A Qualitative Study Exploring Perceived Barriers to Career Development: Perspectives from Division I Female Student-Athletes

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Student-athletes’ career development has been a critical piece of the agenda in the study of athletes in higher education because of the unique status they have as both students and athletes during their college years (Harrison et al., 2009). Although there is a slim chance of playing professional sport for student-athletes, the literature indicates that Division I student-athletes tend to have a higher expectation to play professional sport or work in sport industry after graduation than student-athletes competing in other Divisions (Tyrance, Harris, & Post, 2013). Previous research has focused on student-athletes as a whole by investigating the factors that influence their career preparation, such as athletic identity and career maturity (Houle & Kluck, 2015; Poux & Fry, 2015; Parietti et al., 2016). However, research that exclusively examines female student-athletes’ career development remains limited. Especially, considering the existing barriers for women who currently work in sport organizations (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Smith, Taylor, Siegele, & Hardin, 2019), obtaining insights from female student-athletes would be essential for theoretically bridging this existing research gap and helping them achieve successful career development as they aspire to work in sport organizations. Therefore, this study aimed to explore female student-athletes’ perceived barriers to careers in sport using career cognitive career theory. The following two overarching research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the perceived barriers to female student-athletes’ career development?
RQ2: How do female student-athletes negotiate these perceived barriers?

A qualitative approach was used to explore female student-athletes’ experiences and perceptions regarding career development and barriers. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit female student-athletes who aspired to explore sport careers. The participants included 12 female student-athletes who were active in athletic teams in the academic year of 2019 – 2020 at a Division I institution. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted, and each interview lasted for approximately 30 to 40 minutes. The questionnaire was initially developed based on the two research questions and modified after reviews by the expert panel consisting of three professors in sport management. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding techniques (Creswel & Creswell, 2017), and peer debriefing and member checks were utilized (Glesne, 2011).

Emerging themes included insufficient institutional support for sport career development, lack of experiential learning opportunities, stereotypes and discrimination toward women in sport, lack of mentors outside of the athletic department, and strong willingness to negotiate the barriers. The results of this study have significant theoretical and practical implications. First, the information and insights obtained will add to the body of literature on female student-athletes’ career development in higher education. The identified themes regarding gender-specific barriers and stereotypes will also contribute to the study of women in sport and help scholars further (re)examine the existing gender and diversity issues within sport organizations. Second, for academic advisors and career counselors working closely with female student-athletes, understanding their perceptions of career barriers is essential to offer appropriate and effective advice and mentoring, which can ultimately lead to a more successful career preparation for female student-athletes.