

**Exploring the Influence of Student-Athlete Advisory Committee Participation on  
Leadership and Post-Graduate Career Development**

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### **Abstract**

The Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) is comprised of student-athletes that provide insight on their experiences, influencing policies that affect rules and regulations at the institutional, conference, and national level(s). SAAC participation allows student-athletes to transfer the skills learned on the playing field into a professional setting. These skills are a foundational component for athletes' character and moral development. Despite the proliferation of SAACs across the NCAA membership institutions, there is a dearth of empirical studies examining these committees and the outcomes they achieve. The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of SAAC participation on post-graduate career development. Using a phenomenological approach to research, semi-structured interviews and observations were conducted with eight former SAAC student-athletes to discover the impacts of their SAAC experience. Throughout the data, two major themes appeared, career preparation and future leadership preparation. Ultimately, the participants indicated that participating in SAAC translated into various leadership skills, helping this population prepare for post-graduation endeavors, and explore their self-concept beyond the athletic realm.

*Keywords:* career development, leadership development, programming, SAAC, student-athletes

## **Exploring the Influence of Student-Athlete Advisory Committee Participation on Leadership and Post-Graduate Career Development**

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (2020) asserted that “athletics programs are designed to be an integral part of the educational program” (p. 60). However, the reality is that the time constraints often placed on student-athletes limit their exposure to experiences necessary to positively adapt to a life beyond sport (Coffin et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important that athletic departments, athletic conferences, and the NCAA provide student-athletes with active learning experiences through involvement opportunities like a Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) (O’Brien et al., 2021; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). The NCAA (2020) mandated that its member institutions establish a SAAC but stop short of establishing specific guidelines, instead leaving the particulars of the committee to be determined by each individual college or university.

These committees are comprised of student-athletes that provide insight on their experiences, offer input on the rules, regulations, and policies that affect their lives on campus, and serve as the voice of other athletes at the campus, conference, and national level (NCAA, 2018, 2020). In doing so, SAAC places student-athletes in leadership positions, providing them with an opportunity to grow both personally and professionally and allows them to transfer the skills learned on the playing field into a professional setting (Bardick et al., 2009; Navarro et al., 2020). These skills are a foundational component for student-athletes’ character and moral development, and promote career readiness as they transition beyond their sport (Burton & Welty Peachey, 2013; Cruzvergara et al., 2018). Despite the proliferation of SAACs across the NCAA, there is a dearth of empirical studies examining these committees and the outcomes they achieve. The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of SAAC participation on post-

graduate career development. Specifically, this study strives to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did participating in SAAC prepare former athletes for their careers post-graduation?

RQ2: What leadership skills did former athletes gain from participating in SAAC?

RQ3: What was the overall experience like for athletes that participated in SAAC?

### **Theoretical Framework**

To examine student-athletes' experiences in SAAC and the post-graduation preparation their participation provides, this research relied on the implicit leadership theory (Vogel et al., 2021). Vogel et al. (2021) described implicit leadership theory as a tool researchers can use to investigate salient stakeholders (e.g., learners, experts, decision-makers, scholars, designers) beliefs, identities, or assumptions about essential elements of the leadership development process. The leadership development process is different from one individual to the next, and evidence is lacking regarding whether those with innate leadership qualities or those still developing their leadership skills benefit more from leadership programming (Day et al., 2004; Larsson et al., 2017).

Through the lens of implicit leadership theory, people have idealized perceptions of leaders, and will rate their own qualities against this personally set benchmark (Vogel et al., 2021). These perceptions include whether someone believes leaders are born or made (Vogel et al., 2021). Essentially, implicit leadership theory “addresses the implicit perceptions members within a group hold about skills, traits, and characteristics of a leader,” and in this case, the group is student-athletes (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021, p. 22).

In the context of SAAC, most athletes volunteer to join, but there are those who are assigned by their coaches or administrators or, in some cases, voted into the role by their peers. When they are empowered as potential leaders, student-athletes build confidence as they develop leadership skills (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Studying the impact of student-athletes' participation in a formal Leadership Academy, Rubin and Nwosu (2021) found that participants did not initially view themselves as leaders, but understood through their designated roles as leader, they met the expectations of having perceived leadership qualities commensurate with implicit leadership theory. Accordingly, athletes can both translate the skills they learn on the field and develop new leadership skills through their SAAC experience.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Athlete Leadership Development**

Leadership is typically modeled for athletes throughout their athletic careers through interactions with coaches and administrators as well as their peers who serve in formal leadership roles such as team captain (Rubin & Lough, 2015; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). However, these positions may be closely associated with athletic ability, which means those athletes' possessing the most robust leadership potential may be overlooked for these roles (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Further exacerbating this issue is the limited array of leadership opportunities available within athletic spaces for athletes to occupy outside of their respective teams (Coffin et al., 2021). In their study of first-year seminars for student-athletes, Grafnetterova et al. (2020) found that leadership and career planning skills were often part of the curriculum, but not all institutions offer these courses tailored to athletes, and if offered, not all athletes may be required to enroll in such courses. However, leadership may not be incorporated much for new student-athletes as the transition to college might be more of a focus for freshmen (Grafnetterova et al., 2020).

While such opportunities exist beyond athletics (e.g., work study, extracurricular involvement, internships), implicit and explicit expectations dictate that athletes allocate their extra time and energy to their sport (Rubin & Moses, 2017). This translates to an inability for athletes to pursue other opportunities, which, in turn, limits their exposure to experiences aimed at producing leadership skills and career readiness (Coffin et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2020). SAAC introduces a potential remedy for this situation as it provides athletes with an option to seek out leadership opportunities directly related to their athletic experience but separate from their physical abilities as an athlete (O'Brien et al., 2021). The problem is that these programs include only a small number of athletes, which consequently limits their potential to address the disparity of leadership opportunities in athletic spaces (Navarro et al., 2020). Further, there has been minimal scholarly work examining participants' experiences or the outcomes associated with SAAC.

### **Career Development**

Colleges and universities recognize the importance of career competency, particularly following the economic uncertainty from the Great Recession. As Cruzvergara et al. (2018) explained,

Since the recession of 2008, many colleges and universities have elevated their career services functions positioning them to lead career readiness—a concept that includes leadership competency development—across the institution, broadening the scope of responsibility, and increasing resources to ensure a focus on student success and ultimately, a proof of point of an institution's ROI. (pp. 27-28)

Student-athletes are a unique subset of the student population, and athletic departments have an obligation to provide programming to prepare them to adapt to a life beyond sport (Coffin et al.,

2021; Navarro et al., 2020; Springer & Dixon, 2021; Stokowski et al., 2019). Specifically, previous research has shown that athletes have low levels of career maturity (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Moiseichik et al., 2019). This is particularly true for Division I student-athletes who participate in sports such as football where the chances of cultivating a professional career are higher (Navarro & McCormick, 2017). Thus, while first-year programming (e.g., summer bridge, athlete freshman seminar) might focus more generally on personal enhancement to aid with students' transition into life as a student-athlete, programming in subsequent years should begin to address more specific growth areas that will assist athletes' transition out of sport, such as career development (Grafnetterova et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2020). By leveraging the unique features of athletic environments, athletic administrators can create programming that is accessible for athletes given the similarity of schedules between teams and allows them to engage with individuals that contend with similar challenges (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

### **Method**

As the contemporaneous study sought to explore the influence of SAAC participation on post-graduate career development, this study utilized a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is defined as the study and exploration of the lived experiences of people in a specified setting (Creswell, 2013; Laverly, 2003). Further, phenomenology enables people to describe their experience through their senses, with the dimension of an essence or essences of a shared experience amongst the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were utilized for this phenomenological inquiry. In phenomenology, semi-structured interviews guide the researcher in focusing on certain themes (Dittmore & Stokowski, 2019). Semi-structured interviews are exercised to obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

**Participants**

The participants represented six different conferences, and each participated in SAAC for at least four years. Eligibility criteria included athletic status (i.e., former student-athlete no more than five years removed from competition) and participation in SAAC at the conference or national level (i.e., SAAC President of an institution, held a conference SAAC position, held a national SAAC position). In total, eight former student-athlete SAAC members participated in this study, four participants were male and four were female. Seven of the participants had either completed ( $n = 4$ ), or are in the process of completing ( $n = 3$ ) an advanced degree (e.g., law, master’s). Two participants have begun careers in collegiate athletics, while another three are in other sport-related careers outside athletics. Tables 1 and 2 provide further insight into participants’ demographic information and involvement with SAAC. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to secure anonymity.

**Table 1**

*Student-Athlete Advisory Committee Demographic Information*

Participant Identification	Age	Sex	Race	Athletic Program	Conference of Institution	Undergraduate Major	Highest Degree
Saul	25	Male	Caucasian	Tennis	Conference USA	Sports Management	Master's
Jared	24	Male	Caucasian	Swimming	Southeastern	Political Science	Master's
Marisa	25	Female	Caucasian	Track and Field	Metro-Atlantic	Marketing/Digital Media	Bachelor's
Eron	24	Male	Caucasian	Baseball	Atlantic 10	Math/Computer Science	Bachelor's
Molly	24	Female	Caucasian	Gymnastics	Ivy League	Global/Public Health Sciences	Bachelor's
Etan	23	Male	Caucasian	Men's Basketball	Mid-American	Neuroscience	Bachelor's
Raegan	22	Female	Caucasian	Cross Country/Track & Field	Southeastern	Psychology	Bachelor's
Jocelyn	23	Female	Caucasian	Cross Country/Track & Field	Southeastern	Communications	Master's

**Table 2**

*Student-Athlete Advisory Committee Post-graduate and SAAC Information*



Participant Identification	Career Field	Current Occupation	Years in SAAC	Institutional	Conference	National
Saul	College Athletics	Asst. to Ath. Staff	4	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jared	Private Business	Professional Development	4	Yes	Yes	Yes
Marisa	College Athletics	Asst. Dir. Development	4	Yes	Yes	Yes
Eron	Law School	Student	4.5	Yes	Yes	Yes
Molly	Graduate School/Sport	Student/Sports Consulting	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
Etan	Graduate School	Grad. Asst. Law/Business	4	Yes	Yes	Yes
Raegan	Sport	Athletic Apparel Sales	4	Yes	Yes	-
Jocelyn	Corporate Mngt.	Corp. Mngt. Trainee	4	Yes	Yes	-

### Data Collection

The initial recruitment efforts came via convenience sampling. Convenience sampling involves selecting participants who are “easy to access and inexpensive to study” and is employed in many research studies (Suri, 2011, p. 71). However, contrary to Patton (2002), this was purposeful and strategic. The researcher reached out to a former colleague that was once the chair of SAAC. This former student-athlete and chair of NCAA Division I SAAC then reached out to recent graduates that were SAAC members within the last four years.

Using snowball sampling, participants in this study consisted of eight former student-athletes who were members of SAAC within the last four years (see Tables 1 & 2 above). Snowball sampling is specifically used when trying to reach a population that is hard to find, where the researcher identifies individuals who meet the criteria of the study and asks them to request others who also meet the criteria (Andrew et al., 2019). Per Dittmore and Stokowski (2019), snowball sampling is one of the two most used sampling types (along with convenience sampling) within sport management research.

Semi-structured interviews permitted the researcher to gain insight into information relating to a specific topic or theory and allowed for follow-up questions to be asked (Creswell, 2013; Dittmore & Stokowski, 2019). The research protocol consisted of 11 demographic questions and 11 questions related to the research questions. All participants agreed to be audio

recorded via Zoom. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the conversation and analyzed the data for meaning and themes.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were coded using a two-step process (Saldaña, 2009). During the first stage of coding, researchers considered the setting (attribute coding), research question (descriptive coding), and the words and phrases (structural coding, *in vivo* coding) used by participants (Saldaña, 2009). In the second stage, researchers concentrated the coding by sorting, synthesizing, and conceptualizing the data into the most frequently appearing codes, a process known as developing themes (Saldaña, 2009). To ensure trustworthiness of analysis, the researcher accounted for potential bias and utilized bracketing interviews to seek complete transparency (Dittmore & Stokowski, 2019). Member checking took place through participant e-mails. Participants were sent copies of their interview transcript to ensure their words were precisely reproduced.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of SAAC participation on post-graduate career development. The first research question asked, “How did participating in SAAC prepare former athletes for their careers post-graduation?” The second question asked, “What leadership skills did former athletes gain from participating in SAAC?” The final question asked, “What was the overall experience like for athletes that participated in SAAC?” Throughout the data, two major themes appeared: career preparation and future leadership preparation. Within the theme of career preparation, there are three subthemes: time management, teamwork beyond sport, and networking. Within the theme of future leadership preparation, the subthemes are confidence and empowerment. These findings address all three research questions.

## **Career Preparation**

### ***Time Management***

When asked to describe the skills they learned to assist their life beyond sport and how SAAC prepared them for their careers, 62.5% of participants referenced time management. All athletes have demands on their time such as classes, practices, competitions, and required study sessions, but those participating in SAAC had additional responsibilities that further limited the amount of time they could devote to their life outside of academics and athletics. Jocelyn recognized this when she noted that athletes engaged in “planning, organizing, you know, juggling a little more on top of the student-athlete life, which is always impressive.” Marisa echoed this sentiment and felt that others might also discuss their ability to manage their time: “You are probably going to get this from everybody, but our time management skills were impeccable; to be able to master all of the things that we were doing.” These experiences show that these former SAAC leaders believed they could develop leadership skills rather than be innately leaders from birth (Vogel et al., 2021).

One athlete attributed experiences with SAAC to their continued success in other post-graduate endeavors. For example, Eron noted that “without SAAC, I wouldn’t have had as much of a time crunch and I wouldn’t have had to spread my time amongst so many different things, and so that really helped me prepare for juggling different projects here in my post-graduate life.” Others discussed the time needed to prepare for meetings with high-level athletic administrators. Etan explained:

Going into meetings with the Men’s Basketball Oversight Committee, the Division I Council Individual, and Board of Directors it was important to know

what you're presenting, to know where your team was, and to articulate that accurately, the process that it requires.

Given the stature of the administrators and the volume of the meetings that participants attended, Jared echoed this sentiment, "There is time management, task prioritization, because it was time consuming. We had tons of meetings and you have to be prepared in-between those meetings." Time management is one skill the participants mastered, and teamwork is another that was a significant part of their experience.

### *Teamwork beyond Sport*

Teamwork beyond sport was another salient theme that emerged throughout the interviews. Many of the participants discussed understanding their dynamic within the SAAC team and how their experiences on SAAC differed from those on their respective athletic teams. Saul described learning to be a follower:

I've been propped up in previous years for my leadership, whether it be on a team, whether it be on SAAC, my friend group, whatever it might be. Then you get there and everyone is in the same boat...there's no really, ducks out of the line at the NCAA level...you have to learn how to follow, otherwise any group is not going to get anything done.

Similarly, Marisa and Eton both noted their experiences with learning how they fit into their new roles in SAAC. Marisa noted that "you get really humbled to be in those rooms (with Vice Presidents of Athletic Departments), then to be able to make real, authentic decisions with these people." Implicit leadership theory suggests that there can be perception dissonance when there may not be congruence with the leader/follower dynamic (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Hence, as these former SAAC leaders took on leadership roles but then had to adjust to working with other

leaders, they may have struggled to fit into leadership roles while deferring to the power of athletic administrators' leadership roles. Eton, a former baseball player, described learning to play a different role within SAAC: "SAAC forced me to engage in kind-of intellectual collaboration. At SAAC, not only are you the player, but also the coach." These quotes demonstrate how the participants developed as leaders. They accepted the opportunity to step into leadership roles as they shaped perceptions of them, thus exhibiting outcomes of Implicit Leadership Theory.

Other participants described the importance of balancing their own strengths with the strengths of others on SAAC. For example, Jocelyn felt that "things are sometimes uncomfortable. I learned that was a part of life and part of working with people, you have to get to know people you are working with, learn how they operate." Jared further expanded on this idea:

It's simple, I guess, I've always found myself in leadership positions, right?

Where you lead a team, lead a project, but when you're surrounded by kids who are smarter than you, like for me, I had to learn how to delegate and how to be okay with taking a backseat and I've found that it's very important in the workplace because you might have it all figured out at some level, or in some circumstances, some environment, but there's going to be times where there's people who know more than you and I often found myself in that position when I was with Division I SAAC.

While, in theory, this practice is achievable, Raegan professed that they sometimes struggled with "being hands off and letting other people do things." This challenge connects with how

leaders may be perceived by Raegan, as they may view taking charge as leadership rather than delegation (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021; Vogel et al., 2021).

### *Networking*

Another theme that emerged from the data was the ability of SAAC to facilitate connections between athletes and administrators that, otherwise, may have never met.

Jocelyn athlete remarked, “That kind of networking, you never know when you will run into someone again, and if you ever need something from someone that you trust, I would definitely reach out to some of those SAAC leaders.” This became even more evident as athletes engaged with SAACs at the conference or national level. “At the national level, I think that was more of a networking piece than anything,” Saul explained, “it’s a friends-for-life type of connection and relationship.”

Molly reinforced this idea, acknowledging that even though she did not maintain constant communication with those she had met through SAAC, she knew that if she traveled to a city where a SAAC affiliate lived, she would make the effort to reach out and reconnect with them. Jared also recognized the potential for other members of SAAC “to be lifelong colleagues.” The strength of these relationships and the speed at which they occurred is likely attributable to commonality that exists between participants’ shared experiences. As Rubin and Nwosu (2021) found in their study, athletes were shocked to learn that other teams faced the same challenges that theirs did, thus strengthening their bond through a formal leadership development opportunity. Marisa reflected on this when she noted that “you only met those people a couple of times and you’re like, what is in the air? What are they feeding us? Because, like, we’re instantly connected to one another.”

### **Leadership Development**

### *Confidence*

Throughout the interviews, it was evident through observation that SAAC participants spoke with confidence and carried themselves in a professional manner. Seventy five percent of the former SAAC members spoke on the confidence that participating in SAAC gave them as they embarked on their post-graduate journeys. Raegan alluded to the growth that a student is subject to in college:

The largest thing I've learned through my involvement in SAAC...is honestly, a lot of confidence...entering college you are trying to figure it out...trying to figure out who they are, but SAAC definitely gave me the chance to not only lead others, but to look within myself and develop skills.

Likewise, Eron noted that “self-confidence was big” when dealing with administrators and school presidents and described how that confidence had translated to his ability to speak with the president of the law firm where he works. For Marisa, SAAC allowed her to gain confidence and test her boundaries: “the biggest one for me personally was public speaking, getting myself out there, and putting myself out of my comfort zone.” These experiences echoed that of the Leadership Academy participants in Rubin and Nwosu’s (2021) study.

Others indicated that their participation in SAAC bestowed confidence to find their voice, challenge the status quo, and explore their self-concept beyond sport. For Etan, this materialized through “understanding that, not just accepting things for the way they are, and realizing you have the ability to change those things.” Marisa shared a similar sentiment, “SAAC helped me find my voice and then helped me use my voice to create change...That’s the real world and you have to be able to fight for yourself.” Jared described a different type of confidence that emanated from his ability to explore who he was outside of his athletic identity. He explained

that SAAC gave him “an identity beyond sport” that he could explore and build upon following the completion of his athletic career.

### *Empowerment*

Many athletes in this study described feeling empowered through their work with SAAC. Empowerment is described as the participants taking control over their lives (Page & Czuba, 1999). As Molly aptly mentioned, “Learning how to inspire others through your leadership...means empowering other people to feel confident to use their voice as well.” For Raegan, empowerment manifested from “letting other people do things” and the ability to trust that others would follow through on their responsibilities. Eron, in contrast, felt empowered by “the ability to take a project and run with it.”

Others felt empowered through their interactions with their peers. Saul explained that “when you are surrounded by 31 other leaders...everyone wants to make everyone better and everyone wants to see everyone succeed.” Etan described a similar attitude:

Raising the voices of the quieter people in the group, I found that the people who weren't as willing to share off the rip but had a lot of insight to share. When requested specifically, making sure that they're comfortable with being requested specifically, but essentially understanding everybody's different, and some people need to be asked and that some people don't need to be asked.

Like in Etan's narrative, participants in the Leadership Academy in Rubin and Nwosu's (2021) study also experienced engagement with athletes from different sports and who had varying levels of extraversion and introversion. The opportunity for athletes to interact across sports and personality types was significantly impactful (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021).



### Discussion

The athletic demands placed on athletes (e.g., practices, meetings, competitions) in addition to a full course load give rise to time scarcity and limits the opportunities for these students to seek extracurricular involvement beyond their sport (Navarro et al., 2020; Rubin & Moses, 2017). Evidence from this study suggests that SAACs offer a viable option for athletic departments to consider that provide opportunities for athletes to invest in their leadership skills and post-graduation career readiness. First and foremost, SAACs provide convenience for athletes because they are housed in athletic departments and allow athletes to translate and build on their on-field experiences in an off-field context. Additionally, SAAC members can quickly build comradery with their peers given their shared experiences (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Finally, participants in this study positively reported their experiences with SAAC suggesting that participation is sustainable over multiple years once athletes undergo the initial matriculation process. Sustainability is important given the assertion by Navarro et al. (2020) that athletes' career development programming should begin earlier in their enrollment rather than right before they exhaust eligibility or near graduation.

Combined, these factors also provide a foundation that allows athletes to build confidence in their leadership ability and network with athletes and administrators they might not have interacted with otherwise (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Moreover, interactions with peers and administrators allowed athletes to feel empowered as they were able to learn from one another and find their voice to advocate for themselves and the greater athletic community. This is an important observation given that leadership roles in athletic spaces are typically linked to an individual's athletic ability. With SAAC, athletes can exercise their ability to lead in a setting that is directly linked to their athletic identity but does not require them to be a top physical

performer. This provides two important opportunities. First, participating in SAAC allows athletes to begin reflecting on their self-concept beyond that of athlete, which can then help with their transition out of sport and post-graduation (Navarro et al., 2020). Further, researchers have demonstrated the positive outcomes associated with athletes' identity accumulation (Anderson & Dixon, 2019). As athletes accrue identities beyond their athletic identity (e.g., leader), they are likelier to experience a greater sense of well-being and positive psychological outcomes. Second, SAAC participation offers a pathway for athletes to transfer their on-field leadership skills to off-field leadership opportunities and, eventually, to their post-graduate career. Given the time scarcity many athletes face, opportunities to develop and apply transferable skills are limited (Chalfin et al., 2015). Beyond the obvious career readiness benefits, Coffin et al. (2021) demonstrated that transferable skills also yielded positive effects in other areas of athletes' experience (e.g., athletics, classroom, community).

### **Implications**

An important consideration for athletic administrators is generating awareness of SAAC and its associated responsibilities and benefits. Administrators should make a concerted effort to educate athletes about SAAC as early as their freshman year or, possibly, prior to their arrival on campus. It was evident from our conversations with athletes that they did not completely understand the leadership development that would receive as a member of SAAC or the impact that involvement could have on their future careers. Thus, administrators should consider informing coaches, athletic academic staff, and athletic administrators at every level of the importance of SAAC and of the potential outcomes associated with participation. Additionally, administrators can leverage current SAAC members by providing them opportunities to furnish testimonials about their experience and what they have learned through their experience.

Equally important is for administrators to acknowledge the inherent limitations of SAAC. As great as SAAC is for providing athletes with an opportunity to develop leadership skills and prepare for life beyond graduation, the fact remains that there are constraints concerning the number of athletes that can participate at any given time. Thus, administrators should inventory other viable involvement options around campus and in the local community that encourage the cumulation of similar outcomes while also accounting for the necessary allowances (e.g., time) that would allow athletes to fully capitalize on these opportunities, such as developing a Leadership Academy (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021) or engaging athletes with on-campus undergraduate research opportunities (Rubin et al., 2020).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are three limitations to address with this study. First, given the use of convenience sampling methods, findings from this study are not transferable to all SAAC members, as they shared lived experiences of only eight participants. Second, the athletes in this sample lacked racial diversity, which may have provided a perspective that was common only to the experience of the Caucasian athlete on SAAC. They also were all former SAAC members; thus, the findings do represent current athletes serving on SAACs. There was also a lack of triangulation as other items (e.g., journals, documents during participation) were not collected from participants to add dimension to the data and analysis. Finally, as another potential limitation of convenience sampling, the participants in this study were primarily from what are commonly referred to in the literature as non-revenue sports.

These limitations provide avenues for potential studies exploring the representation across SAAC members, including athletes currently serving on SAACs. Another opportunity for future research includes measuring awareness of the recruitment process and participation

benefits associated with SAAC among both incoming and rising freshmen student-athletes. Finally, researchers should consider quantifying the impact of SAAC involvement to both compare the impact of participation in SAAC with other opportunities on campus and to identify possible correlations between SAAC membership and on-field production.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, athletes expressed positive attitudes toward their participation in SAAC. Saul summed up his experience by characterizing it as “fantastic.” Some of the participants described their initial motivations for joining SAAC through the opportunities it presented like flights to conferences, free meals at meetings, and meeting new people. As athletes began their tenure with SAAC, however, they felt that it materialized into much more than the tangible perks associated with their participation. Participants described many intangible benefits like making lifelong connections, representing both their teams and teammates, and advocating their belief that all athletes should be willing to participate in SAAC. Our study found that SAAC participation had a significant influence on student-athletes’ career development, fostered leadership skill development, and provided a positive experience reserved for this elite group of student-athlete leaders.

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