The Career Planning, Athletic Identity, and Student Role Identity of Intercollegiate Student Athletes

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The purpose of this study was to examine the career planning of university student athletes and relationships between their career planning and athletic and student role identities. Two retrospective in-depth interviews were held with four male and four female university student athletes. Participants entered university with vague or nonexistent career objectives and invested heavily in their athletic roles. In the latter years of their college career, the participants discarded their sport career ambitions and allowed the student role to become more prominent in their identity hierarchies. The current findings support Brown and Hartley's (1998) suggestion that student athletes may invest in both the athlete and student role identities simultaneously and that investing in the latter may permit the exploration of nonsport career options.

Key words: career maturity, psychosocial development

Career development is one of many challenges facing older adolescents. The question, “What am I to do with the rest of my life?” is a defining dilemma of late adolescence, a decision that often causes a great deal of stress (Violo & Holden, 1988). Career development is defined as the formation of mature, realistic career plans grounded in assessing one's career goals, interests, and abilities and awareness of vocational opportunities and requirements (Crites, 1978). Considerable research has investigated college students' career planning (Bergeron & Romano, 1994; Luzzo, 1995; Mather & Winston, 1998) and that of college student athletes in particular. Most studies in this area have compared the career planning of college students to college student athletes, and, with few exceptions (Blann, 1985; Perna, Zaichkowsky, & Bocknek, 1996), researchers have found evidence of poor or immature career planning among college student athletes (Kennedy and Dimick, 1987; Murphy, Petipas, & Brewer, 1996; Smallman & Sowa, 1996; Sowa & Gressard, 1983).

Kennedy and Dimick (1987) reported that male student athletes, particularly those in high profile sports, scored significantly lower than a nonathlete comparison group matched by gender and grade standing on the Career Maturity Inventory (CMI). Sowa and Gressard (1983) found that student athletes scored significantly lower than nonathletes on measures of career development tasks. A number of studies that compared college student athletes' career planning, not to nonathlete peers but to standardized scores on measures of career maturity, also found evidence of poor or immature career planning. Smallman and Sowa (1996), for example, found that male athletes from revenue- and nonrevenue-producing sports scored in the bottom 25th percentile of norms for the Career Development Inventory (CDI), a standardized measure of career maturity and career development. Murphy et al. (1996) reported that both male and female student athletes from revenue- and nonrevenue-producing sports scored in the 27th percentile for 12th-grade students on the CMI.
An explanation for the poor career planning among college student athletes may be available in the developmental literature. Developmental theories that consider career planning emphasize the central role identity development plays in establishing mature career plans. Super (1957), for example, who integrated developmental theory with the task of occupational choice, proposed that career planning occurs in five stages across the lifespan. According to Super, progression from one stage to the next is a function of refining one’s interests, like, dislikes, and values, a product of self-exploration and identity development.

Crites (1978) likewise stressed the centrality of identity development to mature career planning. Crites maintained that for the individual to develop mature career plans, he or she must actively engage in self-exploration and occupational preferences as well as available career options. Chickering (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), who dealt specifically with the challenges facing older adolescents, argued that developing strong vocational purpose requires concentrated introspection and individual assessment. He stressed that to develop mature career plans older adolescents must evaluate their needs, values, interests, and abilities through identity development.

However, there is evidence that college student athletes have poor identity development. Researchers reported that college and university student athletes develop strong athletic identities (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1991; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Sparkes, 1998), the defining characteristic of which is the tendency to commit exclusively to a single athletic role at the expense of meaningful exploration of other available roles. Adler and Adler (1991), for example, observed that male basketball players invested so heavily in athletics and their athletic selves that they failed to seriously invest in other immediately available roles, notably the student role. Sparkes (1998) recounted a similar story about a university swimmer and equestrian rider who invested so heavily in her athletic identity that she disregarded all other possible roles, even after a tumor and complications from surgery prematurely ended her competitive career.

The possibility that limited role experimentation and poor identity development account for immature career planning among college student athletes has already been considered. Unfortunately, the results of the few studies in this area have been mixed. Murphy et al. (1996) measured the career maturity and athletic identity of Division I male and female student athletes using the CMI and the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993), respectively. The researchers found the two were inversely related. Athletes with strong athletic identities, for whom the sport role was particularly salient, were likely to experience difficulty making mature career-related decisions. The researchers concluded that committing strongly and exclusively to the athletic role discouraged student athletes from considering and investigating nonsport career possibilities.

Brown and Hartley (1998) examined the relationship between 114 Division I and II basketball players’ AIMS scores and their scores on five individual scales of the CDI: career planning, career exploration, career decision making, world of work information, and knowledge of preferred occupational group. Their results revealed that none of the five individual scales were related to athletic identity. In a study with 131 male and female university athletes, Martens and Cox (2000) reported similar findings using the AIMS but a different measure of career development—a scale called My Vocation Situation.

Brown and Hartley (1998) offered several plausible explanations for the inconsistent findings in the literature. They proposed that student athletes’ investment in the student role may be an equally or more important factor in their career maturity. That is, their athletic identities may encourage a strong commitment to the athlete role, but their investment in identities other than athlete, namely student, may allow or promote the exploration of other interests and nonsport vocational options.

Brown, along with several colleagues, examined the role experimentation and career planning of student athletes in a subsequent study (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000). The researchers used two measures of role experimentation: (a) identity foreclosure, the degree to which an individual commits prematurely and exclusively with a role without meaningful exploration of other roles (Marcia, 1966), and (b) athletic identity. The results revealed that identity foreclosure was negatively related to career decision-making self-efficacy. Athletes who committed early to the athlete role and had little meaningful exploration of or investment in other roles reported lower self-efficacy for career decision making. Athletic identity, however, was not significantly related to career decision-making self-efficacy; that is, identifying strongly with the athlete role was not related to one’s belief in his or her ability to make career-related decisions. Brown et al. suggested, “...it is possible for a student athlete to express high athletic identity while also possessing a strong commitment to his/her student role identity” (p. 60) and that “[d]oing so would likely allow for exploration of other life and career domains” (p. 60). Brown et al. recommended that future research strive to understand more accurately the relationships among student athletes’ career planning, athletic identity, and student role identity. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the career planning of university student ath-
letes and the relationships among their career planning, athletic identities, and student role identities.

Method

Research Design

Brown and Hartley (1998) suggested the contradictions in the literature may have stemmed from the use of quantitative measures, and Brown et al. (2000) criticized the inability of paper and pencil assessment to provide a "...comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional and complex aspects of career and identity development processes" (p. 60). Brown and her colleagues, among others, recommended that complex entities, such as role identities, be explored using qualitative methodologies (Brown et al., 2000; Luzzo, 1995; Neyer, 1994). We chose to use in-depth interviews, which could provide a rich understanding of these intricate processes from the perspective of those most closely involved—student athletes.

Based on the work of developmental theorists, including Erikson (1959) and Chickering (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), we anticipated the student athletes' role investments and career plans would change over time. Therefore, we decided to use retrospective in-depth interviews, which would allow us to examine changes from the time student athletes entered the university until they approached graduation.

We held two retrospective in-depth interviews with student athletes in their fourth or fifth year of eligibility—the first, approximately 6 months, and the second, 1 month, prior to graduation. Participants were selected from two team and two individual sports: men's and women's volleyball and basketball and men's and women's track and field and swimming. We chose these sports because they provided opportunities for both men and women and their seasons were comparable in length, almost the length of the academic year in the Canadian case.

I, the principal researcher, obtained rosters for the teams listed above and sent every fourth- and fifth-year athlete an electronic notice about the study. I invited those who expressed an interest to a meeting at which I shared additional information about the study and research protocol, identified those who appeared comfortable in an interview setting, and identified any possible dual relationships that might raise concern. Several students were eliminated from further consideration following these preliminary meetings, 2 because they expressed hesitation about participating in in-depth interviews and 1 because of a prior consulting relationship. Although the consulting relationship had ended, both the student and I felt this decision was prudent.

Participants

The participants were 8 full-time students (4 men and 4 women) from a large Canadian institution with an enrolment of approximately 50,000. The university offers a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programs and is located in a large metropolitan city, home to two other universities and numerous colleges. The participants were between the ages of 22 and 24 years at the time of the research; half were in their fourth year and half in their fifth year of undergraduate study. Four were physical education majors, whereas the remaining student athletes pursued arts and sciences degrees. At the time of the first interview, all the participants were actively competing in their sport at the university level. At the time of the follow-up interviews, all participants had completed their athletic seasons and were within weeks of graduation.

All the students lived in the local community surrounding the university during the academic year, and none commuted from afar. Three of the participants had grown up in the city in which the university was located. The others had moved to the host city to pursue their studies and typically returned to their hometown during the summer months.

I was familiar with 4 of the participants at the study outset. Two had been students in my class 2 years prior to the study, and 2 were members of teams with which I had previously worked as a consultant. I was comfortable these student athletes chose to participate due to an interest in the study and not a real or perceived obligation. The familiarity allowed me to easily develop rapport with these participants, which contributed to the quality of the interviews and richness of the data collected.

Data Collection

Researchers often begin in-depth interviews with broad, open-ended questions that have been called "grand tour" questions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Sparkes, 1998) and invite participants to respond in the form of focused monologues. Interviewers then probe and explore in response to participants' comments (Berg, 1995; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Seidman, 1991). Participants provided informed consent and completed a demographic questionnaire before the interviews. I began the initial interviews with this grand tour approach by asking participants to reflect on their experiences as student athletes. They discussed their experimentation of various roles, including athlete and student, and spoke about their career plans. They recalled their initial career plans on arriving at university and detailed how and why these changed over the course of their studies. I took notes during these monologues and afterward used clarification (e.g., What do you mean by "going all the way in sport"?) and elaboration (e.g., Can you tell me more about how

ROES: September 2005

277
you “dropped those sport goals?”) probes (Weiss, Smith, & Theeboom, 1996) to gather more detailed information about the three variables being studied, the relationships among them, and if and how these changed over time. The initial interviews lasted between 90 and 120 min.

Approximately 4–6 months later, I conducted follow-up interviews with the participants to gather more information about their athlete and student role investments and career plans and, in some cases to clarify comments made during the first interviews. I also sought the participants’ reactions to and feedback on ideas and themes emerging from analysis of the first set of interviews. The follow-up interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min.

Data Analysis

Each interview in the first set was tape recorded with the participant’s permission and transcribed verbatim. After the first interview, I began an inductive analysis of the data following procedures similar to those outlined by Côté, Salmela, and Russell (1995). The first stage of the analysis required scrolling each page of the transcription and separating the data into meaning units. A meaning unit is a segment of text that contains a single idea or thought (Teach, 1990). Each meaning unit was assigned a descriptive label or “tag” as it was identified and separated from the remaining text. I recorded each of the tags in a growing list. The meaning units from the first interview and their respective tags were then transferred into a qualitative analysis computer program, NUD*IST4 (QSR International, 1997). This stage of the analysis was completed for each interview and before the next, allowing me to have a keen awareness of the emerging themes and ideas throughout the data collection.

Once I had conducted all the interviews in the first set, separated the data into meaning units, assigned each meaning unit a descriptive tag, and transferred the meaning units and their tags into NUD*IST4, I reviewed the complete list of tags and compiled those that were theoretically or practically similar into distinct groups called properties (Côté et al., 1995). I grouped the tags based on the similarity or relationship between the tags, rather than on the content of their respective meaning units, and then assembled related properties into categories, which allowed me to make connections within the data and generate broader representations of the emerging themes. The final step of the analysis involved returning to the meaning units within each property to examine its content in greater depth and detail (Côté et al., 1995). This allowed me to define the specific meaning or significance of the information within the meaning units. The same procedure was performed with the data collected in the second set of interviews, which were completed 4–6 months later.

Qualitative theorists have concurred that the traditional standards used to evaluate quantitative investigations, such as reliability and credibility, are not relevant to qualitative inquiries (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990; Sparkes, 1998). They have continued to debate the appropriate criteria for judging qualitative work and placed particular emphasis on the issue of objectivity within qualitative studies. Prominent figures within qualitative inquiry have called for researchers to reflect on their role in conducting and reporting research and to clearly position themselves within these processes (Coe, 1991; Richardson, 1992; Sparkes, 1995). Sparkes (1995) argued, “an author needs to be written into and not out of the text” (p. 165). I will, therefore, place myself within the context of the study.

I am a young, White, middle class, highly educated, able-bodied woman, who has never been an intercollegiate athlete, although I have always been a sport enthusiast and have worked as a researcher and consultant within the intercollegiate environment for more than 8 years. I have read extensively the developmental literature related to identity and career development. Based on these experiences, I approached this study with several general assumptions; I anticipated that: (a) the participants’ career plans, athletic identities, and student role identities might fluctuate from entry to graduation but was not sure how, and (b) the three variables under study might be related, but again was not sure how or whether the relationships among them might change over time.

I was an active player in all stages of the research process and cannot remove myself from the story told but, instead, make plain to the readers my presence within the data collection, analysis, and results. I posed the research question, guided the interviews, analyzed the data, and selected the quotes included below, because they clearly illustrated a point. My co-author did not conduct any interviews or participate directly in the data analysis. She is, however, well versed in qualitative inquiry, psychosocial development, and the dynamics of the student athlete population. As such, she was a resource for me as I developed ideas and interpretations of the data. The account below, then, is my interpretation of the participants’ stories, of what they reported doing or experiencing. This is not to say the account is flawed or untrustworthy. In addition to consulting my co-author, I solicited the participants’ feedback on my initial interpretations and working hypotheses from the first through follow-up interviews. My interpretations resonated with the participants and were recognizable to them as texts of their own stories. In this ongoing debate about the researcher-author’s role in the final text as a product of interpretation, evaluation, and judgment, Richardson (1992) commented, “We can choose to write so that the voice of those we write about is respected,
strong, and true” (p. 38). While acknowledging my presence in the text, this is what I have tried to do.

Results

The participants reported that their career plans, athletic identities, and student role identities changed appreciably over the course of their university studies. There were marked differences between their early and later college years, and these are described in two categories: Early Career Plans and Late Career Plans. The properties and themes emergent from the data are described under each category and punctuated by direct quotes from the participants, whose real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Early Career Plans

Two of the participants—Beth, a fifth-year female swimmer, and Sara, a fourth-year volleyball player—had clear ideas about their vocational preferences and future goals when they arrived at the university. Beth wanted to go into physiotherapy and Sara into teaching. Both had identified these career goals during high school and had chosen undergraduate degrees in physical education to reach these objectives. Sara knew an undergraduate curriculum in physical education would include teacher training, and Beth saw a logical connection between studying physical education and physiotherapy.

I knew I wanted to do Physio in Grade 11 or 12. I knew Phys Ed was pretty related and was still dealing with the body and I looked at it as a stepping stone. I always knew I would go into Physio after Phys Ed. (Beth)

The remaining participants identified several possible avenues, but none described themselves as seriously committed to any particular vocational path. Their ideas were vague, they vacillated between numerous potential careers, and they seemed to be easily influenced by others.

I was disappointed when I did not get into Arts and Sciences, but I figured Phys Ed was fairly science oriented and would try it out. Sure enough, I transferred to engineering after 2 years. (Mike)

I came into [the] university wanting to study astronomy. I think that was more of a hobby from high school. I took an astronomy course my second year and did poorly. I knew astronomy was not what I wanted to do so I was thinking long and hard, and I had a friend who was in a co-op program to be a teacher’s assistant. He was telling me about all of the things he was doing and it sounded cool. (Sean)

The participants described having aspirations of pursuing professional and amateur athletic careers in their respective sports when they arrived at the university. When recalling his early university career, Sean said, “A dream of mine is to play professionally, not in the NBA, but Europe is an opportunity for me to play.”

The participants had invested heavily in sport at the high school level, a pattern they continued at the university level. All had been involved in sports as children. Several had participated in one sport during their youth, and others had been involved in a range of activities specializing at the high school or university level. In addition, several had competed at high levels. To avoid jeopardizing their anonymity, I cannot provide detailed information about the levels they achieved or accolades received, but can share that several had competed at the regional and provincial levels and 2 at the national level prior to attending the university. The participants, except for 3, had been recruited by their university coaches and/or senior team members, as well as other Canadian and, in several cases, U.S. schools.

The participants shared that their long involvement in sport, the success they had achieved to date, and the affirmation that came from being sought by university coaches fueled their dreams of making an Olympic team or playing in a professional, international league. Even Sara, who had well defined career plans when she arrived at the university, thought she might pursue an amateur career before going on to teaching: “In terms of career, I always thought I would end up as a teacher, but I thought I might go to the National Team first.”

The circumstances the student athletes encountered at the university reinforced these athletic goals. Although several of the participants had competed at high levels prior to attending the university, they described feeling that training at the university level was “completely different than high school.” It was more serious, more intense, more demanding. They were spending 2, sometimes 3, hours a day in training or practice and often competed on a weekly basis. The caliber of coaches was higher in the university context. Several had coached at Olympic games and World Championships with athletes who had achieved notable success. The participants’ teammates were also talented performers. The participants, particularly those in swimming and track, were training with athletes who had already been or were expected
to secure positions on national teams and Olympic squads and had been invited to major competitions, such as All Star tournaments and World University Games. Mike, a swimmer, described feeling both "exhilarated" and "intimidated" by being in the pool with a former Olympian.

Two female track and field athletes, Michelle and Mary, remembered not having serious athletic aspirations when they arrived at the university. They had been involved in high school track largely because they had enjoyed the training and wanted to be active. However, being exposed to the same conditions, that is, concentrated training with talented peers under the direction of high level coaches, prompted them to form more serious athletic objectives. They began to aspire to more ambitious athletic goals by the end of first year, goals that did not notably differ from those held by their peers.

I got out of running in my last few years of high school. I was not as into it as I had been in the first few years. Coming here really got me back into it. I decided I was really going to work on it and I wanted to do well in track. I tree planted that summer and trained really, really hard. I lost 20 pounds, and my times went down tremendously in [the] second year. (Mary)

The participants' career plans reflected the salience of their athletic identities and lack of investment in the student role. They defined themselves by their involvement in athletics, their relationships with teammates, and their interaction with coaches. The participants recalled making overt efforts to be identified as athletes by their peers from class, residence halls, and home. They wore clothing to distinguish themselves as varsity athletes; they associated with teammates and other student athletes in class and during academic activities; and they organized their schedules to accommodate training, practices, and games or events, which, as a result, temporally and physically separated them from nonathlete peers.

The participants perceived that their investment in athletic goals came at the expense of exploring other role identities, notably that of student. They disclosed that the student role was negligible in their self-perceptions during their early university careers. At the beginning of our interviews, the participants stressed that their education was their first priority. They asserted that they had come to the university "to get an education" and that obtaining a university degree was "very important." Yet, in probing further, I learned they were not really that interested or concerned about their academic performance when they arrived at the university. Sara acknowledged, "My big picture when coming to [the] university was academics was first. When I started, however, I was so excited about volleyball that my focus was volleyball." The participants were strongly focused on their athletic objectives and had less regard for their grades or the academic opportunities available at university. Michelle added, "I always picked going to track in my first year before school. I would miss class and get the notes off someone."

In addition, the students recalled having little time to explore activities such as campus clubs, community projects, or volunteering, experiences that may have increased their awareness of alternative vocational choices. Sara confided that she "was not involved in other things like student council, the community."

Late Career Plans

By their senior years, with the exception of John, the participants indicated they were no longer serious about pursuing amateur or professional athletic careers. They had abandoned aspirations of positions on national teams and contracts with professional European clubs. The participants told of coming to the realization that, while they were talented athletes, they would go no further than conference and national university championships. They accepted that amateur and professional sport careers were extremely unlikely.

Although surrendering their hopes of pursuing athletic careers beyond the university, the participants recognized that their athletic experiences influenced their nonsport career choices. They explained that their athletic experiences had been positive and had helped shape their interests and desires, with some developing interests in professions related to sport and physical activity and others eliminating them. John said, "I like sports and thought I could combine the two into sports medicine, or orthopedic surgery." Conversely, Dan, a fourth-year swimmer, reflected, "I have entertained the thought of coaching, but I am not really interested in it. I don't think I would like it."

The participants acknowledged that their athletic experiences had another indirect impact on their future careers. As a result of investing so much of themselves in their athletic identities, they divulged that they had been indifferent toward their academic performance and their grades during their first year of university. Only later did they realize their commitment to sport and their pursuit of athletic goals distracted them from significant investment in academics, resulting for most in poor grades. They spent more time on their studies in their upper years hoping to improve their grades yet worried their early neglect would impact their future success or opportunities.

Remarkably, a number of participants had elected to pursue careers in the same field, despite the infinite opportunities and academic programs offered at their university. Two participants, Sean and Sara, chose teaching and 4 others wanted to go into medical careers.
had learned there were opportunities for male junior
and primary teachers; he had already applied to a teach-
ers’ college at the time of the second interview and was
volunteering at a local school as a teacher’s aide. He
expected to be teaching full time within a year or two.

However, I sensed a collective feeling of uncer-
tainty among the participants who aspired to careers
in medicine: John, Mary, Michelle, and Beth. When I
asked them about it, they confided they were not sure
they would get into medical or physiotherapy schools
and worried that competition for limited spaces would
be too intense.

I applied for med school for next year
but I don’t know if I will get in. I am
going to think positively. I did not want
to apply here, because I did not think I
would get in, and I thought, “What is the
point?” (Michelle)

At the time of the interviews, Beth had already applied
to a graduate program in physiotherapy and been
deprecated. She had returned for a fifth year as a special
student to try to improve her grades with the intention
of reapplying the following year.

I had not planned on staying a fifth year.
I was overconfident. I thought I could get
into physiotherapy, no problem. I only ap-
plied to this university, because at this time
last year I thought it was the only place I
wanted to go. Then, I did not get in and I
did not have a back-up plan. What the hell
am I going to do? (Beth)

Beth was not the only student athlete to have no
alternative or back-up plan. The participants had cho-
cen careers in prominent fields, were uncertain they had
the academic qualifications to obtain these objectives,
and yet described not seriously considering alternative
career options. They disclosed they had not really
prepared for the possibility they would not get into sec-
ond entry or graduate programs in their chosen field.

I have to do 4 more years of university
after my undergraduate degree at the
[graduate program in a medical field].
I am applying right now, so I’ll have to
see. If I don’t get in, I don’t know. I will
probably apply again. I will see what hap-
pens. (Mary)

The participants felt their career plans in their
later college years reflected the decreasing prominence
of their athletic identities and increasing salience of
their student role identities. Mary remarked, “I just
realized that I wanted to be a doctor, I wanted to get
good marks, I wanted to get into something after
graduation.” The participants recalled continuing to
invest heavily in the athlete role throughout their sec-
ond and third university year. The strength of their ath-
etic identities persisted, and they continued to define
themselves through their involvement in varsity sport
and membership in the intercollegiate subculture.

They described choosing to invest less in their ath-
ete roles in their fourth and fifth years and reported
maintaining a strong, but not an exclusive, commitment
to their athletic roles. They continued to devote a con-
siderable chunk of time each week to practice and train-
ing and pursued athletic goals, but they no longer de-

defined themselves exclusively by their involvement in
sport and their association with teammates and athlete
peers. As Sarah recognized, “My goal is to make a dif-
fERENCE in somebody’s life, and playing profession-
ally is much more of a focus on myself and what I want
than on what I can give to other people.” They revealed that
the student role became more prominent in their iden-
tity hierarchies and reported enjoying their academic
studies and wanting to do better in school, not just to
make up for earlier lacklustre performances but be-
cause it was important to their sense of self. Dan
explained about the program he was interested in:

They have a field course in the first 2
weeks of September, and it gives all of
the first year master’s students a chance
to bond, and it would give me a sense of
what I was looking for in graduate stud-
ies and give me a chance to talk to them.
It will also give me a chance to meet
some of the pros.

The participants’ growing investment in the student
role allowed them to explore intellectual interests and
consider professions related to their programs of study.
They described vocational goals that were direct continu-
atations of their academic programs of study and career
objectives that included second-entry and graduate pro-
grams. They described looking forward to pursuing their
studies more intensely at the next level and expressed
excitement about careers in their chosen field.

The participants continued to spend time with

teammates at practices and events. They described
their friendships with their teammates as some of the
most memorable experiences of their university lives.
However, they started to explore alternative social con-
nections during their later university years, particularly
among classmates who shared similar academic inter-
ests. The participants realized they could identify with
people outside the sport context. As Beth noted:

ROES: September 2005 281
A major thing I learned this summer through working with nonathletes was I could relate to people who were nonathletes. I don’t always have to have friends or family who are really athletic. I can branch out. I can have success with a different group of people.

Mike had not developed tangible career plans despite approaching the end of his university career. He explained he was consciously distracting himself from making future career plans. He continued to focus on his athletic career, although he did not expect to go any further than his current level and had invested more seriously in his academic progress, like his peers. I asked Mike about the fact that he had no definite plans for after graduation, which was quickly approaching. He explained that he knew this was going to be his last opportunity to compete at the varsity level and he wanted to enjoy the time he had left with his teammates. He did not want planning for his future to detract from his last year of being a student athlete.

Part of me is sad to think that part of my life is done and I can no longer be a swimmer. Another part of me is really excited to move on and get a full-time job. I have thought about retirement a little, but I really do not want to think about it too much, because it is a big change. I don’t want it to distract me from my goals. I would really like to finish off my career with the best season I have had as opposed to fizzling out.

Mike had applied to a managerial position in a local business at the time of the follow-up interview. He said he was considering this opportunity but was not sure he would get the job or take it if offered.

Discussion

The failure of student athletes to have well defined career plans on arrival at the university is consistent with the existing literature. The participants entered the university with limited awareness of their nonsport vocational interests and vague or nonexistent career objectives, consistent with existing reports of poor career planning among college and university student athletes (Adler & Adler, 1987; Parham, 1993).

The literature also supports the finding that the participants had more mature career plans by the time they reached their fourth and fifth years at the university. Despite indications that student athletes have lower career maturity in comparison to their nonathlete peers (Brown et al., 2000; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Murphy et al., 1996; Smallman & Sowa, 1996), there is some suggestion in the literature that this may only be the case during student athletes’ early university careers. That is, they may enter a university with poorly defined career goals and a focus on professional and amateur sport careers but may leave with a better understanding of their nonsport vocational objectives.

In a comparison of under- and upperclass male and female Division I and III athletes and nonathletes, Blann (1985) discovered that freshman and sophomore athletes from both levels of competition scored lower than their nonathlete peers on a measure of career planning. However, junior and senior athletes at both competitive levels reported career plans as equally well defined as their nonathlete peers.

The findings of the current study and those reported by Blann (1985) suggest student athletes’ career planning may be delayed during their early university careers but progress over the course of their studies. The current findings do not tell us if this pattern differs from the experiences of the general student population. Additional research comparing the career planning of athletes to students in general across the length of their university studies is needed.

The current study also considered the relationship between student athletes’ career planning and their athletic identities. Murphy et al. (1996) found a negative relationship between career maturity and athletic identity among university student athletes. Yet, Brown and Hartley (1998) reported no significant relationship between the two. However, if we look closely at the populations in these two studies, the Murphy et al. sample was predominantly underclass students, whereas Brown and Hartley’s was almost equally split between under- and upperclass students. What initially appears as a contradiction may actually reflect a negative relationship between career planning and athletic identity that dissolves over time as student athletes’ identification with the athlete role declines. The findings of the current study support this suggestion. Although student athletes had poorly defined career plans in their early university careers, they also reported having strong and exclusive athletic identities. When in their later university years and more seriously considering professional occupations, the participants reported investing less in their athlete role identities. We suspect that had the participants’ athletic identities continued to exclusively dominate their self-perceptions, they may not have contemplated nonsport career options.

The participants were prompted to reevaluate the salience of their athletic identities when they recognized amateur and professional sport careers were
unattainable. Despite receiving recognition at both the regional and national levels, all but 1 participant acknowledged that amateur or professional careers were unlikely. There have been several inferences in the literature that student athletes are becoming increasingly realistic about the probability of professional sport careers (Brown et al., 2000; Brown & Hartley, 1998). Indeed, although Kennedy and Dimick (1987) reported close to 50% of university basketball and football players expected to play at the professional level and Adler and Adler (1985) discovered similar sentiments among university basketball players, Brown and Hartley (1998) reported that only 20% of Division I football and basketball players anticipated advancing to the professional level.

As the exclusivity of the participants’ athlete role identities waned, their student role identities swelled, followed by the exploration of nonsport career options. The findings suggest that the attenuation of their athletic role identities curtailed their enthusiasm for future sport careers, and their investment in their student role identities allowed them to explore career options related to their studies, supporting Brown and Hartley’s (1998) earlier hypothesis.

The decline of their athletic identities created the opportunity to explore other roles. But why did they invest more seriously in the student role in particular? The findings offered several plausible reasons. First, the increasing investment in the student role reflected an augmented interest in academic studies. The participants recalled becoming more engaged in their readings, lectures, and course content. As they became more invested in events taking place in the academic setting, they began to consider their futures as extensions of their courses and academic programs.

Second, the participants’ peer reference groups changed. They remarked that their peers from the intercollegiate subculture strongly influenced their beliefs and attitudes early in their university careers. Diminished commitment to the athlete role meant increased exposure to peers in the academic setting. It is possible that their peers in the academic setting were contemplating their futures and exploring graduate programs and professional careers, thus, triggering the participants to do the same. Existing research has considered the influence teammates and other athletic peers have on the academic interests of college and university student athletes (Adler & Adler, 1985; Miller & Kerr, 2000; Meyer, 1990). However, there is little research on the impact of academic peers on student athletes’ commitment to the student role and their academic performance. This may be because student athletes are often isolated from academic peers and are believed to have little interaction with nonathlete peers in or outside class (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1991; Blinde, 1989). The current findings suggest peers in the academic environment may play an important role in encouraging student athletes to explore the student role and invest more seriously in their studies and future career planning. Future researchers may wish to compare and contrast the influence athlete and nonathlete peers have on student athletes’ role experimentation and career planning across the length of their university studies. Third, it is possible the participants, who had for several years invested time, energy, and money in their academic lives, wished to see a return on that investment, namely the acquisition of a university degree and the career opportunities it might provide.

Third, the findings related to the participants’ career plans as seniors raised some concern and highlighted a misconception in the literature on college student athletes’ career planning. Those interested in the career planning of college student athletes often infer that college or university student athletes reporting nonsport career objectives have developed mature, viable career plans (Perna, Ahlgren, & Zaichkowsky, 1999). Yet of the 6 participants in the current study who had well defined nonsport career objectives at the time of graduation, 4 had ambitious career plans but not necessarily the requisite academic qualifications to achieve them. It may be that, although student athletes abandon expectations of sport careers, they develop equally unrealistic nonsport career expectations. Furthermore, the student athletes failed to develop any serious alternative career plans. Many researchers have used standardized measures of career maturity, including the Attitude and Competency Scales of the CMI (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Murphy et al., 1996). The CMI is based on a conceptual model by Crites (1978) that originally included two additional components: consistency of career choice and realism of career choice. The last two were not incorporated in the CMI, and little has been said about the construct of realism of career choice in existing research on career maturity among student athletes. The findings of the current study suggest we need to consider not only the depth of student athletes’ vocational planning and preparation but also the realistic nature of their nonsport career choices. The climate of today’s workplace suggests employees will change careers three or four times during their working life (Newman & Newman, 1995). The need for realistic career planning and the exploration of alternative vocational interests is greater than ever before.

We must recognize several limitations of the study. First, we used retrospective interviews with student athletes in their fourth or fifth year of athletic eligibility. We chose to do this because of the exploratory stage of this line of research, the desire to ensure informants had been exposed to the university environment and
the intercollegiate subculture, in particular, for a significant period of time, and the potential for attrition. Adler and Adler (1991) estimated that 1 in 5 student athletes do not complete their eligibility. This may be even higher in the Canadian setting, where, at the time of this study, institutions were prohibited from offering athletic scholarships. Yet, we were aware this came with certain drawbacks. The retrospective interviews could have been open to bias. Cognizant of this, I checked for inconsistencies during the participants' narratives and clarified the few that did arise.

Second, we excluded athletes in earlier years of eligibility and notably those who did not pursue athletics for the length of their university careers. Based on the preliminary findings of this study, suggesting investment in the student role may be an important variable in the relationship between career planning and athletic identity, researchers are encouraged to pursue longitudinal investigations following student athletes from entry to graduation.

Third, we did not include a comparison group of nonathletes. Given the consistent findings in the literature that student athletes were differentially at risk in terms of career planning, we determined a comparison group was not necessary. Moreover, given the unexplored suggestion that student athletes' investment in the student role might help explain the contradictory findings regarding the relationship between career planning and athletic identity, we felt more could be gained from closely exploring the lives of student athletes. The next step in advancing our understanding of student athletes' career planning would be to compare and contrast their career plans, athletic identity, and student role identity, not just with students in general but also with those involved in comparable extracurricular activities, such as student government, music, art, and drama. We encourage researchers to consider such questions in future studies.

**Implications**

The findings of the current study can be useful to career counselors and other student support professionals. First, the findings suggest student athletes do not need to relinquish the athlete role to invest more seriously in the student role and explore nonsport career plans. Professionals can reassure student athletes that investment in both is possible without compromising one or the other. The findings also suggest, however, that student athletes' investment in their academic studies and exploration of professional career options followed their realization that sport careers were unlikely. It may be critical for career counselors and other student athlete support professionals to encourage student athletes to realistically examine the likelihood of advancing their athletic careers. As the findings suggest, both athletic peers who have committed to their studies and begun mature career planning and academic peers who have similarly worked on career planning may assist in this process.

**Conclusion**

The current findings make an important contribution to our understanding of the career planning of college student athletes and the relationships among their career planning, athletic identities, and student role identities. The findings suggest that their strong and exclusive identification with the athlete role may hamper their career planning during their early university careers. Yet, the subsequent descent of their athletic identities may allow them to invest in other roles, particularly the student role. Investment in the student role identity may encourage the exploration of professional vocations linked to their academic programs. The findings support Brown and Hartley's (1998) suggestion that student athletes may invest in both the athlete and student role identities simultaneously and that investing in the latter may permit the exploration of nonsport career options.

**References**


**Authors' Note**

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