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Leadership Development Through Athletic Experience

Antoine Grace

University of Southern Maine

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Dr. Elizabeth Goryunova

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Abstract

This qualitative research aims to find the relationship between athletics and leadership development by examining athletes’ and nonathletes’ students’ experiences, life, leadership experiences, and learned behaviors. The research utilized a purposive sampling to recruit a diverse group of participants from the university that classify as either student-athletes or non-sport-playing students. The collection of data from participants has been conducted using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis has been used to identify patterns and themes in the interview data, allowing for a meaningful understanding and interpretation based on aspects of athletes’ and non-athletes’ experiences. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on leadership in the realm of athletics by shedding light on the influence of sports experiences on leadership. Additionally, the research also seeks to explore the transferability of leadership skills to post-collegiate settings.

Understanding the impact of athletics can have potential impacts for a person generally and professionally. Furthermore, coaches, academic institutions, and individuals seeking personal and professional growth could benefit from further knowledge of athletics and leadership relationship.

Keywords: Athletics, Leadership Development, Non-athletes, Leadership skills, Transferability, Experience, College, Leadership
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Experience and active participation have always been known to be large keys to success in the training, learning, and building of future leaders in society. Leadership skills take time and practice to cultivate or develop and there are many domains or fields in which leadership can be applied or practiced. “Leadership is not merely a characteristic of an individual; it is attributed and performed. People actively construct meaning for their experiences in the world, including the domain of leadership development” (Kjellström & Törnblom, 2020, para. 15) Specifically, athletics is an environment where we see individuals of all ages have a chance to learn leadership behaviors and practice leadership strategies. The practice and experiences that come with one's athletic journey can help shape or mold their future in leadership beyond the sports domain. Sports and athletics provide a useful platform for individual development. Teamwork, communication, and social intelligence are just some leadership behaviors learned in time while participating in athletics (Hilliard et al., 2019). Participation in this platform allows access to experiences that can be used to test and practice leadership skills. The skills that are learned in a sports setting can be used primarily to lead teams, compete or work in high-stress situations, communicate more effectively, and make performance-based decisions. The research implies these experiences in real-time could possibly contribute
to a culmination of useful enhancement and development of leadership skills. Over time, these behaviors and skills can be applied to other parts of one's life.

Within each athlete's personal experience, there can be various similarities and differences. This research explores the experiences, similarities, and differences of athletes and non-athlete students of various demographics that lead to learned leadership behaviors and skills. In addition, this study analyzes how the differences in experiences lead to different leadership development outcomes. It’s important to learn what leadership skills can be transferred during or following one’s athletic career to emphasize these practices during development.

The understanding of these relationships can also have significant implications on society, such as possible changes to or during the hiring process. In terms of academic institutions, they can be impacted by the way leadership could be taught by using methods similar to those of coaches. Furthermore, athletic departments would benefit their athletes by teaching them to transfer these skills to other aspects of their life. By examining this relationship between athletics and leadership development, contributions can be made to better understand how important athletics can be in young people's leadership journey, while also granting access to the experiences and practices that foster leadership development. Secondly, this information can inform others outside the sports world on what type of characteristics and skills most athletes will gain and carry into their personal lives. In relation, Conners (2023) states, “Consequently, it is not surprising previous research showed collegiate athletics participation creates opportunities to develop skills that may improve leadership.” (Para. 3).
However, past research has stated that “if the design or implementation is not structured to enhance positive outcomes, youth sport programs often result in diminished skills and characteristics in youth” (Hilliard et al., 2019, p. 2). In the relationship between athletics and leadership development, it is likely significant that the intentional teaching of leadership can relate to the experiences and development of these athletes' leadership skills. Though past research has found that due to a large number of leadership classifications, useful or relevant data has proven difficult to find (Conners, et al., 2023). By this, Conners (2023) suggests that the variety of leadership classifications have resulted in difficulties conducting research on a singular style in relation to athletics. With so many ways for leadership development to happen, it can be difficult to find a common or central theme in the experiences of athletes to add to the existing research, although the idea of intentional leadership development may be a central idea for young athletes/leaders and their experiences.

Through analysis of the experiences of various members of athletic communities, this study seeks to add to the knowledge of research that already exists concerning the development of leadership skills through sports and their transferability.

The following hypotheses are examined in this research:

1. Athletics has a positive relationship with the leadership development of athletes, as compared to their non-athlete counterparts.
2. Athletic participation will show a positive impact on leadership skills and traits.
3. Athletes will have more opportunities for leadership development experiences compared to non-athletes.
4. Traits and/or skills learned through experiences in sports will have transferability during or after a sports/athletic career.

In the examination of these hypotheses, the research has found evidence that athletics and leadership share a relationship in terms of development with those involved. Those relationships have been analyzed, while also stating the importance of the transferability of leadership skills from one domain to another.

**Researcher’s Perspective**

As the primary researcher, this study shows great importance to my world and culture as a leader. As a former student-athlete, I have found that in my time at college, athletics has had a positive relationship with my own personal leadership development. As a student-athlete, I have had the unique opportunity to lead and captain multiple teams and groups in my time at the University. These experiences have allowed me to build and learn necessary skills and tools that can be transferred from the collegiate to the professional environment with any jobs or roles I have in the future. In terms of the impact of this research, I find that in the realm of leadership, not much is known about the experiences of college athletes. I find it is important to recognize and interpret the relationship between athletics and leadership development to further the knowledge and literature of such phenomena, but as a principal investigator I will report objective findings of all data and not my interpretation of them.

**Chapter 2**

**Literature Review**

The following literature review will examine common themes within existing research as they relate to the concurrent study. Common themes within the area of
athletics leadership research include; leadership development in athletics, leadership development in non-athlete students, learned behaviors or skills in college or athletics, differences between athlete and non-athlete college students, athletics' impact on leadership, the transfer of leadership/life skills, and athletes as leaders.

Leadership Development in Athletics

To understand the value of importance and the role athletics and college experience plays in leadership development it is beneficial to define the term. Leadership development is defined as “the expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes” (McCauley, et al., 2010, p. 22). Athletics as a whole provides an area of practice for those involved to grow as leaders. In past research, it has been found that those who participate in sports or sport-adjacent activities recorded a larger increase in leadership capability (Grandzol et al., 2010). Furthermore, findings show that in these same types of activities, participation continues to stimulate leadership development (Grandzol et al., 2010). Grandzol’s (2010) study of leadership development on team captains in college sports yielded a variety of findings. This study took 469 NCAA Division III level sports athletes from various teams and tested their leadership development after one college sports season (Grandzol et al., 2010). Results of self-instrumented leader practice inventory (LPI) showed that team captains demonstrated higher levels of leadership practices than their non-captain counterparts (Grandzol et al., 2010). Concerning team captainship, evidence was also found that the experience that comes with captainship provides students with an opportunity to grow or improve their leadership abilities based on the increased scores of leadership practice between pre and
post-tests (Grandzol et al., 2010). Some limitations of this study include only Division III institutions, the use of only fall sports, and the duration of a study only being one season.

Regarding leadership development in athletics, experiences have also played a role in the development of an athlete's leadership. Machida-Kosuga and Kohno’s (2022) study used ten athletes, six of their teammates, and three of their coaches and explored their experiences using a multi-perspectival, interpretative phenomenological analysis (Machida-Kosuga & Khono, 2022). Data from the study was compiled into two categories, “elements involved in the process of athlete leader development, and leadership skills to be developed in athlete leaders” (Machida-Kosuga & Khono, 2022, p. 8). The findings within the collected data showed there are a variety of experiences and situations that can allow an athlete to develop as a leader such as challenges, feedback, and support of athlete leader development (Machida-Kosuga & Khono, 2022). This study shows the importance experience has in affecting leadership development, Machida-Kosuga, and Kohno’s (2022) study expands the findings on leadership development. In a sports context their findings add to the existing literature by sharing the role of developmental experiences within athletics, such as challenges that help in facilitating development. They also found that leaders may develop in areas in which other athletes assume leadership (Machida-Kosuga & Khono, 2022). Lastly, the study finds that experiences, personal characteristics, attitudes, and dispositions can influence athlete leadership development (Machida-Kosuga & Khono, 2022). These findings within this study were congruent with past research in terms that high levels of certain traits like diligence and confidence were consistent with the characteristics of effective athlete
leadership (Machida-Kosuga & Khono, 2022). Within this study, the limitations include a small sample size of just 19 participants from three teams and two different sports.

**Leadership Development for Non-Athlete Students**

While the topic of interest for the concurrent study falls mostly on the leadership development of student-athletes, the study looks to analyze the experiences and leadership of non-athlete students as well. In terms of potential leadership development, it is a different path for non-athlete college students compared to their student-athlete counterparts. Non-athlete students that wish to develop leadership skills or tools must find different way to engage with leadership-based experiences, unlike their student-athlete counterparts that have sports participation as a secondary field to engage in leadership experiences. Odom and Dunn’s (2023) research takes the time to highlight leadership development in the curricular setting. One way that was found during this study of leadership development in academic curriculum settings was leadership courses (Odom & Dunn, 2023). Many majors or educational programs have now shifted to leadership and leadership identity development as a focal point within the curriculum. For example, Odom and Dunn (2023) highlight majors associated with healthcare and engineering have shifted to promote leadership development within their curriculum.

Within the field of engineering, it has been found that leadership and leadership identity development is necessary in terms of the core competencies associated with further accreditation within the field of engineering (Odom & Dunn, 2023). In terms of healthcare educational programs, it is found that the professional accrediting bodies call for the increase of interest in leadership and leadership identity development within college educational programs (Odom & Dunn, 2023). As future healthcare employees the
nature of their jobs and work calls for leadership skills and ability as modern-day healthcare is more team-focused/based which further sites the need and reason for leadership-based learning experiences within the academic curriculum (Odom & Dunn, 2023). Within the various curriculum that prioritizes leadership development for students, Odom and Dunn (2023) share various pedagogies that often show up during one's time in the formal education of a college student. Odom and Dunn found that within academic courses the prominent pedagogies used were: “coaching, storytelling and counter-storytelling, personal growth projects, as well as personal and behavioral experiments” (2023, para.13). These differing pedagogies can be used to have real-time experience developing leadership skills and concepts. For example, storytelling, "humans use storytelling to make sense of who we are and how we fit into the larger world around us" (Odom & Dunn, 2023, para 16). College is a time in which students can create their own identity, using storytelling is an effective way create one's own identity in leadership by listening and making sense of their place within their colleges, community, and their role as a leader as they continue to develop.

**Learned Behaviors or Skills in College or Athletics**

Athletics can provide helpful skills or behaviors that can be used throughout one's life with the transfer to a professional context. In a study of sports participation’s impact on life skills, Quinaud (2022) found that sports helped influence participants' interpersonal and intrapersonal psychosocial skills. During this research, those in the medical field took skills learned in a sports context and were able to apply them to their medical careers. Additionally, within this study, the sport learning context shared considerable skills that were found to be of use or learned while athletes participated in
sports that could be transferred to their new jobs in medicine (Quinaud, et al., 2022).

Some of these skills included that of teamwork, mental performance, time management, and self-learning (Quinaud, et al., 2022). Sports participation was mentioned to help improve or gain all these skills before or during their roles at their new jobs (Quinaud, et al., 2022). This research was done in direct relation to the medical field which is a limitation of this research. However, limitations of this study include the use of only one sport, basketball, a team sport. This research also shares that even with participation in sports it is not necessary to develop such psychosocial skills as these but does provide opportunities to develop these skills more frequently (Quinaud, et al., 2022).

Regarding behaviors and skills learned through sports, Hilliard's (2019) study examined the integration of positive youth development concepts of citizenship into youth sports. One of the findings from Hilliard states that “athletes most commonly learned respect for others, teamwork, and respect for self through participation in sport” (2019, p. 15). This study also found that coaches need to try to teach desired skills and reinforce them to achieve positive outcomes (Hilliard et al., 2019). Furthermore, this study was designed for youth athletes, vastly younger than the college-level age. Understanding the limitations of this study regarding the differences in age of the athletes and coaches being studied is important to note due to the difference in time that college-level athletes have that younger children do not. Furthermore, this study is done with a remarkably similar population where there is not a large amount of diversity regarding coaches and experiences studied. The two prior studies expound on the existing research on leadership behaviors or skills that can be learned through the context of athletics or sports.
The perspectives and experiences of athletes are also important to note when analyzing learned behaviors or skills that have been developed in their time in college athletics. The way in which an athlete perceives their leadership can shape the behaviors they have moving forward to impact those around them in their communities, workplaces, and lives. Fuller et al. (2018) shared findings regarding female athletes and their respective perspectives of their own leadership. Within this research Fuller et al. shares the common themes found among 295 different female student athletes across 3 divisions of NCAA competition (divisions 1, 2,3) (2018).

These main thematic similarities included being change agents, leading by example, being success-oriented, and the ability to partake in self-analysis (Fuller et al., 2018). These all represented the most common behaviors or learned skills regarding these athletes' experiences in college athletics. Through data analysis it was found that the perception of being a change agent was common among 39.7% of the selected participants, this is important to note because as college athletes they have learned the values in which and why it is important to make a change in the world around them Fuller et al., 2018). Furthermore, in terms of success-orientation, 28.5% of the selected participants “had the will and drive to succeed and would accept nothing short of excellence” (Fuller et al., 2018, para. 11) the behavior has led these participants to want to be successful regardless of the area of focus (Fuller et al., 2018). With this study in mind, we can find use in expanding on the findings on the learned behaviors and how they have impacted future or current leaders in their time in sports as well as outside the realm of athletics. It is important to note and expand on the perspectives and experiences
of student athletes and how they have developed athletes to use their learned attributes in a different domain.

Past research around learned skills and behaviors has been done regarding one's time in college. It is important for the concurrent research to understand what possibilities could be presented in the analysis and data collection of perspectives and experiences of college students and those that are college athletes. The findings of Martini, Frangella, and VanderVlist (2021) show their findings regarding named skills learned and not learned by students and working adults in relationship to their time spent completing their first degree. Within this study, all participants shared 5 skills maximum they developed or were developing through their first degree. Of these responses, 10 main categories developed in skills learned or not learned in their time completing their first degree. These skills included the following: communication, critical thinking, teamwork, leadership, time management, computer/tech, research, job search, job specific, and self-management (Martini, et al., 2021). The findings of this study show the importance of the need of possibly having a space to foster and develop these skills. In terms of the concurrent study of leadership development and the potential learned behaviors and skills, it is important to note past research and its findings of possible skills learned in order to understand or recognize potential data or developments in the current study.

**Differences Between Athlete and Non-Athlete College Students**

The subsequent studies use of a Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI) is to test the leadership practices of students and student athletes statistically. A SLPI tests 5 dimensions of leadership practices each signifying different traits or behaviors associated with them. These 5 practices include: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge
the Process, Enable others to Act, And Encourage the Heart (Foli et al., 2014). The first dimension, Model the Way. measures certain behaviors about how leaders treat those around them and set the example or standard of how those that follow them should act. The second dimension. Inspire a Shared Vision, measures behaviors such as how leaders view the future or communicate with and inspire those around them. The third dimension of study is Challenge the Process, and some of the associated behaviors or traits in this dimension include changing the norm or status quo, learning from mistakes, or risk taking. The fourth dimension, Enable Others to Act, includes traits or behaviors related to relationship building, trust, and teamwork. The fifth and final dimension used in the SLPI is Encourage the Heart, which relates to behaviors and traits such as, rewarding hard work, hope, and motivation. Understanding this model will help better understand how and why some research comparing athletes to non-athletes is useful in regard to our current research.

In terms of the differences between student athletes and non-athlete students Bruce L. Lund (2013) put together a study to compare the leadership capabilities of the two groups of college students. This study consisted of a total of 1, 454 participants from NCAA division I, II, and III, 660 of which were student athletes while the remaining 794 participants were collegiate non-athletes. The researchers collected data using a self-instrumented student leadership practices inventory (SLPI) and an observer instrumented assessment. The findings after data analysis concluded that student athletes found themselves participating in more leadership practices in 4 of the 5 leadership practices tested by the SPLI, these included Modeling the Way, Inspiring a Shared Vision, Challenging the Process, and Encouraging the Heart. As well that athletic participation
indicates a positive effect on leadership practices. This study represents more evidence regarding the usefulness of athletics on college students in terms of leadership development.

Furthermore, past literature and the findings associated with it show some of the differences between the two groups of college students. The research of Galante and Ward (2017) find specific data supporting the differences in traits exhibited by both groups. 635 participants were used in this study in which 209 were Division I student-athletes, these participants completed surveys based on the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI) and Rosenberg self-esteem scale. The findings after data analysis concluded that two out of the five SLPI subscales in which the results stated that female student-athletes scored significantly higher in the areas of model the way and encourage the heart (Galante & Ward, 2017). Research also found that NCAA Division I female student-athletes were more likely to have high to moderate profiles in terms of transformational leadership and self-esteem. Furthermore, the researchers share participation in organized athletics could explain the increased self-esteem and leadership traits (Galante & Ward, 2017). As well that the diversity and number of roles grant more experience compared to the lack thereof in other co-curriculars. These organized athletic experiences provide opportunities that non-athletes don’t have to build leadership characteristics. This study has its limitations regarding using only female student athletes as well as using a self-rating scale to provide data.

Additionally, another study finds more data relating to the differences between student athletes and non-athlete students by comparing that of academic and behavior performance. These findings state that athletic participation related to a reduction of risk
in dropping out as well as statistically significant higher passing rates in student athletes compared to non-athlete students (Eldridge et al., 2014). In terms of disciplinary actions, the same study found that athletes were also statistically less likely to have fewer disciplinary actions against them which reduces the risk of poor academic performance and decreased risk of dropping out (Eldridge et al., 2014).

In relation to the current research, we find the need to study leadership traits and their longevity and possible transferability post college as well as the differences between student-athletes and their non-athlete-student counterparts.

**Athletics' Impact on Leadership**

Leadership in athletics has been defined in many ways in regards to our research we use the definition “an athlete, occupying a formal or informal role within a team, who influences a group of team members to achieve a common goal” (Cotterill et al., 2022, para. 1) with this thinking the athletic domain could relate to the impact of athletes and their leadership skills and development. Some of the existing leadership on this phenomenon shall be reviewed subsequently. In a study of the impact of intercollegiate athletic participation on leadership development, Huntrods (2017) states: “Much can be gained from looking at student-athletes as nontraditional students. As athletes spend substantial amounts of time together, share goals and values, and are often subject to discrimination, viewing athletes in the context of a minority culture may have merit” (Huntrods et al., 2017, para. 4). The athletic environment has been argued to be a noteworthy component of one's developmental process (Huntrods et al., 2017). This study aimed to find whether athletic participation had an influence on leadership development using a multi-institutional, longitude sample. Past research struggled with
validity because of a lack of pretest and posttest design so this addition to the research helped gain a clearer understanding of the student athlete's leadership development (Huntrods et al., 2017). Furthermore, Huntrods (2017) states:

Leadership is not defined solely by individual behavior. Instead, leadership is better defined as the action and change one creates by working through collective action grounded in the community’s betterment. In the case of athletics, athletes work together to produce results in the form of team success—it is rare for one person alone to produce change. (Para. 11)

The findings of this study included co-curricular involvement and out-of-class experiences that had a significant positive impact on socially responsible leadership. The study showed suggestive results that imply athletic participation does not increase socially responsible leadership and some types of sports (collision team sports) slow the gains of such leadership (Huntrods et al., 2017).

To continue examining the research on athletics' impact on leadership, the Haines and Fortman (2008) study of college recreation sports showed that the greatest gains demonstrated by the participants of the study were in Travel Planning Skills, Sense of Belonging, Time Management, School Pride, and Overall Leadership Development. Further findings of the study revealed all participant's skills and abilities in a pretest post-test analysis in which all skills and abilities that were tested came back as increased gains after sports club participation (Haines & Fortman, 2008), unlike what was found in some past research on athletic or sports participation on leadership development.

Within the domain of college athletics comes the potential ability to participate in leadership development programs or experiences. According to O’Brien (2018), and the
findings regarding leadership development programs, student-athletes felt participation in these programs allowed for personal-growth, skill development, and engagement in different leadership development teachings or pedagogies. With these three themes found through the interviewing of experience, student athletes that took part in leadership development programs the combination of themes lead to an impactful and transformative experience (O’Brien, 2018). This research notes the implications for leadership development programs and their benefits for student athletes, in relation to the concurrent research it is helpful in representing some of the benefits and experiences that student athletes may have to participate in that their non-athlete student counterparts do not have access too.

**The Transfer of Leadership/Life Skills**

To set a groundwork for continued exploration of transferable skills in regard to the concurrent research we use the definition of “a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (Mello & Wattret, 2021, para. 5). Research on the transfer of life or leadership skills is important to note because of the effects this application of skills can have on an athlete as they move out of the sports context. Kendellen and Camiré (2019) define the life skills process as, “The ongoing process by which an individual further develops or learns and internalizes a personal asset (i.e., psychosocial skill, knowledge, disposition, identity construction, or transformation) in sport and then experiences personal change through the application of the asset in one or more life domains beyond the context where it was originally learned” (Kendellen & Camiré, 2019, para. 1). The results of their research found that key social agents outside
of sport also influenced the development of the life skills process. The use of skills gained within sports was concisely used or applied when the application of such a context was asked, instructed, or encouraged of them to do so (Kendellen & Camiré, 2019). Additionally, dependent on the ability of an athlete to transform or reconstruct the skills learned in sports to fit the context or demands of a new application. Further findings revealed that in most cases athletes experienced successful skill application when adapting them from sports to their lives (Kendellen & Camiré, 2019).

Another study that expands on life skill development and their transfer was done to gain more knowledge on the lived experiences of youth athletes (Newman, 2020). The youth participants' study stated as a whole that, “life skills were viewed as important skills that can help someone succeed in everyday life” (Newman, 2020, p. 6). These skills included intrapersonal life skills such as self-control, effort, grit, and personal responsibility (Newman, 2020). Interpersonal life skills include communication, teamwork, respect, developing relationships, and social responsibility (Newman, 2020). The use of developing these skills can help in aspects of interacting with other social agents like teachers or other peers (Newman, 2020). However, the findings from this study only show that developing relationships was related to the intention of developing life skills, not life skills transfer (Newman, 2020). Newman (2020) later states:

BT4The development and transfer of life skills are critical for all youth, especially youth who are socially vulnerable and at risk. Specifically, these critical skills are recognized as important mechanisms that help not only promote positive long-term development but also prevent the onset and/or adherence to behavioral health problems” (Newman, 2020). With this in mind, the continuance of research
on skill transfer is readily important in understanding how life skills transfer can help athletes at all ages in the next stages of life. (p. 12)

In relation to the transfer of skills, the current study explores how college students and student athletes at a university portray their learned skills or behaviors outside of college athletics or college university life. One study finds a relation in camp counselor's abilities to transfer their skills from summer camp training and experiences to college life (Murphy, 2022). Through the research of Murphy (2022), it was concluded that the training these camp counselors gained did have lasting effects in the transfer of these skills and behaviors into an academic setting, as well as past that into their respective campus community. The study provides examples of each skill mentioned and how it is used outside of summer camp and in the classroom. For example, leadership skills were stated in half of the participants' interviews for this study. One of the participants recalls using their leadership skills to help instruct or guide others when making decisions for or with a group (Murphy, 2022). This study is important regarding the research of athletics and the transferability of skills because the current research looks to analyze the experiences of student-athletes and the transferability of their skills and leadership behaviors to a domain outside of college athletics.

**Athletes as Leaders**

In the realm of sports, team captains or athlete leadership groups have a responsibility to act as a leader on the playing field, as well as maintain a connection between the coaches and the players (Haddad & O’Connor, 2022). Athletes in leadership roles have the jobs of monitoring, mentoring, and supporting the team's needs and are used to serve as extensions of a coach's influence in terms of creating a healthy sporting
environment and team culture (Haddad & O’Connor, 2022). Athlete leaders need to be well equipped for their role as a team leader or their impact can be negative to the function within the team and how it performs as a whole (Haddad & O’Connor, 2022). Past research has shown there is an absence of formal leadership training for athlete leaders this study adds to the knowledge of the development of athlete leadership and the opportunities that come with it (Haddad & O’Connor, 2022). The findings of the study show that athletes in leadership roles lacked the knowledge and skills about leadership and influence and their coaches realized formal education on what good leadership in their organization looks like is necessary (Haddad & O’Connor, 2022). The findings also show that self-awareness was a central component in effective leadership, by understanding one’s own personality and behavior they could better understand the influence of their leadership within a team leadership role (Haddad & O’Connor, 2022). Overall findings of the study discussed the necessity for athlete leaders, coaches, and teams using athlete leaders to prioritize leadership development in their teams in an action-based learning environment (Haddad & O’Connor, 2022).

Weaver and Simet (2015) state the importance of the role student-athlete leaders play within their teams. Student athlete leaders can act as an extension of a coach in key moments when coaches can’t communicate with their teams in crucial moments of games and can help the team in different performance-based ways during the competition (Weaver & Simet, 2015). Wear and Simet (2015) state that the responsibilities of a student-athlete leader can include “being a role model and mentoring teammates, structuring captain's practice and off-season workouts, making sure teammates fulfill their responsibilities and follow team rules” (Weaver & Simet, 2015, p. 55). The
challenges that student-athlete leaders face in terms of the hindrance to their leadership
development include a lack of time for other endeavors such as leadership programs or
even a lack of involvement in other programs like Greek life or intramural sports
(Weaver & Simet, 2015). Research in the area of effective leadership development and
student-athlete leaders is still needed to understand more about student-athletes roles and
responsibilities. As well as the obligation of needs required from coaches and institutions
in terms of learning environments, support, and collaboration.

It is also important to note the accessibility athletes have to leadership experiences
in college. College sports are directed through the National Collegiate Athletics
Association also known as the NCAA. The NCAA is the governing body of college
sports divisions 1, 2, and 3. The NCAA promotes many programs, such as leadership
development for coaches and athletic administration and student-athletes. The NCAA’s
leadership development program is used to empower and educate all members through
transformative experiences while developing strong leaders and creating a more inclusive
community. Within the leadership development program, the student-athlete sector is
based on creating and learning values, building character, and understanding the role
athletes have within the higher education system (Student-athletes, 2023). Being a
student-athlete within the NCAA gives you the opportunity to experience events and
workshops based on leadership development, such as the student-athlete Leadership
Forum or Athletes Using Their Power (A4) virtual series. These resources help cultivate
meaningful leadership skills and networking opportunities to emerge in the leadership
field.
This literature review analyzed some of the existing literature as it stands concerning leadership development in athletics, leadership development in non-athlete students, learned behaviors or skills in college or athletics, differences between athlete and non-athlete college students, athletics' impact on leadership, the transfer of leadership/life skills, and athletes as leaders.

Chapter 3

Research Methods

The current study uses a qualitative research approach to broaden findings on leadership's relationship to athletics. The study will explore the ideas of athletics' impact on leadership skills and the transferability of these leadership skills to a post-collegiate sport setting. The following research methods section includes research design, participants, data collection, data analysis, and timeline.

Research Design

To better understand the phenomenon of athletics and leadership the study uses a qualitative phenomenology research design to better explore an individual's firsthand experiences as well as the effect that these relationships and experiences may or may not have on someone after a life in sports at the college level. This approach is best because it allows for in-depth data collection, by allowing the researcher to explore the complexity of the possible phenomenon while gaining insights into individual and contextual factors regarding the realm of the connected research.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

To gain a diverse and representative sample for this study, a purposive sampling technique was used to help gain better validity and reliability. Potential participants were
former or current student-athletes that participated in or on a collegiate sports team, as well as a selection of non-sport-playing students from the same university. The selection process included individuals from extensive backgrounds, including different sports, genders, ethnicities, leadership status, and athletic involvement history. The aim for participant selection and recruitment is 10-14 participants to ensure that both athlete and nonathlete experiences are represented equally. This has allowed for various sports, identities, and experiences to be discovered and considered.

**Data collection**

This study uses semi structured interviews as its primary tool for data collection. Interviews of all participants were held over Zoom or in person at the preference and availability of each individual participant. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask questions based on the experiences of each participant. The interview format allowed participants to share their personal experiences, reflections, realizations, stories, and insights regarding their college athletic experience, leadership development, and skill transferability. The same was done with the selected non-athlete students. The data collected from the non-athlete students was information based on their experiences within the same university without the impact or context of collegiate sports. In terms of question topics asked in interviews, the subject matter will consist of experiential questions during participants’ time in and after the college setting. Furthermore, questions about leadership capabilities, leadership skills learned, and transferability have also been asked and considered during the interview meetings. For example, student athlete participants were asked questions like what sport they played, how they gained their leadership roles and so on. As for non-athlete students they were asked questions
such as where did you learn leadership skills or what experiences shape your leadership. These questions were used to gather information about the perceptions and experiences of the two groups of college students.

**Data analysis**

To analyze the data, thematic analysis has been used in order to sort and classify all the findings from each participant's interview. Following the interviews, transcriptions of recordings were reviewed and de-identified for privacy purposes and thematic assessment. After de-identification, and transcription, thematic analysis was used to identify the themes and insights of the participant's data that similarly align together. Transcriptions were analyzed searching for common themes among the experiences and answers for each participant. The themes and patterns were accurately logged into a table to place data in a viewable comprehensive format. This format of data analysis has allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of leadership development and leadership skills transferability with and without the context of sports participation.

**Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the duration of the research process, ethical guidelines have been followed to ensure participants' rights and confidentiality. Consent has been obtained from all participants before the interviews to ensure privacy and anonymity. To ensure privacy and confidentiality concerning each participant's personal details, each of the Zoom interviews that were transcribed were de-identified and stored on a password encrypted hard drive and computer.

**Chapter 4**
Results

This section presents the results of study on leadership development through athletic experience, that used qualitative methods for the examination of leadership skills assessment, leadership behaviors, experiences, and the perceptions of leadership development among student athletes and their non-athlete counterparts. Furthermore, the interviews compared these two groups of university students. The sample for the interviews was comprised of ten (10) participants, these included eight (8) women and two (2) males 5 of each represent either the student athletes or non-athlete student groups. Of the student athletes involved sports included were women's soccer, track & field, wrestling, volleyball, and softball. This approach with multiple sports representation was to include a capture of a diverse group of experiences throughout the university's athletic department. The interviews included fifteen to seventeen questions (if applicable to participants) regarding leadership traits, experiences, transferability, and applicability.

Student-Athletes

Throughout the interviews student athletes were asked questions about their experiences, leadership development, outside leadership roles, and their skills and traits relating to themselves and roles within a leadership position.

Common Themes of Student Athlete Leadership Traits

Throughout the interviews of the student athlete participants the common leadership traits shared were majority consistent. Student athletes shared that some leadership traits they use in leadership roles were communication, social intelligence, emotional intelligence, problem solving, being a role model or example, strong work ethic, coachability, personability, and adaptability. These leadership skills were either
used to help earn leadership roles or learned in their times within roles such as captainship or doing work in other areas within the athletic department.

**Common Themes of Student Athlete Leadership Experience and Development**

Student athletes also had time to share some of the experiences that helped develop them as leaders in the roles they have amongst their teams or in the groups or organizations they work with. The majority of the student athlete participants share in their response that their leadership experience was through a captainship for their respective teams which was earned by showing specific leadership traits before their times as leaders. These roles were often granted by coaches' choice in which they viewed these student athletes as potential leaders for their teams due to their preexisting leadership capabilities and traits. The response from our student athlete participants was again consistent across the board. Student athletes stated that some of the important and major experiences or factors that lead to their personal leadership development were caused by, working with different groups and teams, task managing, delegating, experiencing or seeing good leadership from coaches, leading through conflict, and just being in a space to practices their leadership traits.

**Student Athlete Skills Transferability**

Among the responses from the student athletes all agreed that the skills they learned through their time in the athletic setting were transferable to an outside domain such as work, relationships, and volunteer efforts. When asked what the process was like, all but one participating student athlete said the transfer of skills from athletics to other domains was easy and made them feel more prepared to take on the challenges in these other domains. While one of the student athletes states:
“I was very confident with the strength training side of things the school - you
know, everything that includes and encompassed being a college athlete, I was
very confident with. And I think moving on into the real world, it can be hard to
have that same confidence with something like a new job where I think it'll
develop over time, but being thrown into something so new, it can be hard to
express that passion and that like love for leadership when you're in something
that you're just not as comfortable with, because it's a new environment, a new
role, you have new responsibilities, you're working with new people. So, I think
there's just so much that can become difficult due to that just because you have a
little bit lower of a confidence as a leader.” - Student Athlete 5

Non- Athlete Students

The same interview process was conducted with our non-athlete student
participants where there was also four (4) female participants and one (1) male
participant. In similar fashion to the student athlete group, our non-athlete students were
asked fifteen (15) to seventeen (17) similar questions about leadership development,
skills, traits, leadership roles, transferability, and leadership experiences. Without the
domain of athletics our non-athlete students responses shared that most of their leadership
development happened in areas such as the family dynamic, the church, school, work,
and other extracurricular activities within the college setting.

Common Themes of Non-Athlete Student Leadership Traits

In terms of our non-athlete students, the interviews presented an array of traits or
behaviors that they found were applicable to their leadership behaviors or were seen to be
cause of them earning some sort of more formal leadership role. These mentioned skills
or behaviors included, social consciousness, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, collaboration, personability, trust, problem solving, and adaptability. When asked “what leadership skills or traits did they learn in their time in college” majority responded with statements saying there was not any major skill they learned but they felt they honed the ones they were good at and found ways to improve on them.

**Common Themes of Non-Athlete Student Leadership Development and Experience**

A reoccurring similarity of non-student athletes' responses was the domain or place in which their perceived leadership development and experience took place. These domains included work, college or educational setting, family upbringing, and church. In these domains they responded that they gained the tools to craft their leadership styles. Furthermore, within their responses, they stated they learned these leadership skills or traits from role models such as parents, coworkers, bosses, and mentors. In terms of experiences that lead to leadership development, there were reoccurring themes or response of learning how to work with new or different groups, actively participating in leadership roles, being able to practice leadership skills, changing jobs or settings, or situations where you are having to understand your role. Also, not all but two of our non-athlete students felt they could hold a traditional role in a leadership position within the college realm. While the other 3 found that they had either no leadership role opportunities or found them outside the realm of the college domain.

**Non-Athlete Student Skills Transferability**

When asked about the possibility of leadership skill transferability from one domain to another, all of our non-athletes stated they have had the ability to transfer their leadership skills from one area to another (for those it was applicable too). When asked
about the difficulty of this transition, the majority of the responses stated it was “fairly easy” or natural to use their leadership skills in other domains. Although one of the student athlete participants shared their thoughts stating

“I would say yeah actually it is a little bit difficult like it's the same set of skills but You have to like, when you get to a new place, you have observe what is the situation, what the vibe, what like you know, you really have get know how they run things, how you can implement your style without just like crashing into people. Because it's not the same as where you, like I'm in the industry, because I went from one rec department to different rec departments, but they're so different. And like the way that the whole inner workings of the people work is different. And I still do like the same thing and I have the same style, but like, the way you go about it, I feel like you have to be like aware when you go into a new situation.” - Non-Athlete student 3.

Following the current results section, the responses of our participants will be used to extend the knowledge of leadership development through athletic experience using qualitative and thematic analysis.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The following chapter will present a qualitative exploration into the insights and perceptions found within the responses of our participants on their leadership development through athletic experience, or lack thereof. The aim is to find and interpret the underlying meanings, themes, and implications regarding the following research questions:
1. Athletics has a positive relationship with leadership development of athletes, as compared to their non-athlete counterparts.

2. Athletic participation will show a positive impact on leadership skills and traits.

3. Athletes will have more opportunities for leadership development experiences compared to non-athletes.

4. Traits and/or skills learned through experiences in sports will have transferability during or after a sports/athletic career.

The semi structured interviews will serve as the baseline of data as we further the discussion of leadership development through athletics and the transferability of skills from one domain to another. Through a thematic analysis approach the hope is to clarify the complexities associated with the leadership development process and transfer of skills using the experiences of both student athletes and their non-athlete student counterparts

**Research Question 1: Athletics positively Influences leadership development of athletes, as compared to their non-athlete counterparts.**

Although majority of the participants had the opportunity to develop their leadership skills, the student athletes presented more positive influences in terms of leadership development compared to the non-athlete students,

For example, student athlete 1 explains her success in her graduate program stating,

“Yeah, actually a lot like the, being able to work with the team and all those interpersonal things I talked about have been very important here. Cause like, the lab I'm in functions as team like we all work together to help collect data and do analysis..”
Student athlete 5 shares his experience of practicing leadership

“Yeah. So, I think, I think, um, some of that, I felt like it just developed over time. I think once you get, you get thrown into the thrown into that role, I think it’s one of those situations where, um, it’s almost like getting thrown into a pool. Like you learned to swim at a certain point, um, where I think once you're exposed to a variety of situations, um, so the, the more you deal with, you know, your teammates, the more you deal with teams outside of your own team, uh, the more you deal with the adults in the athletic program. think you, you see various situations. Um, so I was, I was fortunate enough to be in the role for a few years, um, where, you know, as a, as a captain, you’re the point person. If, if someone’s not going to the coach with something, they're going to the captain with it. Um, like I said, whether it be a teammate, whether it be a community member who has questions, um, or an athletic department member who, who has questions, um, so I think being in the role, you gain that experience over time.”

He emphasizes the need to practice leadership to continue developing, which came through the role as team captain.

**Research Question 2: Athletic participation will show a positive impact on leadership skills and traits.**

This question is better answered through a quantitative study, but qualitative study can help inform this question.

For example, the responses from our student athlete participants about the relationship they had with athletics and what experiences, if any, led them to develop leadership skills and traits. Student athlete 3 states
“So it definitely runs in my blood, athletics do. But that's kind of the nature part of it. But then the nurture is where the sports really helped me grow as a person.”

As well student athlete 1 referred to enhanced team skills,

“being able to work with the team and all those interpersonal things I talked about have been very important here.”

Student athlete 4 refers to her self-confidence building through athletics

“ I would say it's definitely made me more self-confident and like even with like awards and stuff like you kind of get like that recognition in that like moment where you're like yeah like I can do this like things might like be difficult at first but over time like you just like learn like I don't know it's kind of like muscle memory like you just like learn how to do things over and over again um but definitely self-confidence being like someone who like knows that they can do whatever is like kind of thrown at them”

Research Question 3: Athletes will have more opportunities for leadership development experiences compared to non-athletes.

All student athlete participants acknowledged various leadership development opportunities they experienced; for example, student athlete 2 refers to her participation in multiple NCAA conferences,

“I think of all the different opportunities that I was given. One of those being, well, actually, I was able to go to three different NCAA conventions.”

as well she states:
“I was able to get some professional development through that program. And I was also able to be exposed to people of color in leadership positions.”

In comparison, non-athlete students had less to say about leadership development because they did not have previous college athletic experience. Non-athlete student 4 shared

“I gained the GSSO role because I was asked to so I kind of made I made the club myself and I was the president of it and then I did the presidential duties”

This differs from the experiences of our student athletes because of the ability to act within a leadership role rather than possessing the title of such.

Research Question 4: Traits and/or skills learned through experiences in sports will have transferability during or after a sports/athletic career.

All participants acknowledge their use of skills and traits learned through athletic experience in sports being transferable to outside activities, for example, student athlete 3 states

“Yeah, personally, I think it is seamless. I couldn't be doing what I'm doing without the life of sport that I've had and all that it has taught me, the teamwork, dedication, just everything.”

Although student athlete 5 states,

“Yeah, I would say, for the first part of the question yes I have been able to transfer them into, into the real world and now like working, working a, you know, real job I guess. But I would say that the difficulties that come with that are different in the sense of, you know, as a, as a wrestler as an athlete, and a leadership role with athletics. I was very confident with the wrestling side of things I was very confident with the strength training side of things the school
that, you know, everything that includes. encompassed being a college athlete, I was very confident with. And I think moving on into the real world, it can be hard to have that same confidence with something like a new job where I think it'll develop over time, but being thrown into something so new, it can be hard to express that passion and that like love for leadership when you're in something that you're just not as comfortable with, because it's a new environment, a new role, you have new responsibilities, you’re working with new people.”

This statement shows the student athlete can transfer skills from athletics but experiences challenges doing so in other domains.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Within this research, I have found an advantage in the skill set and experiences provided by athletics to student athletes compared to non-athlete counterparts. Outside of athletics, it is important to have a fundamental leadership base in which one can continue to develop. As well future employers can find use of student athletes as leaders within their workforce. Students can stand to gain fundamental leadership traits and experiences by participating in athletics as they practice leadership throughout their college experience. Furthermore, the importance of leadership skills with transferability has been found to give growing leaders an edge when entering other domains with which they are unfamiliar, examples of these useful skills include problem solving, communication, adaptability, and strong work ethic. Athletics was shown to be a positive testing and growing ground for these skills that were later used in the workforce or other domains. Active participation and experience in leadership are key factors in cultivating the growth
of our future leaders, through this research of the realm of athletic experience and its influence on leadership we find key factors that highlight the importance of athletic experience on emerging and future leaders.

References


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.11.017.


https://doi.org/10.1007/s12551-021-00852-3


Appendix A:

FINAL APPROVAL FORM

The University of Southern Maine

Master of Arts in Leadership Studies Program

April 26, 2024

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Antoine Grace entitled Leadership Development Through Athletic Experience be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Leadership Studies Program.

_Elizabeth Goryunova_____________ Thesis Advisor (signature)

________ Megan Santiago __________ Second Reader (signature)

Accepted

________________________ (signature) Title

Required signatures as determined by program