Career Maturity and Identity Foreclosure in Intercollegiate Student Athletes:

A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

A review of existing literature on career maturity and identity foreclosure amongst intercollegiate student athletes is discussed. Intercollegiate student athletes are less prepared for post-collegiate career decision-making, and have higher identity foreclosure scores than regular college students. This review indicates a lack of previous research in this area. All four of the sources in this review are primary sources and use quantitative research methods. The results of the research are discussed. Also reviewed are the strengths and weaknesses of the literature, as well as suggestions for future research.
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“We know a good deal about how student-athletes perform on the playing field. We should also keep score as to the quality of their educational activities elsewhere on campus” (Umbach & Kuh, 2004, p. 18).

Introduction

Historically, student athletes have been shrouded in the stigma of being unintelligent, unfocused, and academically uninspired college students. Many student athletes receive their 4-year degrees in general studies and are often thought of as unprepared for the vocational world after graduation. Student athletes experience college differently than general college students and identify strongly with the athlete persona. Their consuming commitment to intercollegiate athletics lends them less time for career preparation, making the transition to being a non-athlete difficult after graduation.

The pervasiveness of this issue makes the career discernment process in student athletes worthy of study. For the regular student body, career exploration is a normal and expected experience, which prepares those students for vocational life after college. These exploration experiences for student athletes, on the other hand, are rare due to time constraints and commitment to their specific sport. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the impact of identity foreclosure on career maturity in student athletes, as well as to examine how institutions can provide support services. First, the overall issue of student athletes career maturity and identity foreclosure will be discussed, followed by a definition of terms used in the research. Next, both the methods and results of research in this area of study will be summarized. Finally, strengths and limitations of the studies
in this review will be presented, followed by conclusions related to current action and future research.

**Overview of the Problem**

Nearly every theory about the development of student athletes describes foreclosed identity theories, as well as theories of delayed or impaired career maturity. Even with this knowledge, there is still minimal research on the subject and inadequate support services provided to student athletes in most universities. There have also been limited studies on the effects of post-collegiate career planning on career maturity in student athletes.

Career maturity and identity foreclosure studies pertaining to student athletes are few and far between. The studies that have been conducted have predominantly been in Division I universities with large enrollments. Those studies generally have addressed similar questions, as follows: (a) What are the differences between athletes and non-athletes in life satisfaction after graduation? (b) What is the difference in life satisfaction between student athletes articulating a post-collegiate vocational plan and those without a plan? (c) How is student athlete identity foreclosure correlated with career maturity? (d) How do student athletes compare, in terms of career maturity, to general college students?

This review of the literature summarizes findings on student athlete identity foreclosure and career maturity from four sources (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Murphy, Pepitas, & Brewer, 1996; Perna, Ahlgren, & Zaichkowsky, 1999). Reviewing the evidence on the correlation of identity foreclosure and career maturity in student athletes is important because it presents factual evidence
that career support services, intervention, and counseling must not only be offered to student athletes at their institutions, but tailored specifically to their needs. Such services, if effective, may give student athletes a better handle on life after graduation and “retirement” from their respective sports.

**Definition of Terms**

**Identity Foreclosure.** Individuals who make commitments to roles without engaging in exploratory behavior. Dependent decision-making style, in which responsibility for important decisions is deferred to others.

**Athletic Identity.** Consists of the cognitive, affective, behavioral, and social concomitants of identifying with the athlete role.

**Career Maturity.** Ability to assess one’s non-sport career goals and aspirations, active exploration of possible roles and behavior.

**Career Foreclosure.** Absence of exploration of various occupational alternatives constricting personal and vocational identity.

**Summary of Research Methods**

**Types of Studies**

All of the studies included in this review on identity foreclosure and career maturity in intercollegiate student athletes are quantitative and cross-sectional in their design. All four are primary sources (all are meta-analyses). Two of the studies are comparative, one is causal comparative, and one is correlational. The studies were conducted in the years 1985, 1996, 1999, and 2010.
Participants

All sample participants were Division I intercollegiate athletes in the United States. Participants in the studies included in this review ranged from 76 to 1,123. Those studied included athletes from revenue-producing sports and non-revenue producing sports. Three studies included men and women, while only one included men specifically. Two studies granted information on racial composition of participants, and one study provided information on socioeconomic status of its participants. Three studies provided information on the location of the universities that were being studied: One sample was from universities within the greater Boston metropolitan area, one was a Midwestern Division I university, and one was comprised of only Big Ten Conference Athletes.

Measures

The primary method of data collection in these studies was through questionnaires. Two studies used the CMI (Career Maturity Inventory) tool, which has adequate stability, and reported construct reliability. The CMI also has internal consistency (K-R 20 coefficient = .74). Two studies used the OM-EIS (Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status) instrument, which is a Likert-type scale with internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .76). One study used the AIMS (Athletic Identity Measurement Scale), which has test-retest liability. AIMS is a Likert-type scale (Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .80-.93). Construct reliability of AIMS has been reported. One study used the SWL (Satisfaction With Life) instrument, with a reliability of $r = .82$, and a high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .87). One study used the CCCS (Commitment to Career Choices scale). The CCCS uses the TTFS (Tendency To
Foreclose Scale). The TTFS has good test-retest reliability and construct validity. Internal consistency for the sample was .81. Questionnaires included items such as occupational plan, post-collegiate plan, and career exploration questions. One study did not use any published instruments.

Summary of Research Results

Role Commitment

One issue in the research on identity foreclosure and career maturity in student athletes pertains to role commitment. Results from studies summarized in this review indicate that student athletes score higher on identity foreclosure than regular college students. Role commitment for student athletes was identified as the most pertinent to transition. Identifying strongly and exclusively with the athlete role may reduce examination of non-sport career opportunities. For example, results repeatedly offered support for the concern that athletes’ role commitments and investments hinder their exploratory behavior and lead to identity foreclosure. Murphy, Pepitas, and Brewer (1996) note this importance by stating, “Failure to explore alternative roles and identifying strongly and exclusively with the athlete role are associated with delayed career development in intercollegiate student-athletes…” (p. 239).

Career Exploration

Another important issue in the research on identity foreclosure and career maturity is career exploration opportunities. Athletes who form vocational plans have a higher degree of life satisfaction at termination of their college careers. Occupational planning may represent the most modifiable factor with respect to influencing life
satisfaction following collegiate career termination. Perna, Ahlgren, and Zaichowsky (1999) reinforce this idea by stating, “…the effectiveness of pregraduation career-planning to influence postgraduate life satisfaction among college athletes has not been empirically evaluated, nor has the role of coach influence been addressed” (p.154).

**Attitudes Towards Support**

Finally, the studies in this review are concerned with support services and the role the athletic administration plays in career maturity and identity foreclosure. Coaches and athletic administration may be less supportive of external activities that would distract student athletes on their teams or take time away from their sport. Institutions must offer programs and interventions that are designed to prepare student athletes for their transitions into the occupational world. Linnemeyer and Brown (2010) expand on this idea further by stating, “Career planning initiatives for student athletes should focus on communicating the significance of making career-related decisions and teaching student athletes how to make rational career decisions regardless of competition level or type of sport” (p. 629).

**Discussion**

**Strengths**

The strengths of the research studies on identity foreclosure and career maturity in intercollegiate student athletes that comprise this review include the following:

1. The majority (3/4) of the studies proved to use instrument with high validity and high reliability.

2. All of the studies listed a high amount of previous research, with the results of that research described clearly.
3. All of the studies provided clear explanations of the methods and instruments used.

4. The response rate of the questionnaires for all of the studies was high.

5. The majority of the studies used published measurement tools (OM-EIS, CCCS, CMI, and SWL) that were appropriate for their purpose.

**Limitations**

The limitations of the research studies on identity foreclosure and career maturity in intercollegiate student athletes that comprise this review include:

1. Generalizations beyond the individual institutions or geographical areas may not be warranted by the studies included in this review.

2. The differences in results between athletes who participate in revenue-producing sports and non-revenue-producing sports was only discussed in detail or even mentioned in one study.

3. Most of the studies provided information that was gathered at a proximal point, that is, one point in the students’ lives.

4. Only one of the studies included in this review was conducted in the past 10 years. The literature may be outdated.

5. There was a lack of information on the demographic data of participants. Identifying demographic and sport related factors that moderate career development in student athletes may be beneficial.

**Conclusion**

Intercollegiate student athletes are often seen as ‘dumb jocks’ with no career aspirations other than attempting to play their respective sports professionally. The results
of the studies summarized in this review consistently indicate that intercollegiate student athletes with foreclosed identities are less likely to explore post graduation career options, and may experience different types problems during this transitional period. Such findings are noteworthy, especially since many institutions of higher education lack sufficient and impactful support for student athletes in these areas. The results of these studies indicate that career exploration intervention programs for student athletes could have positive effects.

However, more research, including longitudinal studies of student athletes and career maturity should be conducted in different settings and with more specific populations. Due to the locations and settings where these studies were conducted, generalizability of the results is not warranted. Future research in this area has the potential to equip colleges and universities with the tools, programs, and staff needed to implement intervention strategies for career exploration for student athletes.
References


