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Amanda L. Paule-Koba
Bowling Green State University, apaule@bgsu.edu

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Identifying Athlete's Majors and Career Aspirations: The Next Step in Clustering Research

Amanda L. Paule-Koba

Bowling Green State University

Paule-Koba (apaule@bgsu.edu) is corresponding author.

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine current collegiate athlete's academic majors and identify their career plans after graduation. The goal was to see if the athlete's academic major was congruent with their career aspirations. Previous research studies have shown that academic clustering, when 25% or more of an athletic team are in the same academic major, exists within a variety of athletic teams. However, there has not been a study done that assesses whether the athletes are majoring in disciplines that are related to their ultimate career goal. A total of 605 athletes from eight sports in the BIG10 and MAC conferences participated in the study. The results revealed that 192 of the 605 participants (31.7%) did not have majors and career aspirations that aligned. This study provides further insight into the academic puzzle of collegiate athletics.

Keywords: *Academics, Career Goals, Clustering, Division I, NCAA*

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) touts a commitment to seven core values, which consist of the collegiate model of athletics, the highest level of integrity and sportsmanship, the pursuit of excellence in both academics and athletics, the supporting role that intercollegiate athletics plays in the higher education mission, an inclusive culture, respect, and presidential leadership of intercollegiate athletics at the campus, conference, and national levels (NCAA, 2018c). The pursuit of excellence in both academics and athletics is an NCAA core value -- but does this match the athlete's experience? Do the athletes feel they are given a chance to excel in their academic pursuits (including the ability to pursue any academic major) as well as on the playing field? How are the athlete's academic pursuits preparing them for their future endeavors and careers post graduation?

In terms of excellence in academics, the issue of academic clustering, especially among athletes, has received increased attention from scholars and the mainstream media. Clustering occurs when 25% or more of an athletic team are in the same academic major (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987). Fountain and Finley (2011) have continued this research and discussed super and mega clustering in sports, specifically regarding minority athletes in football. Super clusters are 50% or greater of athletes

in one major and mega clusters are 75% or greater in one major.

With all the talk of academic clustering, there has not been any research to examine if these athletes are choosing these majors due to their own interest or external factors. If the athlete's major matches with his or her career aspirations, even if it is a clustered major, there is not a problem because that athlete needs to gain that knowledge to be successful in that field. The problem arises when the athlete's major is not one that will prepare him/her for their potential career field.

Examining academic clustering and the academic pursuits of athletes is important because the majority of collegiate athletes will not go on to play professional sports (NCAA, 2018b). The probability of going from the NCAA to a professional league varies greatly by sport (9.5% baseball, 1.2% men's basketball, 0.9% women's basketball, 1.6% football, and 1.4% men's soccer) but the likelihood is low (NCAA, 2018b). Therefore, the significance of obtaining an education and acquiring a degree cannot be understated.

The purpose of the study was to examine current collegiate athlete's academic majors and identify their career plans after graduation. Is the athlete's academic major congruent with their career aspirations?

The research questions guiding this study are:

- Do the athletes' academic majors align with their career aspirations?
- Are the academic majors of female athletes more likely to align with their career aspirations than male athletes?
- Are the academic majors of Caucasian athletes more likely to align with their career aspirations than minority athletes?

Background Literature

Academic Progress

The NCAA has rules to try to ensure athletes are progressing toward their degree. Bylaw 14.4.3 of the NCAA rulebook discusses eligibility for athletes. The NCAA's 40-60-80 rule, as it is often referred, requires athletes to complete 40% of their degree requirements by the completion of their second year, 60% of degree requirements by the end of their third year, and 80% of degree requirements upon the conclusion of the fourth year (NCAA, 2017a; NCAA, n.d.).

These rules are extended in football. By law 14.4.3.1.6 states,

In football, a student-athlete who is a member of the institution's football team and who does not successfully complete at least nine-semester hours or eight-quarter hours of academic credit during the fall term or does not earn the Academic Progress Rate eligibility point for the fall term (or does not successfully complete either requirement) shall not be eligible to compete in the first four contests against outside competition in the following playing season. (NCAA, 2017a, p. 171)

When created, these degree completion regulations appeared to be an attempt by the NCAA to ensure all athletes were making progress toward graduation so they would be able to "go pro in something other than sport" when their athletic eligibility concluded. The NCAA appeared to be helping schools create guidelines for athletes in order to keep them on track to graduate.

However, controversy arose after the regulations were incorporated into the NCAA rulebook. The way this rule is written makes it difficult for athletes to major in certain disciplines, makes changing majors complicated if not impossible in certain instances, and may cause athletes to choose majors they perceive as less rigorous in order to meet the benchmarks laid out by the NCAA (Horner, Ternes, McLeod, 2016; Paule-Koba, 2015; Wolverton, 2007). While these challenges may exist, it also illustrated that the NCAA recognized athletes were not making progress toward obtaining a degree and this rule was an attempt to help universities and academic counselors provide guidance for the athletes.

Academic Clustering

As previously stated, clustering occurs when 25% or more of an athletic team are in the same academic major (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987). The Case, Greer, and Brown study (2007) was the first empirical look into clustering in Division I athletics. This study looked at whether male and female athletes were being clustered into majors at similar rates. The authors found that the male basketball players were clustered at a higher rate than their female basketball counterparts (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987).

While the Case, Greer, and Brown (1987) study was the initial academic clustering study, Lederman (2003) compared the percentage of football players in academic majors to the total percentage of undergraduates in that major on several campuses. The results showed a large concentration of football players in majors that few other undergraduates selected (Lederman, 2003). One of the most significant results was from the analysis at Auburn University. At Auburn, 26% of the football team majored in sociology compared to only 0.3% of the entire undergraduate population. Thus, there was great disparity when comparing football players with the undergraduate population in each major. Had the percentage of undergraduate students been the same as the percentage of athletes in the major, the clustering would not have been viewed as problematic because it would have mirrored the overall student body.

Fountain and Finley (2009) examined clustering in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) football programs. The data revealed that 11 out of 12 football programs in the ACC had at least one major where athletes were clustered. The other school in the conference did not report athlete majors. The authors also found that Black athletes were clustered into specific majors at a higher rate than their White counterparts (Fountain & Finley, 2009).

In a study of football players in the Southeastern and Pac-10 Conferences, Otto (2010) found that clustering was very prevalent in both conferences. Otto also found that the football players' career aspirations did not align with their majors. This finding begs the question of why athletes are in these majors if they are not going to help the athletes achieve their overall career goals.

Additional clustering studies were conducted by Schneider, Ross, and Fisher (2010) and Fountain and Finley (2011) that took a longitudinal approach to examine clustering in football. Schneider et. al. (2010) examined whether clustering existed within Big 12 institutions during the 1996, 2001, and 2006 seasons. The growth of academic clustering was evident. In 1996 and 2001 there were three institutions where clustering was occurring. In 2006, that number had risen to seven of the 12 conference universities. Hence in a 10-year period the incidents of academic clustering had more than doubled.

Fountain and Finley (2011) examined one football program over a 10-year period. This analysis allowed the researchers to observe each athlete's major, if there was a change in the player's major, and when that athlete moved into the clustered major. To obtain the data, the researchers used media guides from the selected football program. They examined the reported majors of 349 players from 2000 through 2009. The results revealed that clustering did exist and players entered into clustered majors over time.

In a departure from academic clustering studies that looked solely at Division I football programs, Paule-Koba (2015) investigated whether academic clustering occurred in Division I women's basketball programs. Through an analysis involving two years of data, academic clustering was found to be present on 44.5% of teams in 2008-09 and 29.8% of teams in 2009-10. The results illustrated that academic clustering was not relegated solely to the sport of football or men's sports in general.

Love, Watkins, and Kim (2017) took a different approach to examine academic clustering in Division I football. The researchers first looked at how the football players' majors compared to the general student body. Next, they assessed if there were any differences in these distributions based on the admissions standards of universities. This study revealed football players were overrepresented in the social sciences and underrepresented in engineering. Further, the results showed that the more selective the admissions criteria of a university, the more frequently football players were overrepresented in certain majors.

While there is no theoretical framework per se for this study, it does draw from the previous empirical studies that have examined the concept of academic clustering in a variety of sports and conferences. Additionally, the purpose of this study was based on the future research directions Paule-Koba (2015) discussed in her paper that examined academic clustering and Division I women's basketball.

Method

While each of the previous clustering studies added knowledge to the literature, they have not assessed whether or not clustering actually is a problem. The purpose of this study was to examine if the academic majors of collegiate athletes in the Mid American Conference (MAC) and Big 10 aligned with their career aspirations. The subjects in this study were baseball, football, men's basketball, men's soccer, softball, volleyball, women's basketball, and women's soccer athletes. To recruit participants, the names and email addresses of the athletes were identified via information available to the general public on the university website. Participants were sent a recruitment email. Athletes from Akron, Kent State, and Western Michigan were not included in this study because the email addresses of their

athletes were not publicly available. The researcher did not use the institution athletic departments to help distribute the survey in order to reduce any chance the athlete would be influenced by coaches, administrators, or another external entity.

Participants were asked to complete the survey and were told to read through the consent form. If they agreed to participate, the participants began answering the survey questions. The survey asked questions about their academics and career aspirations.

Of the 3,953 athletes who were sent emails to participate in this study, 674 athletes entered into the survey and answered questions. 605 individuals completed the entire survey – a 15.3% response rate. Acquiring 605 completed surveys from this population supports the recommended sample size with a +5% precision level when using a 95% confidence level as recommended by Israel (1992). While the researcher would have preferred a higher response rate, upon examination of the athletes who completed the survey it was diverse in terms of sport played, institutional affiliation, sex, year in school, and recruitment status. According to Cook, Heath, and Thompson (2000) the diversity of “response representativeness is more important than response rate in survey research” (p. 821). Thus, the representativeness of this study's sample helps give confidence that these results can be generalized to athletes in other conferences across the United States.

Participants

The sex breakdown of study participants was 269 male (44%) and 336 female (56%). The racial breakdown was self-reported as 484 Caucasian (80%), 79 African American (13%), 10 Hispanic (2%), 5 Pacific Islander (1%), 3 Asian (0%), and 24 Other (4%). Participants were between 18 and 23 years of age.

Seventeen different universities were represented in the study sample. The Big 10 had 254 participants (42%), while the MAC had 351 participants (58%). The school years of the participants were as follows: 135 first-year athletes (22%), 148 second-year athletes (25%), 121 third-year athletes (20%), 145 fourth-year athletes (24%), 41 fifth-year athletes (7%), 12 graduate student athletes (2%), and 3 athletes who did not list a year in school.

Each sport that the researcher hoped to gain data on was represented in this study. The breakdown of sport played by the athletes was 54 baseball (9%), 168 football (28%), 17 men's basketball (3%), 30 men's soccer (5%), 91 softball (15%), 78 volleyball (13%), 55 women's basketball (9%), and 112 women's soccer (19%). Additionally, 470 (78%) of the participants were recruited to be a part of their athletic team. Ninety-six (16%) reported being a recruited walk-on and 39 (6%) were not recruited and walked onto the team.

Data Analysis

Data was examined to assess whether the athlete's self-identified major aligned with their career aspirations. In order for the major and career aspiration to be considered aligned, the chosen career had to relate to the listed major in some form. The researcher had a colleague review the data to ensure that the researcher's interpretation of major and career aspiration alignment was consistent and not solely based on one person's judgment. An example of major and career aspiration alignment is if an athlete wants to be a teacher, are they in an education major or the content area he or she wants to teach (e.g., a history major for a history teacher)? If yes, it will be listed as aligned. If they are not, that will be recorded as well.

Results

Unaligned Majors

Of the 605 individuals who completed the study, 192 participants (31.7%) were deemed to have majors that did not align with their career aspirations. It is important to see the demographic data for these 192 individuals because it helps shape the picture and lets us see that this is an issue across sexes, years in school, and sport. The sex demographic breakdown of these 192 participants was 101 women (53%) and 91 men (47%). The racial breakdown of the participants was 160 Caucasian (83%), 24 African American (13%), 1 Hispanic, 1 Asian, 1 Pacific Islander, and 5 who self-identified as Other (3%).

There were participants whose major did not align with their career aspiration in every year of school. The breakdown of these athletes' year in school was 49 first-year students (25%), 55 second-year students (29%), 28 third-year students (15%), 45 fourth-year students (23%), 12 fifth-year students (6%), and 3 graduate students (2%).

This survey was sent to athletes in eight different sports. Each sport had individuals with majors that did not align with their career aspiration: 14 baseball (7%), 60 football (31%), 6 men's basketball (3%), 9 men's soccer (5%), 26 softball (14%), 17 volleyball (9%), 41 women's soccer (21%), 16 women's basketball (8%), and 3 who did not list a sport (2%).

Selecting a Major

Participants were asked to state the primary reason for choosing their major. The primary reason stated by the majority of those with unaligned majors was that they had always wanted to be in the field associated with their major. This is problematic because the career aspiration they wrote down did not align with this major. The complete breakdown of the primary reason for choosing major was: 109 - Always wanted to

be in this field (57%), 12 - Teammates were in the major (6%), 2 - Coach recommended the major (1%), 25 - Academic advisor recommended the major (13%), 19 - parents recommended the major (10%), 5 - Seemed easy (3%), 13 - Classes Fit Best in My Schedule (7%), and 7 - did not state a reason (3%).

Athletes were given the option of selecting additional factors that contributed to his or her choice of major. They were told to select all that apply. The secondary/additional reasons were: 36 - Always wanted to be in the field, 23 - Teammates were in the major, 2 - Coach recommended the major, 34 - Academic advisor recommended the major, 24 - Parents recommended the major, 19 - Seemed easy, and 16 - Classes fit best in my schedule.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Unaligned career goals and major aspirations

There were 192 athletes who were deemed to have academic majors that did not align with their career aspirations. Exactly half (n=96) of the 192 athletes stated future desired occupations that would normally be associated with a different academic major. Examples of these major and career aspirations are listed in Table 1.

Table 1.

Examples of Unaligned Academic Major and Career Aspiration

STATED ACADEMIC MAJOR	CAREER ASPIRATION
Anthropology	Marketing
Crime law and justice	Get a job in sales
Exercise science	To have a successful career in a field that interests me
Graphic design	Medical school
Healthcare service administration	Go back to school and get a degree in a field I'm actually interested in
History	Work in finance
Individual Studies	To own my own team.
Individualized Studies	To be a PreK-3rd teacher
Movement and Sports Sciences	Psychiatrist
Psychology	Begin my career in sales and marketing
Psychology	Physical therapy
Secondary Education	I want to be an FBI agent
Sociology	Firefighting
Spanish	Physical therapist
Sport Studies	Police officer
Youth Studies	Becoming a firefighter

Desire for a job, money, and/or a family

Participants were asked, “What is your career goal once your playing days are over (either upon graduation or after a professional career)?” The response to this question was the essential piece in analyzing whether an athlete’s major aligned with their career aspiration. While the majority of athletes who completed the study survey (n=413, 68%) had majors that aligned with their career goals, 192 athletes (32%) did not.

Of the athletes that did not have majors and career aspirations that aligned, 65 individuals (32 men and 33 women) mentioned their career aspiration involved finding a job, making money, and/or starting a family. Many of the participants stated a combination of these three as their career aspirations in their statement. Examples of their statements included, “Make enough money to enjoy my life filled with friends, family and clothes,” “To be successful, happy, and married with children,” and “Get a well-paying job and support my family.”

Unclear about the future

There were 16 athletes that stated they did not know what they wanted to do after graduation and an additional 16 that left the question blank. Of these 32 athletes, 12 were men and 20 were women. There were 7 first-year students, 7 second-year students, 4 third-year students, 9 fourth-year students, 4 fifth-year students, and 1 student who did not list their year in school. The 16 athletes who answered the question about career goals after graduation made comments such as, “I am figuring that out,” “No idea,” “Undecided,” and “I have none.” Seventeen athletes that self-identified as a third-year or above did not know what they wanted to do after their athletic careers ended. With all of the resources available to athletes, this is alarming. The NCAA asserts that the pursuit of excellence in academics and athletics is one of their core values (NCAA, 2018a). However, if athletes are in their third or fourth year at their institution and they are not sure what they want to do with their life after their playing days are done, then it seems as though the institution and/or the NCAA is failing to help the athlete achieve excellence in academics.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine current collegiate athlete’s academic majors and identify their career plans after graduation. Of the 605 individuals who completed the study, 192 participants (31.7%) were found to have majors that did not align with their career aspirations. Thus, the answer to the first research question in this study was no, not all of the athlete’s academic majors aligned with their career aspirations.

This study provides another piece to the academic clustering

puzzle. A criticism of academic clustering literature is that athletes in the clustered major may be there because they have a desire to enter that field after graduation. It can no longer be argued that the athletes are all interested in the same major as it applies to their future. While this study did not assess if the respondents were in clustered majors, the responses of some of the participants indicate that not all athletes are in majors that align with their career aspiration.

The second research question in this study examined whether female athlete’s academic majors were more likely to align with their career aspirations than male athletes. The results of this study revealed the sex of the athlete did not impact whether their major aligned with his or her career aspiration. In fact, there were more women (n= 101, 53%) than men (n=91, 47%) in majors deemed to be incongruent with career aspirations. This is a significant finding because the majority of academic clustering studies have focused on male athletes, specifically football (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011; Lederman, 2003; Love, Watkins, & Kim, 2017; Otto, 2010; Schneider, Ross, & Fischer, 2010). In concentrating the research on just male athletes, scholars are overlooking 43.7% (n=195,000) of the collegiate athletic population (NCAA, 2017b). In essence, it is saying that ensuring male athletes are receiving a real education in academic majors that will assist them after their playing days are over is the top priority. This study illustrates that scholars also need to focus their attention on the academic pursuits of NCAA female athletes.

The third research question assessed whether Caucasian athletes’ academic majors were more likely to align with their career aspirations than minority athletes. The racial breakdown of the 192 athletes with unaligned majors and career aspirations was 160 Caucasian (83%), 24 African American (13%), 1 Hispanic, 1 Asian, 1 Pacific Islander, and 5 who self-identified as Other (3%). The racial breakdown of the athletes in unaligned majors was almost identical to the percentages of all participants who completed the study. The results demonstrated that Caucasian athletes were the majority of athletes who comprised the unaligned group. This is counter to the findings of Fountain and Finley (2009). In their study, the researchers found that Black athletes were clustered into certain majors at a higher rate than their White counterparts (Fountain and Finley, 2009). While this study in no way doubts the accuracy of Fountain and Finley’s (2009) results, it does raise the question of why minority athletes are clustered at higher rates when upon further examination Caucasian athletes are majoring in areas that do not align with their ultimate career goals.

Life after graduation

The data from this study illustrated that not all athletes are receiving an education in an academic major that will benefit

them after graduation. On their website, the NCAA claims, “to truly benefit from college, student-athletes have to succeed in more places than on the field. The NCAA provides opportunities to learn, compete and grow” (NCAA, 2018a, para. 1). The NCAA also has previously stated that athletes are going “pro in something other than sport.” However, if 192 athletes, or almost one-third of the study sample, were not in majors that aligned with their ultimate career aspiration, are these athletes really being set up to succeed in more places than on the field?

Not all of the athletes in this study stated a major. When asked the question, “What is your career goal once your playing days are over (either upon graduation or after a professional career),” 65 athletes stated their career aspiration involved finding a job, making money, and/or starting a family. One male athlete stated that his ultimate career goal was to “get a good job after once [sic] I graduate to be able to support myself and ultimately become successful and happy with my occupation.” While these are great abstract life goals, they are not career aspirations.

Further, 32 additional athletes asserted they did not know what they wanted to do after graduation or did not respond to the question. Now, it is unknown what those who responded that their goal was to find a job meant. Their aspiration could be in a career that aligned with their major, but we do not know since the athlete did not state specific details.

Who is really choosing the athlete’s major?

Athletes were asked about the primary reason they selected their academic major. Twenty-five athletes (or 13% of the participants with unaligned majors) selected “Academic advisor recommended the major” as the primary reason they were in their current major. An additional 34 athletes stated that the academic advisor recommending the major was a contributing factor to their choice of major.

The number of athletes who are in their major due to an academic advisor is troubling and could be the reason for some athletes majoring in academic disciplines that do not align with their dreams. This is in no way stating that academic advisors are putting athletes into majors that do not align with his or her career aspiration intentionally. Athletes may come to the realization about what they want to do after graduation late in his or her academic career and, due to academic progress toward degree requirements, are unable to change their academic major.

Further, the job of an academic advisor is complex and full of pressure (Brady, 2008). The teams that fail to make appropriate NCAA standards and benchmarks risk losing scholarships, the opportunity to participate in post-season championships, and athletes being deemed ineligible to play during the season (Brady, 2008). Further, while the NCAA has created new academic measures that were supposed to help

athletes progress toward graduation and a degree, the reality is these rules have placed additional pressure on academic advisors who are charged with carrying out NCAA directives and monitoring the athlete’s grades and eligibility (Castle, Ammon, & Myers, 2014; Grasgreen, 2012; Steeg, Upton, Bohn, & Berkowitz, 2008).

Implications

This study provided further insight into the academic puzzle of collegiate athletics. Universities and the NCAA need to be proactive in providing athletes with opportunities to select academic majors that align with the athlete’s career aspirations. The NCAA has created academic benchmarks that athletes must achieve in order to progress toward graduation; however, a diploma does not equal an education. Graduation is incredibly important, but preparing athletes for life after their playing days are over is of utmost importance. The NCAA and individual universities need to work together to create legislation to limit academic clustering.

The athlete’s academic advisors need to allow athletes to choose their own majors. There are obvious challenges that athletes must navigate, such as practice time, grades/eligibility, and the 40-60-80 Rule (Castle, Ammon, & Myers, 2014; Grasgreen, 2012; NCAA, 2017a; NCAA, n.d.; Steeg, Upton, Bohn, & Berkowitz, 2008). However, while these are important areas that need to be taken into account given the current NCAA system, the athletes themselves should be at the center of everything. Doing so will carry out the NCAA’s vision of helping athletes “succeed in more places than on the field” (NCAA, 2018a, para. 1).

Limitations

As with all research, there were limitations to this study. First, the data was self-reported. Athletes had to accurately state their major and their ultimate career aspiration upon the conclusion of their athletic career. This was necessary in order to correctly analyze the data.

The participants had to take this survey seriously. While it appears that a large majority of the participants did answer truthfully, there were a few individuals who answered that their career aspiration were occupations that may have been misleading. For instance, one participant claimed to want to be a “professional skydiver or perhaps porn star.” While the researcher is not judging either of those professions, it seems as though that participant was trying to be funny rather than answering the question honestly.

Finally, 65 individuals mentioned their career aspiration involved finding a job, making money, and/or starting a family. It is possible that the job these participants wish to attain is aligned

with the athlete's major. However, since they did not provide that data, the researcher had to code what the participant presented.

Future Research Directions

The purpose of this study was to examine whether an athlete's academic major aligned with his or her career aspiration. To take this work further, it would be necessary to do a large examination of academic clustering in multiple sports throughout a conference and then follow up with athletes who were in clustered majors. Most clustering research to date has been quantitative in nature. Adding a qualitative element, such as interviews, would again provide additional insight into why an athlete is in a given major and if that major will help them in their career pursuits.

Not all athletes who play collegiate sport will graduate whether their academic major aligns with the career aspiration or not. According to the NCAA's Graduation Success Rate (GSR) data, the graduation rate for the 2016-2017 cohort was 87%. The GSR scores for the sports the athletes in this study participated in were: baseball 82.7%, football 77.8%, men's basketball 81.7%, men's soccer 85%, softball 94.2%, volleyball 93%, women's basketball 91.8%, and women's soccer 94.2%. A future study could assess reasons why the athletes who did not graduate with a degree may reveal if the academic major they were in, and whether or not they were in that major by their own choice, played a part.

Conclusion

This study intended to further research what is known regarding collegiate athletes' academic pursuits. While previous studies have found academic clustering to be prevalent in collegiate sports, is it really a problem? The results of this study indicate that it is in fact a problem. With nearly one-third of the athletes (192 out of 605) deemed to have majors that were not aligned with their career aspirations, the data from this study indicated that not all athletes are obtaining an education in an academic discipline that will assist them once their playing days are completed. Additionally, some athletes reported not knowing what they wanted to do after graduation. These instances are troubling and need to be addressed by institutions and the NCAA through meaningful reform and the creation of legislation that give athletes the opportunity to major in disciplines that are congruent with their career goals. Additionally, there needs to be more career counseling and guidance available to students who are undecided on what to do after graduation. Since the NCAA states they are helping athletes "succeed in more places than on the field" (2018a, para. 1), it is time they start living up to their claims and allow athletes to choose majors in line with their career aspirations.

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