors in the engineering field before selecting electrical engineering, but she was concerned about having to transfer to another institution where she would not have her NCAA scholarship and eligibility. Pre-engineering was a path that would have required her to transfer to a larger university within the state and she stated, “I didn’t really want to do that, because I have my athletic scholarship and my eligibility here. So that’s [transferring] a whole different process... and then I decided against pre-engineering.” Rachel shared that she knew she was going to attend her current institution for volleyball after her sophomore year of high school, so

selecting a major at a different institution or transferring would have been difficult for her with what she already had set up at her current institution.

For Sam, he had to decide on how to incorporate an academic program into his fifth year of NCAA eligibility that he wanted to utilize. He was actively considering different master's programs that would work with his NCAA eligibility because he saw this fifth year as both an opportunity and challenge. Sam found it challenging because he was graduating a semester late in exercise science, so he felt he needed to find a shorter master's program to fit in both baseball eligibility and his academic programs.

While Kennedy shared that she is not receiving an athletic scholarship, she still shared that her NCAA eligibility is a consideration and challenge for her as she navigates her majors. Kennedy decided to add nutrition and dietetics as a second major and was aware of the extra coursework that she would have to manage in order to maintain her eligibility. She knew before she decided on this major that it would be challenging to balance 18 credit hour semesters and her sport. In addition, Kennedy shared that both of her majors require an internship and that has added an additional challenge for her. She shared, "I have to find something [internship] that works with my athletics, that doesn't get me into NCAA problems, and that works for the nutrition side and the physical therapy side."

Curriculum at Institution

Two participants noted that the course offerings and curriculum at their institution was a difficult aspect for them when deciding their major. Both of these participants indicated that transferring between institutions could be difficult from a curriculum and major standpoint. However, one participant's main issue was the limited options in

majors, and the other participant's was the course sequencing issues in transferring. The curriculum of the institution presented itself as a challenge for these participants but was not a deterring factor for them in ultimately selecting their major.

The course offerings at the institution limited Rachel's choices for her major. Her institution did not offer the engineering field that she wanted to go into, so she would have to do pre-engineering and transfer which presented other challenges as mentioned previously. She shared, "I knew I was looking for more mechanical engineering, and then with electrical being one that was offered here, I would say I settled." It was evident through interviewing Rachel that electrical engineering was not her original choice, but it was the closest thing to what she felt would give her the knowledge and experience for the career she was seeking. Rachel also shared, "I guess [the] difficulty here is there's not much to choose from."

As mentioned previously, the curriculum for Sam's major of exercise science at his institution required core classes that were not needed at his previous institution. For Sam, this was a challenge as he selected his major because he knew he would have to do more difficult classes like anatomy while also doing junior and senior level coursework. The coursework of Sam's institution itself was not the challenge, but the transferring of coursework from one program to another is what Sam found to be difficult.

Research Question #3: What role do others play in the student-athlete's choice of academic major?

Three themes of individuals emerged from the participants' responses as having an impact on the participants' choice of major: family, institution staff, and former teammates. Of these three groups, family appeared to have the largest impact on the

participants in the decision-making process. Only one participant mentioned current or former teammates as having a role in their choice. The role of family was shown to be influential in which major the participant selected, while the role of institutional staff was used more to confirm the participant's choice or get them declared logistically within the major. The amount of interaction with others in this decision-making process varied between participants with Melanie discussing others as having an influence the most, and Kennedy mentioning them the least.

Family

Family impacted three of the participants' choice of their major. For these participants, family was a trusted source of information and an example to them as they thought about what they should major in. The participants valued the opinions of their family and recognized how what they had observed and been told in their families had an impact on them. None of the participants talked about their family as a negative or troubling influence on them, but rather discussed their influence as either neutral or positive.

Rachel's family had a direct impact on her choice of engineering. She shared that she came from a family of engineers, so she had an idea of what the career would be like if she was to go into it. She stated,

I chose them [family] just because I mean, I'm pretty close with my family, and they were part of the reason why I chose to study that, so trying to get a closer insight to what my workload would be like, or what kinds of things I'd be seeing, or what kind of careers I could go into. I think that they were obviously a trusted source.

In addition, Rachel's brother was also a collegiate student-athlete, so she had the influence of her brother's opinions on if Rachel should go into engineering or not, and what challenges she could face. She shared,

I mostly looked to my dad and brother because my brother's only 3 years older than me. So he was still in school, obviously, when I was in high school trying to decide. So, it's definitely something that I could tell was very time consuming for him.

Rachel knew that going into a STEM field and playing volleyball would be difficult because of what her family told her, but she still felt that she was up for the challenge. Rachel's family provided her a supportive and realistic example for what her choice of major would require and give her after college.

The role of Melanie's family looked a little bit different between her initial choice of pre-medicine as her major before she changed it. Melanie shared that her mother was a large influence as to why she chose pre-medicine. She stated, "I think my heart was so set on pre-med, especially because my mom influenced that too. She's always pushed me in the direction of the medical field, so I think I didn't know anything except for pre-med." For Melanie, she chose pre-medicine because it was what she was exposed to and directed into by her mother, as opposed to consulting with her family on all the perspectives of choosing it like Rachel. When Melanie decided to switch her major to psychology, she indicated that this was a choice she made on her own, apart from her mother.

When asked if he sought advice from anyone when making the decision on his major, Sam shared that he talked with his brother. Sam shared,

He's a couple of years older than me and he was a computer science major and now he doesn't even use his major. He's like in sales and stuff. And so, me looking at that I was like, well why do business? But really, if I wanted to start my own business, I feel like I could do that with kind of prior knowledge and just knowledge of other people.

Sam saw that his brother did not use his major for his career, so this influenced Sam to reconsider what the purpose of his major was. Sam ended up switching to something he could see using in his everyday life after college. Sam's brother was an example for him and was someone he could look to who was only a couple of years older than him.

Institutional Staff

All four participants indicated that one or more staff members at their institution assisted them in the process of choosing a major. Most of the participants indicated that this staff member was their academic advisor. However, these participants mainly used their advisor for logistical assistance once they knew what major they wanted to declare and did not use them for helping them in the process of deciding and exploring options. There were varying levels of interaction between the participants and the staff members, but all of the participants knew someone at their institution they could go to talk to.

Melanie consulted a few different staff at her institution when deciding her major, primarily because of switching from pre-medicine biology to psychology. Melanie shared that as she was considering switching out of biology, she consulted her biology academic advisor because she thought that would be the person to go to for moving the process of changing majors along logistically. She also consulted with her athletic academic advisor to see if it would be a good idea to switch majors, especially to psychology. She then met

with the psychology department advisor who was also a faculty member. She shared, “I think [institution]’s psych department is known to not really have helpful advisors because they’re also professors and they have a lot to do, you know.” However, Melanie also shared that her advisors were really helpful when it came to changing her major from a logistics standpoint, but the logistical aspect was the only thing she utilized them for. She thought the transition into her new major was a smooth process because of the support she received and that the change was harder on her mentally more than anything else.

Prior to coming to her institution, Kennedy spoke with the student ambassadors for her program, professors in the department, and her coach about selecting exercise science as her major. While Kennedy shared that she knew for a while before coming to college that she wanted to do pre-physical therapy, she still indicated that these individuals helped her in the right direction to solidify her decision. She shared that her coach was in her program as an undergraduate and that he had a lot of good things to say about it. She also shared that talking with the professors was her “biggest thing”. Kennedy did not share much about these individuals besides the facts that they had positive things to say about her choice of major and that it signified she was going in the right direction. Kennedy also mentioned that as she was deciding on adding nutrition and dietetics, she was told by some staff members that it could be a good idea to add the major. Kennedy shared, “When I came here, they told me I should minor in nutrition. It’ll look really good on not only a resume, but a doctorate program application, because they all knew that’s what I was coming for.” Kennedy did not specify who specifically had told her this, but that she took their advice and decided to check out the major for herself.

Sam's relationship with the institutional staff when deciding his major was shared as mainly a required thing he had to do. When asked if he used any offices or services on campus when selecting his major, he shared, "I don't think I have. I've talked to my advisor a couple of times just making sure I'm on track. But that's pretty much it. Nothing really outside of what's mandatory." Sam did not share that the institutional staff had an influence on what major he selected, nor that he sought out their opinions or advice on his major. For Sam, the institutional staff, namely academic advisors, were used to keep him on track to graduate and check off the mandatory boxes to do so.

Similar to Sam, Rachel used her academic advisors to try and figure out what classes she needed to take. She stated that she saw her academic advisor for her major and her athletic academic advisor, who were both utilized as a resource for the logistics of selecting her major. Family was the larger influence on her decision of a major. In addition to advisors, Rachel indicated that she has a positive and close relationship with some of her professors and that they have helped her with career exposure. She shared that one professor gave her a list of internship sites to apply for and that the professor she did research with was, "just trying to put me in the best situation post-college." Rachel's responses indicated that while the faculty may have not initially been an influence when deciding her major, they were definitely a support and influence when looking at careers post-graduation.

Former Teammates

Kennedy was the only participant that mentioned talking with former teammates when trying to figure out what she should major in. When asked if she sought advice from anyone when making the decision on her major, she shared, "I had a high school

teammate that was a few years older than me that came to [research site] for exercise science with pre-physical therapy. So, I was messaging with her and asking her how she liked it and she's like, 'I love it! It's helping me so much.'" This teammate helped Kennedy confirm the major she was already leaning towards choosing because of her positive experience in the major Kennedy was considering.

Research Question #4: How does a student-athlete's identity with athletics manifest in their decision-making process for their major?

The participants revealed two opposing themes in how their identity with athletics manifested in their major selection process. Two of the participants had a strong identity with athletics and felt this identity was intertwined with the major they selected. The other two participants felt that although being a student-athlete was a large part of who they were, it was separate to their academic choices and major. The participants who felt their sport and academics were intertwined often talked about their sport without being asked about it by the interviewer, while the other participants rarely talked about their sport when talking about their major.

Sport and Academics Intertwined

Half of the participants viewed their identity with their sport and academics as intertwined. They saw their sport as an enhancement to their major and vice versa. These two participants mainly knew about their major as an option because of their experiences in their sport like injuries or lifting weights. They demonstrated their athletic identity as a central part of who they are and where they want to go in life.

Kennedy is one participant who showed a strong affiliation to her identity as a student-athlete through her involvement with her sport for most of her life. She also

shared that she was heavily involved in an extracurricular club at her institution that focused on volunteering, but was exclusively for student-athletes, demonstrating her strong ties as a member of the student-athlete community. Kennedy's initial exposure to physical therapy and exercise science came from her identity as an athlete when she was injured. In addition, Kennedy expressed that her academic experience has been enhanced by being a student-athlete because of her ability to connect what she is doing in the classroom with what she is doing in her sport. She shared,

My team actually comes to me sometimes with the athletic trainer too like, 'Hey, what can I do to help with this?' So, it's kind of getting that hands-on experience within my own team like they ask me certain questions because they know I'm learning it.

Kennedy's decision to go into physical therapy was one that came about because of her sport, as opposed to an experience outside of her sport.

Sam is the other participant who had a strong sense of identity that was tied to their sport which played a major role in their decision of a major. When Sam was deciding to switch majors from business to exercise science, he shared that exercise science and learning about the body would, "help me in anything if I wanted to coach." Sam shared several sentiments that he is looking at careers related to baseball and that his choice of major was to be a great backup option for him if he decided not to work in the realm of baseball. When asked how he sees his career goals lining up with his major, he shared,

I do kind of want to stay around the game of baseball. So, with exercise science and me being a student-athlete, I feel like that can open up a lot of doors. One,

strength and conditioning, but two, helping out with a baseball program to where I feel like I could offer a couple of other things that other people can't.

Sam's identity as a student-athlete was directly intertwined with his career goals and therefore choice of major.

Sport as Separate to Academics

The other two participants saw their identity with their sport as separate to their academic major. While their sport was still an important part of their college experience, it was not something that drove them to be interested in their majors. They recognized that their sport was not part of their career goals and was not their main or even their only focus while in college.

For Rachel, her choice of engineering as her major was a decision made separate from her identity as a student-athlete. She knew it would be a difficult time trying to balance volleyball and being a STEM major, but her decision was not wrapped up in her experience as a student-athlete. Rachel shared, "I had been taking some engineering classes in high school, so I kind of knew that I wanted to study that, and that was kind of how I also narrowed down some schools." As Rachel was searching for schools, she considered what schools offered the major she wanted, as opposed to only searching for schools that would give her the best sports scholarships and opportunities. In addition, Rachel mentioned that her sport was an escape for her from academics. She stated, "When you're younger, school isn't stressful. But in high school and college, it's kind of a way for like... It's [sports] something else to focus on." In addition, Rachel answered that she did not think that her student-athlete identity had an influence on what major she selected.

While Melanie did express facing some challenges with being a student-athlete and being in her different majors, her ultimate career goals had nothing to do with being a track and field student-athlete. When Melanie first came to college, she shared that her mindset was, “I’m here to do school, and then track is here to get me through school financially.” She stated that she did not think being a student-athlete had an influence on the major she selected, but that it did influence her wanting to change majors because it made her reevaluate her priorities with what limited time she had. When discussing her career goals, Melanie shared that she is hoping to go to law school after graduation and if that does not work out, her backup plan is business or marketing. Melanie felt that her time as a track and field athlete was not really a part of her career goals or that it played any role in the types of content she was looking for in a major.

Conclusion

This chapter provided the results of this study by analyzing the findings under each research question. Themes included participants looking for a major with a practical application to their career, challenges the participants faced with time commitments and NCAA eligibility, and influences of other people on what major they selected such as family and institutional staff. In addition, this chapter revealed the split in how the participants’ athletic identity was tied to their major selection. In chapter five, the discussion of these results, as well as recommendations for student affairs professionals and future research, will be addressed.

CHAPTER V

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

This chapter begins with a discussion of the results of this study including an analysis using the theoretical framework. The four main components include the importance of academics, the commitment to a major, the elements of authoring their own life that the participants experienced, and the significance of the varying experiences amongst student-athletes and their athletic identity. It also provides recommendations for higher education professionals as they work with student-athletes. Additionally, this chapter includes recommendations for future research to enhance the breadth of knowledge concerning the diversity within the student-athlete population and their decision-making processes. Finally, recommendations for higher education and future research will be provided.

Importance of Academics

Academics and the content of one's academic major are of central importance to student-athletes. The student-athletes in this study all knew that their sport alone was not going to land them their first job post-graduation. These student-athletes also recognized that the experience and knowledge gained within the curriculum of a major were important for a future career. The participants could identify how their major would practically apply to careers they were considering, and this was significant to them. In some cases, this importance of having a practical application for a career was enough for a student-athlete to change their major so they could gain that experience.

The student-athletes in this study were aware of what their major could mean for them both after they graduated and while they were still in school. The participants had to

find ways to balance their time, navigate various pressures, and remain NCAA eligible, which led them to consider what major was best for them in combining a good undergraduate experience with a desired career post-graduation. Student-athletes do not always view their sport as primary and academics as secondary, as the academic component to a student-athlete's undergraduate experience is considered heavily as they navigate different choices of major.

Commitment to Major

Some student-athletes experience the exploration process of majors after they have declared a major. They are not always labeled as undecided or undeclared when exploring which major is the right fit for them. None of the participants in this study came into college as an undeclared student. They all had declared majors and then some of them decided to change majors later. The major exploration process for student-athletes may primarily be found prior to coming to college or within the context of a declared major, which influences the practice of the professionals who advise these students.

The idea of being an undecided student was not discussed with these participants, but the findings indicate that they commit to a major before they are technically required to by the institution and NCAA regulations. Committing to a major gives student-athletes exposure to what a career could look like in a related field to the major and helps them decide if that is something they are actually interested in. However, committing to a major and then switching it later can present problems for student-athletes as they consider credit-hour loads and potential transfer to another institution. Recognizing that student-athletes may commit to a major and then change, like any other student

population, is important when working with these students in order to maximize the ability to transfer credits between different majors, including general education requirements.

Authoring Their Own Life

Student-athletes did present evidence of moving through Baxter-Magolda's theory of self-authorship. The participants looked to external authorities, such as family, faculty, staff and athletic personnel to help them make the decision of which major to select. As the participants faced challenges or crossroads and experienced their collegiate life as a student-athlete, their decision on their major became their own. The student-athletes began to think of their own futures and how their major connected to their future. The expectations of external authorities became secondary to the student-athletes' wants and needs for their experience.

Student-athletes are faced with unique challenges and pressures such as limits on their free time and NCAA eligibility and regulations, so they have to navigate their academic decisions in light of these things. With these pressures, there are sometimes external authorities that they follow in their decision-making process, like family. Student-athletes may have to decide if they are going to follow these external authorities when they make their decision, or if they will use those other individuals simply as a resource and ultimately make the decision that is best for them.

Student-athletes must be encouraged to author their own life when selecting their major and career path to help them look beyond their sport and into their post-college life. The participants in this study seemed to have the understanding that the major they chose had implications for their career path, and they wanted to be the ones to choose this

path, not anyone else. Self-authorship was something that all of the student-athletes demonstrated in their decision to pick their major. This development began before the student-athlete entered college at high school age and continued until the student-athlete became a junior or senior in their twenties. This development is a central factor to consider when working with this population because it shows that student-athletes take thought and ownership into their decisions with academics as they experience more years in college.

Varied Experiences in Student-Athlete Identity

There is not a clear-cut way to describe how being a student-athlete influences which type of major a student will select. Some student-athletes see their sport as a strong part of their identity, so picking a sports-related major and career that they feel is close to their identity is important to them. Other student-athletes see their sport as something important to them, but it is not so intertwined with their identity that they base their major and career decisions on it. Two of the participants chose a major somewhat related to sports, and two did not, demonstrating that there is not always a link between sport identity and major selection. The student-athletes in this study had the viewpoint that their sport is what they do, but not who they are, which influenced how they viewed majors and careers.

While the literature cites academic clustering as an issue in collegiate sports teams, this study did not find that to be the case (Rowland, 2014; Schneider et al., 2010; Svyantek et al., 2017; Watkins et al., 2022). None of the participants mentioned current teammates when talking about how they selected their major and only one mentioned a teammate at all, and it was a former teammate. While academic clustering may be an

issue and has been found in other studies, this study found that student-athletes do not always consider their teammates' academic majors as being meaningful in their own educational journey. Student-athletes will often look to other people for advice outside of their sport to help them decide what major is best for them. While the student-athletes recognized they spend a lot of time on their sport and with their teammates, their teammates were not found to be a significant influence in what major they selected, showing that their decision-making process was not exclusively tied to their relationship with athletics.

While this study did not specifically look at gender or particular teams, the results did have some suggestions that could be useful for future research, recommended later in this chapter. Of the four participants, the only student-athlete who indicated that they hoped to work in their sport after college was male. The two student-athletes who chose a major in the realm of their sport, both being exercise science majors, were student-athletes in men's baseball and women's soccer. Societal influences may exist towards women affecting their career outlook and if a professional sports career or career working in professional sports is attainable. Likewise, there may be influences affecting those athletes in sports who do not have professional teams and leagues in the United States where student-athletes could envision themselves working. These things may affect how student-athletes pick their major if they do not see a career post-college in athletics as being something they could pursue.

Recommendations for Higher Educational Professionals

Of the broad range of professionals who work with student athletes, academic advisors and career services professionals are among the most important ones indicated

by the results of this study. These recommendations are not comprehensive, but rather a starting point for these professionals to consider. All of the participants met with their academic advisor while navigating their major, but most of them saw their advisor as someone to help them mostly with the logistics of major selection. Advisors were seen as simply a checkbox that must be cleared by the student-athletes as opposed to a person to help them navigate their academics and decisions. Academic advisors should take note of this and find ways to bridge the gap between themselves and the student-athletes they advise. They can find ways to empathize with these students, ask them challenging questions to get them thinking about their decisions, and get to know them so that the student-athletes see the advisor as a true resource for them. Advisors should also check to see if they are encouraging major exploration, especially with freshman and sophomore students. This type of messaging and relationship building can and should begin as early as new student orientation and the first meeting with the student-athletes.

In addition, academic advisors can also help evaluate the challenges that their students bring to them during their meetings. Advisors can determine if what the student is struggling with is a challenge specific to them as an individual, a general college student challenge, or a challenge specific to student-athletes such as NCAA eligibility and time management related to their sport. Staying educated on this population is important for academic advisors to understand how to best serve these students and navigate these challenges with them, even if they are an academic advisor for the academic department and not specifically working as an athletic advisor. All of the participants in this study met with an academic advisor outside of athletics, so athletic advisors are not the only ones who will work with this population.

Academic advisors should also increase transparency and knowledge in transfer credit policies and articulation. With student-athletes entering the transfer portal, it is important for advisors to be aware of how course credit transfers so that the student-athlete can be informed and have no surprises once they reach their next institution. This can include helping the student look up general education requirements and curriculum guides to majors of interest.

Professionals working in career services can also consider a few things when working with student-athletes. First, professionals can work with student-athletes to find and secure internship opportunities related to a potential career. To do this, professionals should recognize the location bound nature that many student-athletes may face during all points of the academic year. Student-athletes may want or have to find an internship, but their sport could make it so they can only manage local internships. Career professionals can connect these students with qualified local area employers and research where the institution's student-athletes have previously interned at. This could help student-athletes with any fears about a certain major that requires an internship or similar requirement.

Additionally, career services professionals can help student-athletes with exposure to different career fields beyond their sport. Some of the participants in this study had a career outlook that stemmed from their sport or was a continuation of their sport. Professionals should help student-athletes learn what careers exist beyond what they may first think of with their major.

Time management is a critical skill for student-athletes and staff should look for ways to help these students develop strong competencies in this area. All of the participants indicated managing their time and the requirements placed on them as a large

challenge, so finding ways to help these students balance their time well will be helpful, especially for students in more challenging majors such as the STEM field. Athletic support centers could host workshops for students as they transition into being a full-time student and athlete. Professionals also need to make sure that any programming they come up with does not take up too much of the student-athlete's time and works within the restrictions of their schedule. It is a tricky balance to not contribute to the student-athlete's challenge of not having a lot of free time, while also recognizing the importance of teaching them these skills.

Recommendations for Future Research

One recommendation for future research is to conduct this study at a larger Division I institution that has higher revenue generating athletic programs. Only one of the participants in this study indicated wanting to continue their sport as a career post-college or indicated that either they or their teammates had seriously considered it. This study could be replicated at an institution with more attention on those teams with professional opportunities to see how student-athletes select their major in a higher-pressure environment and with expectations of turning their sport into a professional career.

Another recommendation for future research is to conduct this study specifically with participants from revenue generating sports like basketball and football. The research indicates that academic clustering happens more frequently in these sports teams (Schneider et al., 2010). Interviewing this student-athlete population could produce different results and identify different challenges and reasoning for selecting specific

majors. In addition, these participants may have different ties to their sport and athletic identity, or even different support staff that they go to for advice.

Finally, this study could be conducted with a larger and more diverse participant pool. As discussed in the limitations of this study, the participant pool only had four student-athletes, with three of the four identifying as female and all four identifying as white. Results could vary with different populations and also provide a richer understanding of how student-athletes pick their major and not just how this limited group of students experienced this process. With a larger participant pool, the findings of this study could be expanded and explored more fully.

Conclusion

This research study examined the decision-making process of selecting an academic major amongst student-athletes at a midsize Division I institution. The results indicated that student-athletes face challenges like time management and NCAA eligibility that impact their academic experience. Student-athletes often prioritize their academics and do not always look at their major as a means to end, but rather as an important, practical experience to set them up for future career success.

Student-athletes do not always select a major that will be the easiest for them or that relates easily to their sport. Rather they have varied experiences with their athletic identity, which impacts how they select their major. They do not always select a major because of what a coach or advisor told them or what their teammates chose. These students develop during their time in college to make a decision that is completely their own. Professionals who work with this population must be aware of the diverse experiences and pressures these students face and implement practices that help these

students explore majors and see the potential careers that could be a fit for them outside of their sport.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Beginning the Interview

As the participant enters the Zoom room, change their name on the screen to a pseudonym. Then, ask permission to record the session and begin recording, welcome them in, thank them for participating, and chat about light, easy, and small talk topics to help them feel comfortable. In addition, make sure to introduce oneself to establish trust. Ask if they have reviewed the informed consent document and go over some key points on it, such as their anonymity and ability to stop participating at any point. After that, ask permission to record the interview. Once the recording begins, start with simple questions and progress into more specific ones related to the research question in order to establish rapport first.

Demographic Questions

I: To start, I have some demographic questions to ask you that will not be used to identify you. Please feel free to answer whichever ones you feel comfortable with.

1. What year are you in school?
2. What is your age?
3. What sports team do you belong to?
4. How do you define your gender?
5. What is your race?

Primer Questions

II: Next, I have some questions about your major and athletic involvement.

6. What is your major?

7. When did you decide on this major and has it ever changed?
8. How would you describe your time commitment to your sport?
9. How would you describe your time commitment to your academics?

Content Questions

III: During the last portion of this interview, I would love to hear more about your experiences deciding on your major.

10. What did you look for in a potential major?
11. Did you seek advice from anyone else when making the decision on your major.
If so, can you tell me about why you choose that person and how did they help you?
12. What challenges did you run into when choosing your major, if any?
13. Why did you decide on your major?
14. How do you think being involved in athletics has influenced your academic experience, if at all?
15. Do you believe athletics has had an influence on the major you selected?
16. How do you see your career goals lining up with your major?
17. Can you tell me about any offices or services here on campus that you used, visited, or worked with as you decided on your major/career?
18. Were there any majors you considered but did not select? Can you tell me briefly why you decided against them?