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# Toward an Understanding of Best Practices in Student-Athlete Leadership Development Programs

*Student-Athlete Perceptions and Gender Differences*

Kristina Navarro

Stephen Malvaso

## Abstract

Student-athletes often know how to recognize leadership but struggle to master techniques to exemplify leadership characteristics during their college experience. As Division I athletics now serve as the front porch to American institutions, the visibility of Division I student-athletes has drastically increased. With this visibility comes enhanced responsibility to represent oneself, one's team, and one's university. In turn, it is of heightened interest for higher education and intercollegiate athletics practitioners to understand how to best foster leadership skills for this unique population that garners enhanced media attention. This mixed-method case study considers the perceptions of 221 Division I freshmen student-athletes who completed a formal peer mentorship and leadership development program at a large Southeastern institution. A survey was employed to analyze the relationship between gender and student-athletes' perceived effectiveness of the program's curricular components. Findings displayed no widespread significant impact of gender on perceived effectiveness. Recommendations are presented to enable practitioners nationwide to improve student-athlete leadership development programs considering gender differences and the student-athlete voice.

**Keywords:** *student-athletes, intercollegiate athletics, leadership development*

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## Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the highly commercialized world of intercollegiate athletics has increasingly influenced the way in which student-athletes, a subset of the higher education student body, prepare for life after sport (Adler & Adler, 1987, Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 2003, Broughton & Neyer, 2003; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003, 2004). External influences such as multimillion-dollar television contracts have heightened the commercialization of college sport, resulting in enhanced pressure for coaches and athletics administrators to produce winning teams (Croissant, 2001). In turn, media forums continue to depict large Division I athletic departments as systems which exploit student-athletes for their athletic prowess, but place little emphasis on meaningful leadership development during the higher education experience (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011; Spivey & Jones, 1975; Renick, 1974; Suggs, 2003; Thelin, 1994).

Further, the unique relationship between athletic and academic spheres and the placement of athletics within the institution of higher education continues to be debated in current literature. The unique placement of intercollegiate athletics systems within academic institutions provides greater responsibility for higher education systems to prepare student-athletes as future contributors to society, not just highly visible figures that often serve as the front porch to the institution. Due to this unique nexus of education and athletics at the intercollegiate level, higher education and intercollegiate athletics practitioners must consider how to best prepare Division I student-athletes to be leaders on the field, in the classroom, and in life after sport during the higher education experience. To meet this need, many Division I athletics departments now incorporate student-athlete peer mentorship programs to assist freshmen student-athletes to develop self-leadership skills. However, practitioners have yet to determine what curricular and pedagogical strategies best meet the needs of this population subset during the first-year of college.

### Leadership Development and Theory

Leadership is a construct imperative to the cohesive functioning of any organization but often difficult to understand. James MacGregor Burns (1978) perhaps best displays this concept as he posits leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth. Looking at leadership within a broad scope of organizational behavior, success can be exemplified by leaders who effectively motivate subordinates and in turn followers that buy into the larger picture and mission of the organization. Within a higher education context, leadership can be viewed as a constant learning process in which students must evolve and practice a specific skill set to develop true aptitude. Today multiple theories exist that frame the importance of developing members of society as leaders. In turn, leadership theories (i.e. member exchange, servant leadership, and situational leadership) can help to frame the need for leadership development programs within the high-

er education experience. As higher education professionals consider the construct of leadership, a debate continues to surface as to the understanding of whether leaders are born or developed. In addition, leadership theory continues to raise questions among higher education practitioners as to whether all students should be leaders. To this end, this study considers how higher education institutions can prepare student-athletes to be future contributors to society and exemplify self-leadership characteristics. This study does not suggest that all individuals can and should be leaders, but builds on the understanding and mission of higher education institutions to prepare students as future contributors to society in career fields.

### **Leadership Development and Student-Athletes**

Within the scope of collegiate athletics, the construct of leadership takes on similar themes. Just as leaders of an executive organization search for ways to effectively reach and motivate staff, student-athletes search for ways to motivate themselves and their teammates to navigate complex and challenging environments (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Building from the premise of the need to develop self-leadership skills during the higher education experience, this study specifically looks at the development of freshmen student athletes within the context of a peer mentorship program. Today, college athletes can often recognize leadership, but struggle to master techniques to best exemplify those characteristics during their student *and* athlete experiences.

**Peer mentorship and leadership development.** Peer mentoring is an extensively researched topic area within higher education and given the findings in recent years, there is strong support for programs to be facilitated by student affairs and student support staff internal to athletics. Jacobi (1991) states that the traditional notion of mentoring—a somewhat authoritative relationship between a student and a much older faculty or staff member—has lost prevalence in recent years and since transitioned more prominently to a peer to peer relationship. A foundational component of the mentoring relationship as described by Eby and Lockwood (2005) is the delineation between a formal and informal relationship. An informal mentorship usually occurs spontaneously and casually whereas the formal relationship commonly involves structure and direction (Budge 2006). Over time, debate has sparked over the importance and impact of gender and race related to mentorship pairings, but the results continue to be inconclusive. Bowman & Bowman (1995) found that mentor-mentee pairings based on gender and race are helpful, especially when considering students from underrepresented groups, whereas converse findings from Sosik and Godshalk (2005) support mixed gender pairs. Ehrich et al. (2004) and Terrior and Leonard (2007) stated that a mentor can supersede differences in identity (particularly race and gender) simply by having a natural and relatable style of communication and support. Because of this move away from the traditional sense of mentoring, athletics departments are starting to adopt the new model of peer mentoring.

## Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how a formalized peer mentorship program for first-year Division I student-athletes influenced male and female participants as they transitioned to college, balanced roles as students and athletes, and prepared for life after sport. In turn, this study sought to determine if a significant relationship existed between student-athletes' gender and their perceptions of a formal peer mentorship program to effectively: (a) develop self-leadership skills; (b) ease transition processes from high school to college, (c) establish social networks; and (d) motivate them to become leaders in organizations outside of athletics. The ultimate goal of this research study was to provide recommendations for intercollegiate athletics practitioners who seek to prepare student-athletes for success in the higher education experience as well as life after college.

## Review of Literature

### Leadership Theory

Leadership theory today incorporates a broad range of disciplines, definitions, and theories and is increasingly dependent upon the context to which this term is applied. The majority of empirical study dealing with the construct of leadership focuses on organizational and social psychology. Research to this point incorporates two differing interpretations of the construct of leadership. Many researchers suggest leadership effectiveness appears to be consistently viewed in a trait-factor approach and is associated with specific personality characteristics of the leader (Eiche, Keith, Sedlacek, William, Adams-Gaston, & Javaune, 1997; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). This is known as the situationalist approach to the construct of leadership, which hypothesizes that leadership is a function of the environment (Eiche et al., 1997). According to this interpretation, leadership is based primarily on environmental characteristics and the unique motivation and special needs of the group.

Eiche et al. (1997) worked with the Department of Athletics and the Counseling Center at the University of Maryland to develop a unique method to examine the attitudes and behaviors associated with leadership qualities in student-athletes. The overarching goal of this study was to determine whether student-athletes perceived themselves as leaders and role models in the student body. They used three forms of questionnaires to define leadership according to student-athletes' self-perceptions. In general, these results appear to suggest individuals who ranked themselves higher as self-leaders had more positive or optimistic expectations of the college experience. In contrast, those who ranked themselves lower had more pessimistic expectations of the college experience. Results portrayed the importance of understanding the self-leadership development process during the collegiate experience in a holistic approach.

In the past, a majority of research in leadership has focused primarily on the coach as leader (Longhead, Hardy & Eys, 2006). However, a key leadership force within the team is the individual student-athlete. Longhead et al. (2006) attempted to uncover a distinction between two differing forms of student-athlete leadership within the team setting including team and peer leadership. These researchers looked at the various forms of student-athlete leadership development and role classifications within the team setting. They began research under the assumption that student-athletes, not just coaches, serve important leadership functions internally to the team including task, social, and external leadership functions. Overall, the researchers found that both team captains with formal leadership roles and teammates without formal leadership titles served as influential leadership sources. Formal leaders were more likely to be identified as team leaders than peer leaders, while informal leaders or those without a formal appointment on the team were more likely viewed as peer leaders. Overall this study supports the importance of leadership development of all members of the team regardless of formal role. Most importantly though, this research suggests the importance of training coaches, athletes and peers early in the college experience to foster personal leadership development.

### **Higher Education and the Millennial Generation of Students: Transitions to College**

Literature suggests millennial student-athlete face enhanced challenges as they transition from high school to college and from college to career fields (Bell, 2009; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Navarro, 2012). Strange (2004) describes millennial students as having seven defining characteristics that differentiate them from different generations. He suggests millennial students are (a) rule-following, (b) sheltered, (c) confident, (d) conventional, (e) team-oriented, (f) pressured, and (g) high-achieving. While these defining factors pose challenges for the majority of millennial students, Bell (2009) suggests these challenges are further pronounced for student-athletes. Moreover, the commercialization of college athletics and subsequent development of a tumultuous and dichotomous student-athlete identity presents a need for student affairs professionals to better understand the unique needs of millennial student-athletes (Broughton & Neyer, 2001).

Coomes and DeBard (2004) and Pizzolato and Hickle (2011) describes how millennial students continue to defer from generations past, and in turn, challenge current student development program models. He describes millennial students as ambitious but directionless because they possess an innate need to achieve, but an inadequate competence for how to do so independently—especially in relation to their Baby Boomer parents (Pizzolato & Hickle, 2011). Building on this concept, Odenweller, Booth-Butterfield, and Weber (2014) posit Boomer parents do so much preemptive problem-solving that their children lose the opportunity to learn even menial independent analysis and resolution strategies. By no means are these students cognitively crippled, but they are coming into college with a far

lesser developed sense of independence than generations past. Coomes and DeBard (2004) also emphasize the desire for millennial students to conform in order to reduce pressure. While these pressures are true for most millennial students, they are perhaps more pronounced for millennial student-athletes—specifically those at the Division I level—who often experience separate and segmented student development programming from the general population (Bell, 2009). Odenweller et al. (2004) discuss how the millennial generation of students is unlike any other which has indelibly posed significant challenges for student affairs, academic affairs, and athletics practitioners today.

### **Challenges Facing Millennial Student-Athletes**

Over the past 20 years, the highly commercialized world of intercollegiate athletics has increasingly influenced the way in which millennial student-athletes, a subset of the higher education student body, navigate the college experience and prepare for life after sport (Adler & Adler, 1987, Baille & Danish, 1992, Broughton & Neyer, 2003; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003). Chartland and Lent (1987) discuss the inherent role conflict many student-athletes face at the start of the college experience as the primary identifying factor of “athlete” often overshadows that of “student.” Research shows freshmen student-athletes struggle to find a balance between these roles as social isolation, faculty isolation, and even isolation from peers becomes evident early in the college experience. In the early 1970s, collegiate athletic departments began the first serious effort to recognize the uniqueness of the freshmen student-athlete experience (Shriberg & Brodzinski, 1984). At this time, collegiate athletic departments focused predominantly on offering services in three major areas including: academic tutoring, time management, and scheduling of classes (Shriberg & Brodzinski, 1984). While this helped from an academic standpoint, no special attention was given to the personal struggles of adjustment to the college experience.

Harris, Alterkruse, and Engels (2003) studied the unique freshmen student-athlete adjustment process to college life using psycho-educational groups. These specific groups included 77 student-athletes representing eight varsity sports at the University of North Texas and targeted student-athletes in their first semester of college (Harris et. al, 2003). Efforts were made to diversify each group in terms of team, gender, and race to prevent segregation of ideas and experiences. This study found that student-athletes participating in psycho-educational groups reported enjoying the group experience as a vehicle to adjust to the college environment, network, and relieve stress. Results found student-athletes felt uncomfortable at the beginning of the semester, but eventually enjoyed the group atmosphere and experience significantly more than expected. Participants suggested the time spent in groups helped them to feel more relaxed and reduced stress as a student-athlete by spending time with individuals with similar time constraints. Finally, group members perceived the small group leaders as helpful and trustworthy sources of support for their freshmen year experience.

## **Challenges Facing Student-Athletes: Role Conflict and Role Tension**

Scholars who study the student-athlete experience and transition to college suggest student/athlete role conflict and role tension, further intensifies the importance of peer mentorship. Adler and Adler (1987), Baille and Danish (1993), Bell (2009), Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993), Comeaux and Harrison (2011), Harrison and Lawrence (2003, 2004), Miller and Kerr (1993), and Snyder (1983) address how Division I student-athletes often struggle to balance athletic and academic roles during the higher educational experience. Their evidence suggests that Division I student-athletes often associate more with their athletic than academic centered roles, negatively influencing campus integration and student engagement (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009). Since student-athletes may rely to a greater extent on support services internal to athletic departments as they navigate dual roles, it is imperative to provide student and academic affairs professionals with empirical research related to leadership. This study uniquely contributes by making a case for the importance of formalized leadership programs in addition to forming peer mentor relationships.

## **Method**

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a significant relationship between student-athlete gender and the perceived effectiveness of the program to (a) develop self-leadership skills, (b) ease the transition process from high school to being a collegiate student-athlete, (c) enable freshmen student-athletes to establish social networks, (d) motivate freshmen student-athletes to become involved leadership positions internal to athletics, and (e) motivate freshmen student-athletes to become leaders in organizations outside of athletics. To address this purpose, this study was guided by one overarching research questions that addressed these foundational curriculum components.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to answer two main research questions:

(a) Is there a relationship between freshmen student-athletes' gender and his/her perceived effectiveness of the peer mentorship program to: a) ease the transition from high school to being a collegiate student-athlete; b) establish social networks; c) motivate him/her to pursue additional leadership opportunities in athletics; d) motivate him/her to become a program mentor to future freshmen student-athlete; and e) motivate him/her to seek leadership opportunities in organizations outside of athletics?

(b) How can perceptions from the student-athlete perspective inform curricular practices?

### **Development of Survey Instrument**

This research study required the development of an instrument to accurately measure freshmen student-athletes' perceived effectiveness of the freshmen stu-



dent-athlete peer mentorship program. A survey was created using a five-point Likert scale for perceived effectiveness. Researchers employed a pilot study of the survey utilizing feedback of student-athletes who had previously completed the targeted peer mentorship program to establish validity via the use of experts. Both athletics department professionals currently working in collegiate leadership programs and professors with leadership expertise were asked to critique whether the survey measured freshmen student-athletes' perceived effectiveness of the peer mentorship program. Experts in the field confirmed that the survey measured what was intended.

### **Survey Instrument Description**

The survey instrument was divided into three sections: The first portion of the survey included demographic information of the student-athlete in terms of gender and sport. The second portion addressed four main curriculum components of the peer mentorship program. These questions concentrated on specific goals of the program addressing the effectiveness of the program to meet each of these stated objectives. Each of the questions in this section included a five point Likert-scale response section measuring freshmen student-athletes' perceived effectiveness of the program component. Likert-scale values included the five responses including ineffective, slightly effective, effective, highly effective, and extremely effective. These values were used to quantify perceived effectiveness of each specific program component. The final portion of the survey included three open-ended questions asking student-athletes for feedback on their views of the most and least effective portions of the program as well as components they would recommend adding or deleting from the current curriculum.

### **Selection of Survey Participants**

Survey participants were chosen based on two main factors. All survey participants were required to (a) be enrolled as a freshman at the large southeastern university, and (b) be a member of a varsity athletic team roster. From this list, all freshmen student-athletes who met selection criteria were included in the population sample. Survey participants who did not complete the program or were dropped from the roster were not included.

### **Survey Distribution and Collection Procedures**

The survey was electronically transmitted via Survey Monkey (web-based survey management software) to 211 freshmen student-athletes based upon a master list of contact emails generated by the Athletic Department's Division of Academic Support Services. The survey was given a three week response window. Four email reminders were sent as follow-up to generate the maximum number of sample responses. Data was collected through the Survey Monkey Tool and then transferred for analysis with the SPSS statistical package.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were compiled for all demographic data. For each of the 12 questions using a Likert-scale measure, a Chi-square analysis was run to see if a relationship existed between gender and perceived effectiveness of the program curriculum components. In effect, the study aimed to see if there was a significant difference between observed frequencies and expected frequencies for each of the twelve questions. Open and axial qualitative coding techniques were used for open-ended questions. Responses were tabulated, summarized and interpreted appropriately depending on trends seen in the data set.

## Findings

A total of 211 student-athletes received the survey during a three-week period. The survey was designed in a way that student-athletes were required to complete all portions of the survey before submitting. A total of 68 student-athletes completed the survey. This corresponded to a 32.23% total response ratio.

## Demographics

Of the 28 varsity sports at this institution, 25 teams had at least one respondent. This corresponded to an 89.29% return ratio from varsity teams. Women's basketball, men's soccer, and men's tennis did not have any student-athletes respond to the survey. The initial population for the study included 211 student-athletes. Broken down by gender, this included 114 (54.03%) females and 97 (45.97%) males. In terms of the sample group gender breakdown, 43 females (63.2%) and 25 males (36.8%) completed the survey. Women's rowing posted the largest overall response rate, accounting for 14.7% of total respondents. Women's outdoor track and field also posted the second highest overall response rate with a total response rate of 8.8%. For males, men's outdoor track and field, football, and fencing posted the largest response rate, each accounting for 5.9% of total responses.

## Survey Results

**Data cleaning.** For each of the survey questions, an alpha level of .05 was used. Initial survey Likert-scale responses ranging from 1 (ineffective) to 5 (extremely effective) were recoded to enable accurate interpretation of data. This recoding process using SPSS statistical software was used to ensure less than 25% of cells had an expected count less than five. This enabled us to appropriately interpret data based on Chi-square analysis. In this process all survey responses of 1 were changed to 2 and all responses of 5 were changed to 4. This created a new condensed range of response values from 2-4. A response of 2 now signified a student-athlete felt the program was slightly effective or ineffective. A response of 4 now signified a student-athlete felt the program component was highly or extremely effective. The same recoding process was used for each of the survey questions.

**Likert-Scale Question #1**

*How effective was the peer mentorship program with regard to easing the transition from high school to being a collegiate student-athlete?*

For survey question one, there was no significant relationship between gender and response. When asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the program to ease the transition from high school to being a collegiate student-athlete, respondents showed no significant difference between observed and expected frequencies ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = .637, p = .727$ ). Looking specifically at the percent of responses within gender for question seven, results showed 53.5% of females responded the program was slightly effective or ineffective to easing their transition. In addition, 18.6% of females responded the program was effective in terms of easing their transition, while 27.9% responded the peer mentorship program was either highly effective or extremely effective to easing the transition from high school to college. Results showed that 56.0% of males felt the program as a whole was slightly effective or ineffective to easing the transition, 24.0% felt it was effective, and 20.0% felt the program was highly effective or extremely effective.

**Table 1**

*Survey Question 1 Gender and Response Chi-Square Analysis*

Gender		Likert 2	Likert 3	Likert 4	Total
<b>1= Female</b>	Count	23	8	12	43
	Expected Count	23.4	8.9	10.8	43
	% Within Gender	53.5	18.6	27.9	100
	Adjusted Residual	-0.2	-0.5	0.7	
<b>2= Male</b>	Count	14	6	5	25
	Expected Count	13.6	5.1	6.3	25
	% Within Gender	56	24	20	100
	Adjusted Residual	0.2	0.5	-0.7	
<b>Combined</b>	Count	37	14	17	68
	Expected Count	37	14	17	68
	% Within Gender	54.4	20.6	25	100

**Likert-Scale Question #2**

*How effective was the peer mentorship program with regard to establishing social networks?*

For the second survey question, there was no significant relationship between gender and response. When asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the program to establish social networks, respondents showed no significant difference between observed and expected frequencies ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = .1557, p = .459$ ). Looking specifically

at the percent of responses within gender for question eight, results showed 48.8% of females responded the program was slightly effective or ineffective to establishing social networks. In addition, 32.6% of females responded the program was effective in terms of establishing social networks while 18.6% responded the program was either highly effective or extremely effective to establishing social connections. Results showed that 52.0% of males felt the program as a whole was slightly effective or ineffective to establishing social networks, 20.0% felt it was effective, and 28.0% felt the program was highly effective or extremely effective in terms of this component.

**Table 2**

*Survey Question 2 Gender and Response Chi-Square Analysis*

<b>Gender</b>		<b>Likert 2</b>	<b>Likert 3</b>	<b>Likert 4</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1= Female</b>	Count	21	14	8	43
	Expected Count	21.5	12	9.5	43
	% Within Gender	48.8	32.6	18.6	100
	Adjusted Residual	-0.3	1.1	-0.9	
<b>2= Male</b>	Count	13	5	7	25
	Expected Count	12.5	7	5.5	25
	% Within Gender	52	20	28	100
	Adjusted Residual	0.3	-1.1	0.9	
<b>Combined</b>	Count	34	19	15	68
	Expected Count	34	19	15	68
	% Within Gender	50	27.9	22.1	100

**Likert-Scale Question #3**

*How effective was the peer mentorship program with regard to motivating you to become a future peer mentor for incoming students?*

For the next survey question, there was no significant relationship between gender and response. When asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the program to motivate the student-athlete to become a mentor, respondents showed no significant difference between observed and expected frequencies ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = .072, p = .965$ ). Looking specifically at the percent of responses within gender for question three, results showed 65.1% of females responded the program was slightly effective or ineffective to motivating them to become a future mentor. In addition, 20.9% of females responded the program was effective in terms of motivating them to become a future mentor, while 14.0% responded the program was either highly effective or extremely effective to motivating them to apply to become a future mentor. Results showed that 68.0% of males felt the program as a whole was slightly

effective or ineffective to motivating them to become a mentor, 20.0% felt it was effective, and 12.0% felt the program was highly effective or extremely effective in terms of motivation to become a future mentor.

**Table 3**

*Survey Question 3 Gender and Response Chi-square Analysis*

Gender		Likert 2	Likert 3	Likert 4	Total
<b>1= Female</b>	Count	28	9	6	43
	Expected Count	28.5	8.9	5.7	43
	% Within Gender	65.1	20.9	14	100
	Adjusted Residual	-0.2	0.1	0.2	
<b>2= Male</b>	Count	17	5	3	25
	Expected Count	16.5	5.1	3.3	25
	% Within Gender	68	20	12	100
	Adjusted Residual	0.2	-0.1	-0.2	
<b>Combined</b>	Count	45	14	9	68
	Expected Count	45	14	9	68
	% Within Gender	66.2	20.6	13.2	100

**Likert-Scale Question #4**

*How effective was the peer mentorship program with regard to motivating you to become a leader in organizations outside of athletics?*

For the fourth survey question, there was no significant relationship between gender and response. When asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the program to motivate the student-athlete to become a leader in organizations outside of athletics, respondents showed no significant difference between observed and expected frequencies ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = .012, p = .994$ ). Looking specifically at the percent of responses within gender for question eleven, results showed 34.9% of females responded the program was slightly effective or ineffective to motivating them to become a leader in an organization outside of athletics. In addition, 37.2% of females responded the program was effective in terms of motivating them to take on a leadership role outside of athletics while 27.9% responded the program was either highly effective or extremely effective to motivating them to seek external leadership opportunities. Results showed that 36.0% of males felt the program as a whole was slightly effective or ineffective to motivating them to become a leader in organizations outside of athletics, 36.0% felt it was effective, and 28.0% felt the program was highly effective or extremely effective in terms of motivation to pursue a leadership role outside of athletics.

**Table 4***Survey Question 4 Gender and Response Chi-square Analysis*

<b>Gender</b>		<b>Likert 2</b>	<b>Likert 3</b>	<b>Likert 4</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1= Female</b>	Count	15	16	12	43
	Expected Count	15.2	15.8	12	43
	% Within Gender	34.9	37.2	27.9	100
	Adjusted Residual	-0.1	0.1	0	
<b>2= Male</b>	Count	9	9	7	25
	Expected Count	8.8	9.2	7	25
	% Within Gender	36	36	28	100
	Adjusted Residual	0.1	-0.1	0	
<b>Combined</b>	Count	24	25	19	68
	Expected Count	24	25	19	68
	% Within Gender	35.3	36.8	27.9	100

**Qualitative Analysis Results**

The final section of the survey asked student-athletes to reflect on specific curricular components of the peer mentorship program. Themes in responses to these three questions are described below.

**Open-Ended Question 1**

*With regard to developing YOUR personal self-leadership skills, what part of the program was most effective?*

Sixteen out of a total of 25 male respondents chose to answer this question (64%). When asked to identify the most effective portion of the program, five main themes were seen in the qualitative data for males: (a) guest speakers, (b) group work and activities, (c) working with mentors, (d) allowing the individual to become associated with the Athletic Department, and (e) that the program was not effective in any regard. Most notably, of the 16 individuals that responded, 50% felt group work and activities fostering team motivation, communication and interaction were most effective part of the program as a whole, and 31.25% felt the guest speakers were the most effective component. In addition, 6.25% of males who responded noted that working with mentors was the most effective piece while 6.25% of these male student-athletes noted that the most effective part of the program was becoming associated with the UNC Athletic Department. A final 6.25% of respondents expressed they felt the program was “pointless,” or not effective at all.

In terms of females, 26 out of the total 43 females responded to this question (60.47%). When asked to identify the most effective portion of the program, five main themes were also seen in the qualitative data for females: (a) guest speakers, (b) group work and activities, (c) meeting new people, (d) learning about herself,

and (e) that the program was not effective in any regard. Most notably, of the females who responded to this question, 50% stated the guest speakers were the most effective portion of the program to develop self-leadership skills. In addition, 26.92% of the 26 who responded stated group work was the most effective, 11.54% responded meeting new people was the most effective component to fostering self-leadership skills, and 3.85% responded learning about them individually as a leader was most effective. Finally, 7.69% of the females who responded felt the program was not effective in any form with negative responses.

### **Open-Ended Question 2**

*With regard to developing YOUR personal self-leadership skills, what part of the program was least effective?*

Twelve out of a total of 25 male respondents chose to answer this question (48%). When asked to identify the least effective portion of the program, six main themes were seen in the qualitative data for males: (1) the mandatory nature of the program, (2) the inability to relate to guest speakers, (3) the power point presentations, (4) outside projects, and homework, (5) that the program as a whole was least effective and should be eliminated and (6) the book work and reading. Of the 16 individuals who responded, 25% felt the mandatory nature of the program was the least effective component, while 16.67% felt an inability to relate to guest speakers was the least effective part of the program as a whole. In addition, respectively 16.67% of males who responded noted that PowerPoint slides as well as projects and homework were the least effective pieces of the program to develop self-leadership skills. An additional 16.67% felt that the entire program was ineffective to developing self-leadership skills. A final 8.33% of male respondents expressed they felt the book used was the least effective portion of the program.

In terms of females, 27 out of the total 43 females responded to this question (62.79%). When asked to identify the least effective portion of the program, seven main themes were seen in the qualitative data for females. These seven major themes included (1) the mandatory nature of the program, (2) the time commitment required, (3) homework, book work and activities, (4) ineffective use of group time, (5) lack of mentor leadership, (6) guest speakers too long or off topic, and (7) stating that no specific part of the program was ineffective. Most notably, of the females who responded to this question, 37.04% responded nonproductive group work was the least effective component. While 18.52% responded homework, book work and activities were the least effective, 14.81% felt the lack of mentor leadership was the least effective component of the program. Overall, 11.11% of respondents noted guest speakers speaking too long or off topic was the least effective component, 7.41% stated the mandatory nature of the program was the least effective portion, and 3.70% of stated time commitment was the least effective part of the program to develop self-leadership skills. Finally, 7.41% of the females who responded felt that no part of the program was ineffective.

### Open-Ended Question #3

*For the purposes of effective development of self-leadership skills, is there anything missing from the peer mentorship program curriculum? What, if anything, would you recommend adding to the program?*

Ten out of a total of 25 male respondents chose to answer this question (40%). When asked to identify the least effective portion of the program, four main themes were seen in the qualitative data for males: (a) the need for more activities, (b) the need for more mentor leadership, (c) the need for more social interaction, and finally (d) the response that the program was effective and nothing needed to be added. Of the 10 individuals who responded, 30% noted that more social interaction during workshops should be added to effectively develop self-leadership skills. Another 30% of male respondents expressed they felt the program was effective in its current state and nothing should be added. Next, 20% felt more activities should be added to workshops, while an additional 20% felt more mentor leadership was a necessary addition.

In terms of female responses, 23 out of the total 43 females responded to this question (53.49%). When asked to identify necessary additions for the program, seven main themes were seen in the qualitative data for females: (a) topics and discussion covering sport culture, (b) community service opportunities, (c) more mentor leadership, (d) food, (e) more interaction and activities, (f) more diverse guest speakers, and (g) stating that nothing should be added to the program. Most notably, 47.83% of the 23 females who responded stated more interactive activities should be incorporated. Next, of the females who responded to this question, 4.35% stated topics and discussion covering sport culture should be added, 4.35% felt community service opportunities should be incorporated, 8.70% felt more mentor leadership should be fostered, and 4.35% felt food should be added to improve the program. While 4.35% felt guest speakers should be diversified, a final 26.09% felt nothing should be added to the program and that it was effective in its current status.

### Discussion

Overall, chi-square analysis of Likert-scale survey questions portrayed no significant relationship existed between student-athlete gender and his or her perceived effectiveness of the program to (a) ease the transition from high school to being a collegiate student-athlete, (b) establish social networks, (c) provide motivation to become a future mentor, and (d) provide motivation to seek leadership opportunities in organizations outside of athletics. While the quantitative findings were not statistically significant, the qualitative open-ended responses provide strong evidence of topics that warrant further exploration both practically and academically with respect to peer mentorship programming. Practitioners might consider the qualitative narrative provided as guiding themes for future study and program enhancement.



Overall, qualitative analysis portrayed across genders that group work and activities (i.e., fostering team motivation, communication and interaction) in addition to guest speakers were the two most effective components of the program to develop self-leadership skills. Next, results showed both male and female student-athletes felt the mandatory nature of the program and un-productive group work time negatively influenced the perceived program effectiveness. Females tended to surface themes requiring showing they favored more interactive leadership in group work while males tended to view self-directed methods of learning more effectively. Finally, qualitative analysis portrayed an overwhelming majority of both males and females feeling that nothing should be eliminated from the current program, but rather curriculum changes and improvements made to enhance department wide buy-in.

### **Conclusion**

Today student-athletes do receive enhanced visibility and pressure to perform. In turn, the American higher education system has a heightened level of responsibility to prepare students for lifetime success as societal leaders both in college and in life after sport (Janssen, 2007). To fulfill this responsibility, institutions of higher education must evolve and consider programmatic changes with respect to their approaches to personal leadership development. This study suggests peer mentorship programming could be one method to prepare student-athletes as future societal contributors with strong self-leadership skillsets. Moreover, student affairs professionals must work in concert with coaches and administrators to not only provide meaningful academic training in support of students' undergraduate academic major coursework, but also assist students to foster transferrable lifelong skillsets. This balance is imperative so that students can successfully navigate roles as both student and athlete.

Throughout higher education as a whole, student-affairs professionals must revisit the challenges and needs of their students who today must not only adapt to college, but prepare to move from higher education institutions to a competitive workforce (Keup, 2007; Kidwell, 2005; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). Athletic department practitioners must work to identify which specific curricular and programmatic methods best prepare students to develop as future contributors to society during college and in life after the higher education experience (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981; Savickas 2002, 2005). Furthermore, athletics department practitioners must continue to consider the specialized needs of a highly diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century student-athlete population (Danish et al., 1993; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003, 2004; Petitpas, Buntrock, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1995).

### **Recommendations for the Practitioners**

Overall, data analysis from this study suggests that student-athletes feel changes could be made to the peer mentorship program curriculum to better develop self-leadership skills. While the feedback collected from this particular group of

student-athletes can truly only apply fully to Carolina's program, the practice of collecting participant feedback as a general rule is a viable method for all institutions as part of their process for determining what (if any) alterations need to be made.

First, many students recognized difficulty in perceiving the program as effective due to the mandatory nature. Since this peer mentorship program is mandatory in nature, fostering department wide buy-in (i.e., coaches and administrators) will enable student-athletes to better perceive the effectiveness of the program to develop personal leadership skills. A focus on leadership from the top level down beginning with older student-athlete peer mentors could foster increased group cohesion and networking within smaller group sessions. Once a level of respect is attained for older student-athlete peers serving as mentors, student-athletes may find increased value in the mentorship program as well as aspire to be like their peer mentors. In turn, this could help students find additional value in the program as they create social connections, easing the transition process and finding motivation to continue to invest time in upper levels of the program.

While peer mentoring research traditionally represents the general student population, several implications for its continued development and success are transferrable to athletics. Budge (2006) posits that an integral piece of the success of a formal or informal peer mentor lies in the mentor's training. Given the unique experience of student athletes in college, student affairs/athletics support staff could be best suited to facilitate mentor development to support not only psychosocial, but career development for potentially novice, incoming student athletes. One possible avenue for a program such as this to take would be to create a curriculum for incoming student-athletes associated with the topics that guest speakers are slated to present. From there, mentors could be trained in a way that allows them to scaffold and reinforce the information coming from the guest speakers in a digestible fashion that better substantiates the purpose of peer mentors.

Qualitative analysis portrayed that student-athletes perceived guest speakers and group work to be most effective in developing leadership skills and added value to the experience of the program. An increased focus on initiatives to connect with and bring in varied guest speakers outside the athletic department may bring fresh ideas and perspectives. Fresh faces may increase the likelihood of holding the student-athletes' attention. In addition, ensuring relevance to the workshop topic and timeliness of each speaker's presentation may also increase the perceived effectiveness of the program as the attention span of younger student-athletes is maximized.

Overall, it appears focus and attention placed within the small group components and guest speaker component of the program could drastically improve the effectiveness of several key goals of the program including easing the transition from high school, establishing social networks, enabling understanding of the Carolina Culture and increasing motivation to invest time in upper levels of the

program. As student-athletes recognize the value of the program to accomplish these crucial self-leadership factors in the freshmen student-athlete experience, program directors could notice a significant jump in the perceived effectiveness of the program to increase self-leadership skills.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Burns (1978) looked at gender differences in leadership development patterns as they related to transformational and transactional leadership. Mayer (1997) looked specifically at stereotypes in leadership style roles based upon gender. Both studies pointed out common stereotypes found in the work force as gender can correlate with being accepted as a transformational or transactional leader. This specific study could be expanded to include these concepts by adding survey questions addressing the student-athletes' perceived leadership style. Researchers could then look for trends and patterns based on student-athlete gender to see if stereotypes exist in the student-athlete population similar to those Mayer and Burns found in the work force.

Next, in this study, the specific sport of the student-athlete was not considered as a crucial independent variable due to the relatively small response rate and inability to accurately interpret Chi-square analysis with larger than adequate cell count for this variable. In future studies, leaving the survey open for a longer period of time may enable a larger response rate. Dispersing the survey in person during the final meeting of the spring semester rather than electronically may also significantly increase the response rate.

In addition, expanding this study to include additional data collection of personal attributes such as race, ethnicity, and prior leadership experience to see whether there are trends and patterns would be useful. Differences in perceptions based upon whether the student-athlete participated in a team sport or individual sport should also be explored.

Additional longitudinal studies may include performing a pre-, post- and retrospective survey within a given peer mentorship program class. In this scenario, student-athletes would rank their perceived self-leadership ability prior to completing the program in the fall semester of matriculation in college and immediately following completion of the program in the spring semester of the first year. In addition, the student-athletes would complete a retrospective analysis of their perceived self-leadership ability in the fall semester of their sophomore year, similar to the method in this study. Data could be compared to track trends across the span of a full year of the student-athlete's freshmen year experience. Time constraints placed on the study made certain areas of analysis such as those listed above impossible, but could provide added benefit for program curriculum development.

Follow up on several fronts has the potential to have positive impact on future student-athletes in similar programs. As previously mentioned, retrospective survey collection from mentees would provide perspective as to their personal

leadership progression. In addition to surveys, qualitative interviews focused on mentor guidance and assistance, curriculum content and design, as well as guest speaker impact will offer insight into program effectiveness and at least some sort of future direction to improve the mentee experience. Ideally, program directors and coaches will have sufficient broad-based knowledge to inform the direction taken for curriculum development in relation to leadership development opportunities they can provide going forward.

The next iteration of this type of leadership development program would be to extend it to similar institutions. This will not only provide the opportunity for student-athletes in similar circumstances to develop their leadership, but also for program designers to possess a greater sample size when assessing effectiveness in techniques, mediums of delivery, and style of training for mentors, staff, and coaches alike.

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