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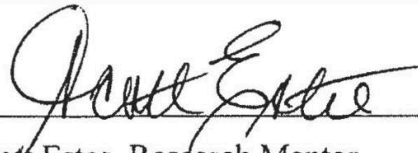
CREATING A CULTURE OF CAREER PREPAREDNESS FOR FIRST-GENERATION
STUDENT-ATHLETES IN A POST SECONDARY ACADEMIC INSTITUTION

A Scholarly Research Project

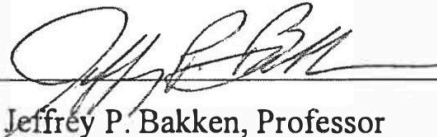
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:



Dr. Scott Estes, Research Mentor



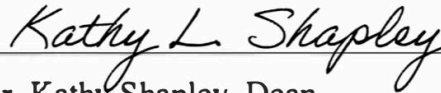
Dr. Jeffrey P. Bakken, Professor



Dr. Jana Hunzicker, Program Director



Dr. Anna Viviani, Department Chair



Dr. Kathy Shapley, Dean

Chelsea N. Minor

Bradley University

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of eight weeks, a mixed method action based research study was conducted to analyze what effect a career portfolio development program had on the career preparedness of six first-generation student-athletes at a post-secondary academic institution. This study was quantitative in nature through the collection of retention rates, grade point averages, and student demographics from those in the focus group. The qualitative data was from structured surveys, and semi-structured interviews as students in the focus group completed the tenets of the career-preparedness portfolio such as creating a resume, writing a cover letter, and exercising interview techniques. This study aimed to analyze the ways in which career services in higher education can best serve its student population and found that first-generation student athletes were receptive to and benefitted from a structured program where they had means to develop their social cognitive competencies and career preparedness. Participants responded positively to the program and felt that it lent them an opportunity to be more prepared to pursue career exploration within their respective fields. Additional tenets of the portfolio program could include mentoring programs, tailored career development, and job search strategies to an expand student skill base in being prepared for their post-graduate employment.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to FJ and our sweet girls. Your unwavering support made each step achievable and your encouragement made me see potential in myself I had never imagined. Most of all, your love gave this journey purpose and me a great sense of pride. Thank you for being my inspiration, strength, and motivation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to give a special thank you to my advisor at Bradley, Dr. Scott Estes, and my mentor at Rockford University, Dr. Randy Worden. Your guidance, wisdom, encouragement, and most of all, patience, helped me to grow both academically and personally. I am deeply grateful for you both for all that you have done for me throughout this journey.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The value of receiving a well-rounded post-secondary education is often measured by a student's success in their career pursuit after graduation. However, students often lack the core competencies it takes to be considered career-ready and confident to enter the workforce. Even when receiving a comprehensive liberal arts education with small classes and a myriad of campus resources, students still can struggle to develop their social cognitive theory and feel ill-prepared to pursue a career in their field of interest. This issue is widespread in first-generation student-athletes as their time commitments and educational background sometimes work against being career-savvy.

In January 2022, the office of career development began working with the head football coach on composing a leadership development portfolio program for the football team at Rockton University. Traditionally, Rockton football student-athletes have been primarily first-generation students and from low-income households. The football team had the lowest average grade point average of all athletic teams at the university. In part, some of this stemmed from first-generation students transitioning to campus that were often unaware of the resources offered or did not know the services were applicable to them. Creating the leadership development portfolio program promoted student-athletes utilizing campus resources such as career services and the Center for Learning Strategies, attending career readiness events, and asking them to create professional documents that can be useful when applying to jobs, internships, or graduate school.

For each chapter of the leadership portfolio, a theme or concept was applied to accentuate the leadership or professional skill being strengthened. Those concepts were, first, the fundamentals of leadership and communication; then, organizational skills and time management; next, the significance of strong leadership; and finally, the practical application of leadership skills and networking. Using those tenants as cornerstones for each component of the leadership portfolio, student-athletes were asked to complete a succession of tasks in which they demonstrated leadership, professionalism, and competency in their content area. Throughout their four years at this liberal arts institution, students are given opportunities to develop those skills and are expected to demonstrate the ways in which they have become proficient in those areas.

The success of this program within the football team led to the implementation of the leadership portfolio program in men's soccer for the spring semester. For the fall 2022 semester, women's soccer, cross country, and Esports will also implement the leadership portfolio program for their teams. The program is managed by the respective coaches and the director of career development via the learning management system, Canvas, where students upload their submissions and can see announcements of campus activities, opportunities, and upcoming deadlines. The Office of Career Development monitors submissions and gives feedback to students. The university coaches use this program to incentivize recruits, maintain high expectations for student-athletes, and communicate campus resources. Such success was seen in the football team's participation that after the first semester of implementation, the football team's GPA increased significantly.

By introducing the leadership development portfolio as a full-year program and to more students, particularly first-generation student-athletes, it is the hope of this researcher to see

better first-year retention rates, higher student grade point averages, and better utilization of career development resources, thus leading to adequate career preparation.

Research Problem

While adjusting to campus life, first-generation student-athletes often face a myriad of time commitments. The demands on their schedules leave little time for career development and academic reflection, leaving them inadequately prepared for entering the job market. In particular, first-generation student-athletes may struggle with identifying and utilizing campus resources such as resume building or internship placements, given their time constraints and lack of awareness of the resources available to them.

Additionally, student-athletes may choose majors more conducive to their schedules, eligibility, and previously understood content knowledge. In a study conducted in 2014, Ferrera claims that “while student-athletes in these programs may receive a degree, the quality and applicability of the degree can sometimes be called into question and may leave the student-athlete in an unfortunate situation following graduation when they find it very difficult to find employment” (Ferrera, 2014, p. 2). Student-athletes often lack the mentorship or guidance necessary to prepare for their careers adequately. Using career services on campus can help facilitate meaningful career counseling discussions and guide students into making more intentional choices about their majors. The use of a professional portfolio program is a method that gives students discipline and clarity on what it takes to make successful career preparedness choices.

Background Information/Context

Often, first-generation student-athletes face many challenges when beginning their postsecondary academic career. Many first-generation students have never been in a collegiate

setting and have little understanding of the processes, nuances, and expectations that come with it. Their exposure to campus life is often limited before them attending college themselves.

When asked what pressures weigh on their minds, Warner found this from the focus group, "as a whole, first-generation college student-athletes are primarily concerned with (1) finding a place within their newfound community; (2) defining their career goals in preparation for life after college; and (3) negotiating their dual student and athlete identities, which are often at odds with one another" (Warner, 2016, p. 21). Student-athletes who are also the first in their family to go to college may struggle with a dichotomy in their personal lives. Their identities are caught between being a member of their family and fitting into that setting, but also finding a sense of belonging in their campus community. Being cognizant of the primary concerns of first-generation student-athletes is pivotal to helping them align their time on campus to successful career preparation.

When asked what strategies or exercises make student-athletes feel most supported, results from a study conducted by Scarcella (2018) concluded that while the comfort and identity could be found in being on a team was immensely helpful to their academic success, student-athletes overall felt that the most valuable support came from "aid in their academic experiences as reflected in the themes of support from coaches and positive relationships with academic advisors" (p. 86). In summary, having a high level of engagement and communication with academic advisors and coaches made participants feel more supported and structured, academically speaking. Additionally, authors Berg, Brennan, and Warner (2019) examined how to advance student-athlete development through social support and determined the four emerging themes that student-athletes felt supported them most were openness and honesty, equal treatment, intentional programming, and informal interaction (p. 91). A vital component of this is

the duality of both intentional programming and informal interaction. Student-athletes benefit from having both the practice and the game in their sports, and the same can be applied to their academics and career readiness. It also helps the student feel a sense of belonging when those informal interactions are organic and frequent. It creates a sense of caring and investment in the relationship beyond the scope of meeting a deadline or expectation from intentional programming.

Challenges and Obstacles

The idea that retention and academic success can be hinged upon career readiness alone is short-sighted. College experiences are unique to each student, and there is an entire realm of factors beyond the scope of a staff member's control that play into whether a student stays with the program. One of the biggest challenges many students face is that first-generation students are 50% more likely to drop out than those whose parents graduated from college (Engle, 2007).

Time constraints can also be a challenge when planning this study. Ideally, the professional portfolio would be developed over the students' enrollment at the institution; however, for the purposes of this study, the portfolio's development and data collection will be limited to one semester.

Participation is voluntary, and participants may drop out at any point. The validity of student answers may also be subject to scrutiny, given participants may fail to recall pertinent information or answer entirely honestly.

Success Stories and Solutions

The initial implementation of the leadership development portfolio program has thus far increased the overall GPA of the football team and the number of student appointments scheduled with career development. Student-athletes have been using the Office of Career

Development resources more frequently, demonstrating their knowledge of campus resources has improved. Anecdotally, students have shared their triumphs in achieving career preparedness goals and feeling an overall sense of preparation not previously felt in their education. Moving forward, the purpose of this study will be to quantitatively measure and qualitatively assess the correlation between the leadership development portfolio and overall student career preparedness.

Research Purpose and Questions

1. What academic supports can be implemented to serve first-generation student-athletes to ensure career preparedness and academic success?
2. What gaps do first-generation student-athletes experience in preparing for a career after their postsecondary degree completion?
3. What measures can be taken to improve competency in social cognitive theory for first-generation student-athletes?

Research Design and Framework

The professional portfolio program is open to all Rockton University students and is required for some sports teams on campus. The director of career development will instruct the students on the tenants of the leadership portfolio, employ high-impact practices such as resume workshops, career fairs, and forums, and monitor their submissions and participation. After each semester of completing the leadership portfolio, participants who met the requirements of being an athlete and a first-generation student will be invited to take a series of surveys assessing the usefulness and alignment with their career goals. In conjunction with the qualitative data collected, qualitative data such as student grade point averages will also be collected.

Definitions and Assumptions

1. Social Cognitive Theory - "How career and academic interests mature, how career choices are developed, and how these choices are turned into action. This is accomplished through a focus on three primary tenets: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals" (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004, p. 93).
2. Career Preparedness - "The attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace" (Akos, Leonard, Bunko, 2021, p. 79).
3. Self-Efficacy - "People's beliefs about their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Lent, 2002, p. 287).
4. High Impact Practices - "enriching educational experiences that facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and other students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback" (Miller, 2019, p. 8).
5. Professional Portfolio - "A collection of artifacts and examples of what students know and can do using a variety of media to document learning, competencies, and reflections" (Blackley, Bennett, Sheffield, 2017, p. 4).

Significance of the Study

First-generation student-athletes have a higher retention and graduation rate than non-athlete first-generation students but do not traditionally have a high level of career preparedness. Career services' implementation of high-impact practices, such as a professional portfolio in the student-athlete curriculum, will better prepare students for their post-graduation careers. Additionally, while the leadership portfolio is unique to the university where the study is

conducted, similar tenets can be mimicked elsewhere to fill gaps in first-generation student-athletes career development.

Chapter Summary

Seeking a post-secondary degree is no easy task; students should feel a sense of accomplishment and preparedness when they graduate. However, without appropriate professionalism developed and career preparedness in place, many can be left feeling that their time at university was underutilized. This researcher intends to examine and assess what learning strategies and academic supports can be put in place to alleviate these issues. In this chapter, the research purpose, questions, and problem have been addressed.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

First-generation student-athletes face many major adjustments when beginning their post-secondary academic career as they balance their academic schedules, practice and game commitments, as well as career preparation. Becoming a competent, competitive job seeker often takes the backseat to the more pressing present issues, such as assimilating to campus life and adjusting to a higher level of expectations overall. Many first-generation student-athletes may struggle to find their footing as they assess their dual identities and begin the education that will frame the success of their careers (Park, 2013). Colleges and universities nationwide are already evaluating how to serve first-generation students better and increase retention rates. Still, career preparedness should not be overlooked as it is an imperative necessity as well.

Choosing a major that establishes a sense of purpose and drive is naturally challenging for many students, but for first-generation student-athletes, that may ring true even more so. First-generation student-athletes must not only navigate the significant adjustments that come with beginning college but must also begin to prepare for the major adjustments of post-college life as they embark upon their careers. In this sense, career preparedness is imperative to maximizing their time on campus and becoming fully adept in the workplace. Seeking assistance from the career development office to prepare a professional portfolio and develop professional skills sets graduates apart as they begin their search in this highly competitive job market.

First-Generation College Students

Colleges and universities are meant to be a space where learners from all walks of life can obtain an education that is meant to increase career opportunities and the ability to create the

success they desire. However, many students from first-generation households struggle with the dichotomy of the life they live and the life they are working towards. First-generation students, or students with parents or guardians who did not attend college or earned a post-secondary degree, are often a demographic colleges and universities struggle to recruit and retain. In fact, first-generation students are 50% more likely to drop out than those whose parents graduated from college (Engle, 2007, p. 27). First-generation students are more likely to come from disadvantaged or low-income households and a minority background (Hébert, 2018). This often impacts not only their ability to seek post-secondary education but also their ability to be successful once they are enrolled. These issues can arise from inadequate primary and secondary education, financial strain, family support, and familial obligations. When coupled with the rigor of the academic program they are pursuing, it often proves to be too much for many students. Not only that, but first-generation students are also more likely to work full-time jobs while attending and commuting to campus, both of which can be major influencing factors toward a student's success (Adams & McBrayer, 2020) Overall, the systematic and inherent challenges that many first-generation learners face seem to make up a deck of cards stacked against them before even beginning college. Universities, colleges, and federally funded programs are making efforts to alleviate what they can, but being cognizant of students' cultural differences is also essential.

Assimilating to college campus culture can be difficult for first-generation students because its makeup is one they have likely not encountered thus far. In part, students are expected to have a predetermined understanding of the academic language needed for complex processes like registering for classes, declaring a major, and having a strong sense of financial literacy for financial aid. Parents of first-generation students are often less able to offer insight

into the inner workings of post-secondary education (Redford et al., 2017). Families where several generations have had the opportunity to complete a secondary degree may provide more first-hand knowledge about crucial information needed to navigate college. College-educated parents will also be more likely to encourage their children to attend a 4-year university and see the return on investment that is probable to come with a degree (Lee et al., 2004). Not only that, but there are also many social and cultural capital inequities that many first-generation students face. Social capital is defined as "networks together with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (p. 5). Cultural capital is a dominant culture's skillset, shared knowledge, and behaviors. For higher education, the social and cultural capital has been established by white, middle-class families. A qualitative study by LeBouf and Dworkin (2021) showed that the more social and cultural capital a student possesses before college, the more likely they will be to see success in their academic careers. Without a sense of belonging or inclusion, many first-generation students may feel that their efforts to assimilate into the higher education culture are too difficult.

When researching how best to support first-generation students, one must be mindful of what external influences and internal conflicts students often face. Adams and McBrayer's (2020) prevailing research question is: how do first-generation students of color adjust to living and studying at a predominantly white college? Through a phenomenology-based qualitative research method, the researchers were afforded "the opportunity to be in the natural setting of the institution in which the students were enrolled and to hear first-hand from the students their recollection of their experiences as a first-generation college student of color at a PWI" (Adams & McBrayer, 2020, p. 737). After the study concluded, four emergent themes were identified. "A college degree is a means to a better lifestyle; money always matters; a heightened sense of

safety concerns exists; and there is a desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment" (Adams & McBrayer, 2020, p. 741). With that, the researchers concluded that, for the most part, the study participants were generally happy with their collegiate experience and grateful for the opportunities it afforded, but not without some consequences. Students noted instances of racism, bias, and inadvertent segregation. To eliminate these hindrances, universities must strive to be proactive rather than reactive to issues regarding students feeling unsafe and aim to have DEI initiatives at the forefront of their mission for student success. This is just one of the areas that colleges and universities must immediately address to support the retention of first-generation college students further.

Although financial and academic support is integral to a first-generation student's success, those efforts can be without consequence if there are no emotional or psychological resources available as well. One support, in particular, is the institution creating a sense of belonging and a "belief that people with backgrounds like theirs deserve to attend college and can thrive there" (Oyserman & Destin, 2010, p. 4). When surveyed, researchers found that 44.5% of participants stated that their colleges did not support them as first-generation students (Rubio et al., 2017). Leaving these insecurities and uncertainties to the students to traverse while assimilating into campus life can prove too much for many. When implemented, a peer mentoring program for first-generation students yielded powerful results. Mentors helped develop hard skills such as applying for scholarships and built relationships founded on respect, trust, and empathy (Plaskett et al., 2018). The acute sense of belonging and inclusion is vital because first-generation students typically do not see as much encouragement to attend college as those with at least one parent achieve a degree (Irlbeck et al., 2014).

Familial reception and perspective on return on investment can be daunting to a learner weighing their options when pursuing a four-year degree. Many students depend on their immediate families for not only tangible resources such as housing and financial support but also assurance in an emotional capacity. While many learners seek a post-secondary education to gain independence from their families, first-generation students often pursue a college degree with interdependent motives. Covarrubias et al. (2019) identified through a qualitative study that first-generation students were more likely to view a post-secondary degree as a means of contributing to their family rather than set themselves as independent from their family. Stephens et al. (2012) propose the theory that first-generation students and colleges or universities are culturally mismatched. Colleges and Universities often put a distinct emphasis on independence, whereas working-class families often have a culture of interdependence and community in that sense. In this study, the comfortability of this mismatched culture is examined and found to be a contributing factor to first-generation attrition in many higher education campuses (Stephens et al., 2012).

About one-third of the student population at colleges and universities is comprised of first-generation students (*RTI International*). However, first-generation students are 71% more likely to drop out by the end of their second year than that of a student who had at least one parent acquire a post-secondary degree (Pratt et al., 2019). Attrition from first-generation students can be due to a multitude of factors, some of which include lack of academic or social support, financial strain, inequitable resources, or unfamiliar cultural practices and norms on campus that misalign with their own. Alone, any of these can prove to be too much to overcome, but many first-generation students face multiple complications when working towards achieving their degree. Pratt et al. (2019) found that the likelihood of first-generation student attrition can

be attributed to financial security, academic competence, and social belongingness. Being comfortable or confident that the economic burden placed upon stakeholders will pay off later once a degree has been achieved is another instance of the gap in cultural capital for many.

Often, first-generation students rely on student loans to make pursuing an education feasible. For many students from low-income, first-generation, or minority households, federal loans serve as one of the only aids for the opportunity to attend a post-secondary institution. Without financial assistance, college would be impossible for many to afford. However, many students do not possess the financial literacy needed to comprehend the implications of accepting federal loans and thus do not perceive their debt as a means to potential earning post-degree (Markle, 2019). Of the 429 students surveyed, over half reported the loans they took out as a significant source of anxiety or concern, with many also showing little understanding of financial literacy (Markle, 2019). Education is supposed to be an opportunity to elevate one's position and economic status, but instead, it is causing many to be held back. The burden of taking out massive amounts of financial aid in the form of federal loans at such a young age can deter many from continuing their education after receiving their high school diploma.

Student-Athletes

Many factors play into a student's choice of college, and an athlete has an added measure of decision-making when they decide to continue playing after high school. Many families evaluate scholarships, eligibility, athletic conference, and competitiveness as considerations, but how many are looking past the immediate future and looking at career readiness, first-destination surveys, and job preparedness? Results from Czekanski and Barnhill's (2015) study showed that the most influential factors in student-athletes choosing a college were the location of the school, the quality of the athletic facilities or fields, and feeling comfortable on the team. However, the

availability of specific academic majors and the academic reputation of the school ranked 7th and 18th, respectively (Czekanski & Barnhill, 2015). Student-athletes are failing to make decisions on their academic pursuits with delayed gratification of career preparedness and potential job security. Instead, their priorities initially gravitate towards their immediate potential success athletically. Because student-athletes are inclined to make their sport more of a priority and decision-making influence, they may find themselves underprepared academically or career-wise post-graduation. Often, recruiters, coaches, and even players may contact students before they even apply. Because of this, student-athletes are often hyperfocused on their post-secondary academic career through the lens of athletics and not on career preparedness or academics (Nixon et al., 2021). There is also the distinction of priorities based on the level the student is considering playing. Division I athletes favored coaching and competitiveness as the most significant factors. In contrast, Division II was most inclined to pick a college or university based on financial aid and Division III on academics (Nixon et al., 2021). This is partly because Division III athletes seldom pursue a career in athletics post-graduation or because Division III colleges and universities cannot give athletic scholarships. Among the many influences that factor into choosing a college, student-athletes place little emphasis on career preparation or employability, as indicated by the literature reviewed.

The independence and autonomy that come with receiving a college education are often something students experience for the first time during their freshmen year. With less strict course schedules and demands on how a day is spent, many students must learn how to navigate their newfound freedom quickly. However, time management and prioritizing obligations can be more complex if a student is involved with an athletic team on campus. They are balancing the

higher level of academic rigor and more rigid demands on their schedules due to practices, traveling, and additional training.

Scarcella's (2016) study aimed to identify the struggles and solutions that first-generation student-athletes face when tasked with playing a Division III sport and completing a post-secondary degree. Through a qualitative approach, the author conducted a series of interviews with first-generation student-athletes using questions focusing on the students' "social, academic, and athletic experiences [on campus]" (p. 38). The author notes that the interviews were intentionally held in an informal setting where students could participate in their interviews with a more conversational feel about what was on their minds. The results concluded that while the comfort and identity could be found in being on a team was immensely helpful to their academic success, student-athletes overall felt that the most valuable support came from "aid in their academic experiences as reflected in the themes of support from coaches and positive relationships with academic advisors" (Scarcella, 2016, p. 86). In summary, high engagement and communication with academic advisors and coaches made participants feel more academically supported and structured.

Structure through communication and positive mentoring can help students feel the sense of belonging, inclusion, and purpose needed to be successful on campus. Examining how to execute social and academic support with student gaps or needs is also imperative. Berg and Warner (2019) address their research questions of what social supports and best practices are implemented by colleges to develop a sense of community for students with a mixed method research approach, using a Likert scale survey and open-ended response questions. Based on the participants' responses, the authors determined four emerging themes that student-athletes felt

supported them most: openness and honesty, equal treatment, intentional programming, and informal interaction.

Student-athlete career development and career counseling are imperative for success post-graduation, yet it can be difficult for many students to prioritize or navigate independently. Student support resources such as the university's career services department must be accessible early and often in a student's academic career. Early is particularly important as student-athletes can lean towards choosing a career path or major based on their schedules, priorities, and interests at the time and not necessarily on market trends, job security, or purpose. Student-athletes can tend to choose "sport-friendly" majors (Ferrera, 2014). This can be attributed to a host of factors, making NCAA eligibility easier to acquire and maintain, a lack of exploration beyond the scope of athletics, and an issue of time allocated to the pursuit of career exploration. With that, the authors of this article designed a non-experimental comparative design with non-athlete students and student-athletes. The study used a demographic questionnaire with questions pertaining to their use of career services, academic standing, and student demographics. Instructors and coaches were then asked to collect data from surveys given to students in their circle of influence. The results yielded exciting results that showed student-athletes valued career counseling more than non-athlete students but that student-athletes overall showed a lower ability to demonstrate "career savviness" (Ferrera, 2014, p. 22). This study demonstrates the necessity for higher institutions to invest more resources into the career development of student-athletes if we expect them to be career-savvy.

However, investing in more career development resources does not necessarily need to be established on campus. Colleges and universities can partner with community employers and companies to create opportunities for students to develop their skills, learn about market

demands, and gain relevant experience in the field. Students acquire a wealth of knowledge beyond the classroom by facilitating internships with local partners. In a study by Coffin et al. (2021), twenty paid internships were secured for student-athletes throughout the semester, in which the researchers analyzed the impact of cross-campus collaboration with career services, professional networking, and course-specific internship planning. Of those twenty student-athletes with paid internships, "88.89% of student-athletes felt their internship was relevant to their career goals" (Coffin et al., 2021, p. 61).

Furthermore, 77.78% stated that the quality and usefulness of the internship were excellent. This study used qualitative research methods such as personal interviews and open-ended response questions in the final survey. While the case study sample size is relatively small and the study was conducted using students from only one university, the program has seen continued success; in 2019, the program boasted over 374 paid internship experiences on its campus (Coffin et al., 2021). This action-based research method demonstrates the effectiveness of career development offices providing intervention strategies and career preparedness opportunities.

Student-athletes need to be open and receptive to receiving campus support, and many coaches help promote the use of the resources available. Coaches who give positive feedback and hold their student-athletes accountable to high standards of behavior and performance are more likely to see results, such as student-athletes who are more motivated and have better confidence and self-development (Gould, 2016). Self or identity development can be pivotal to a student-athlete navigating their priorities and long-term goals.

In particular, student-athletes must take identity development and career preparedness seriously before concluding their intercollegiate sport. Warner (2016) examines student-athletes

identity development and autonomy in their post-secondary collegiate careers through a series of interviews. The study uses those findings to evaluate what practices could be implemented for first-generation student-athlete success. The research was conducted over two semesters with nineteen first-generation student-athletes, twelve of whom were first-year and seven third-year students. The results were that "As a whole, first-generation college student-athletes are primarily concerned with (1) finding a place within their newfound community; (2) defining their career goals in preparation for life after college; and (3) negotiating their dual student and athlete identities, which are often at odds with one another" (Warner, 2016, p. 21). While common concerns and stressors were found among the participants, methods to offer support for those students varied. Their responses to interventions did not have the same conclusive results that the first part of the study yielded. Research found that some college athletes are hesitant to seek academic or career support because of the perceived "withdrawing from athletic responsibilities" (Stellefson et al., 2020, p. 118). Student-athletes may feel that they were allowed to attend the institution because of their commitment to athletics, and looking at life after that seems like a betrayal. Students who have relied heavily on their athletic abilities and involvement are more likely to be underprepared for vocational tasks and struggle to transition out of sports and into their careers (Poux & Fry, 2015). It is partially the responsibility of staff and faculty to ensure student-athletes are given the support and space to develop their identity and independence outside athletics.

Career Preparedness

Career preparation is one of the most complex undertakings an adolescent may face academically. Not only is it an exploration of self-identity, but also long-term goal setting and successful preparative performance. In order to properly develop a comprehensive career

identity, one must also actively seek or participate in career preparation opportunities (Stringer et al., 2011). Research shows that guided interventions such as workshops, events, and programs improved the positive outlooks and attitudes of students previously considered high-risk or exhibiting deficient career preparedness (Koivisto, 2011). Colleges and universities can task career development departments with creating programs such as these but need to be conscious of meeting the needs of their students. While seeking relevant experience in the field, acquiring appropriate certifications and qualifications, and developing skills to meet market demand is imperative, it is also necessary to recognize the learned behaviors needed to be successful in the workplace.

Research indicates that career preparedness is about learned behaviors such as seeking mentorship or advice from university employees gaining insight into professional options through career exploration and self-exploration (Marciniak et al., 2021). This is particularly urgent for students who have perhaps not received prior mentorship or opportunity to develop those soft skills or behaviors. Career services can help first-generation students overcome barriers, make career-driven academic decisions, and set attainable goals for themselves. In particular, Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) outline the use of social cognitive career theory as a driving force for student support; they define social cognitive theory as "how career and academic interests mature, how career choices are developed, and how these choices are turned into action. This is accomplished through a focus on three primary tenets: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals" (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004, p. 93). How those choices can be turned into action is by facilitating real-world experiences for students before they leave campus.

Not only do these experiences make students more marketable to employers because of their relevant field experience, but they also help students recognize the expectations, potential,

and opportunities that can be associated with their career path (Odio et al., 2014). It also allows students to develop their own sense of purpose, interests, and proficiencies. In a study conducted by proactively engaging in career preparation activities, participants overall showed reduced anxiety from career uncertainty and positive associations between career identity and life satisfaction (Praskova et al., 2015). Students benefit from the opportunity to draft professional portfolios under the guidance and mentorship of professionals or staff. For those students seeking more assurance in their career identity, setting career goals can help give more direction and purpose to their career exploration. In a study seeking to discover the effectiveness of goal-setting strategies for career preparedness, 60% reported that the use of the techniques taught helped them clarify their career path (Antonio & Tuffley, 2015). Having checkpoints and accountability can help students feel both the manageable progression of their preparation and the paramount need to begin their career planning as soon as possible.

Creating goals and benchmarks for career preparedness can also help students recognize employer and market demands. Assessing what employers seek from applicants and developing those hard and soft skills will help them become more marketable and competitive when applying for positions. Results from Eldeen et al. (2013) show that employers seek not only specific knowledge and basic hard skills from applicants but also intrapersonal skills, problem-solving, adaptability, and self-efficacy from their applicants. These traits can be developed outside of the classroom through purposeful experiences.

Students can demonstrate their acquired experiences and skillset by creating and using professional portfolios. This could culminate in documents representing a student's proficiencies and qualifications, such as a resume, curricula vitae, and personal statement. A professional portfolio is defined as a "thoughtful, organized, and continuous collection of a variety of

authentic products that document a professional's progress, goals, efforts, attitudes, pedagogical practices, achievements, talents, interests, and development over time" (Salend, 2001, p. 196).

This gives students who may not necessarily have a lot of relevant work experience a competitive edge as it shows the culmination of their experiences concerning their skills.

Professional portfolios also lend themselves to demonstrating the adaptability and flexibility of the preparer. Given current job market trends, students showing a wide breadth of abilities and skills is paramount to their success in finding a position post-graduation. Communication, teamwork, and integrity were determined to be the most crucial skills by employers surveyed in a study by Archer and Davison (2008). By creating a portfolio of professional documents, students can convey their competency or proficiency in that skill in a multitude of manners. Being able to communicate and demonstrate their ability to produce what employers are looking for will set them apart from other applicants.

Applying for jobs after graduation is no longer about just in-class instruction and fundamental skills. Instead, employers seek applicants with a comprehensive demonstration of experience, hard and soft skills, and higher-order thinking. By making conscious efforts to gain that through opportunities for career preparedness and practical application in the field, students market themselves to have a competitive edge against those they are up against.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the literature review that assessed the identities of student-athletes and first-generation students as well as what it means to be prepared for a career after completing a post-secondary degree. The literature review aimed to understand better what academic supports can be implemented to serve first-generation student-athletes and ensure career preparedness and academic success. What gaps do first-generation student-athletes experience in

preparing for a career after their post-secondary degree completion? What measures can be taken to improve competency in social cognitive theory for first-generation student-athletes?

From the literature reviewed, it is clear that first-generation student-athletes face a number of challenges when assimilating to a college campus and culture. Not only are they beginning a new experience with prior previous relevant experience, but often they are also obligated to many other priorities such as work, familial commitments, and extracurricular involvement as well. Many students from first-generation backgrounds face their circumstances in a somewhat isolated manner, often having few resources from home to contribute to their understanding of a college campus and its inner workings. Campus support and resources can be of significant benefit when appreciated and utilized. These resources must, however, be presented so that first-generation students can find them accessible and equitable.

Student-athletes also face unique challenges when managing their intercollegiate commitments and identity outside of sports. Student-athletes must be diligent in time management and aware of their priorities when juggling sports, academics, and career preparation. As evidenced by the literature reviewed, student-athletes benefit from positive relationships in their lives, like coaches and mentors. Receiving career preparation through the means of a role model or team-structured setting, feedback is received well and put to good use.

Programs such as career preparedness workshops, career development tasks, and real-world experience such as internships can help first-generation student-athletes develop their identities beyond collegiate sports and their social cognitive behaviors. The literature showed tremendous influence through mentoring programs in small groups, opportunities facilitated through career services, and identity development through career exploration. The tenets of these concepts will better shape the action-based research to be done in chapter three.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Introduction

This study aims to identify the most impactful student support strategies and implement a career development program that includes creating a professional portfolio and utilizing campus resources that will help first-generation student-athletes for career preparedness during their postsecondary academic experience.

1. What academic supports can be implemented to serve first-generation student-athletes to ensure career preparedness and academic success?
2. What gaps do first-generation student-athletes experience in preparing for a career after their postsecondary degree completion?
3. What measures can be taken to improve competency in social cognitive theory for first-generation student-athletes?

This study explores the efficacy of academic support, particularly a career development program incorporating professional portfolio creation and campus resource utilization, in enhancing career preparedness and academic success among first-generation student-athletes. Additionally, it will investigate gaps in the career preparedness experienced by this demographic and subsequently propose measures to bolster competence in social cognitive theory.

Research Methodology

During this action-based research study, a mixed-method approach was employed to analyze the effect a career portfolio development program could have on the career preparedness of first-generation student-athletes at a post-secondary academic institution. As defined by Mertler (2020), action research is

Any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn. (p. 309)

By conducting this study through action-based research, the researcher is making a concerted effort to improve practices and student success strategies in the university office of career development. This study aims to analyze the ways in which career services in higher education can best serve its student population, much like the study conducted by Dey and Cruzvergara (2014). This researcher intends to use the statement made by Taquette and Borges (2022), “The ethical principles that guide scientific research are based on the assurance of human freedom and dignity” as the driving principle for this study (p. 1).

The study also explored the application of social cognitive theory in understanding how the career portfolio development program aided students’ understanding and reflection of their career preparedness, as was the case with Lent, Brown, and Hackett’s (2002) study on career choice and development. Social cognitive theory is defined as "how career and academic interests mature, how career choices are developed, and how these choices are turned into action. This is accomplished by focusing on three primary tenets: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals" (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004, p. 93). The researcher used a focus group of first-generation student-athletes who met the appropriate criteria, determined using a screening form to collect qualitative data. This study used a mixed method with quantitative data collected from grade point averages, and student demographics were collected from those in the focus group. Students self-reported this data. The qualitative data was collected from structured

surveys with some open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews as students in the focus group completed the tenets of the career-preparedness portfolio.

One advantage of this study is that the mixed-method approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the portfolio program's impact, as both qualitative and quantitative data will be analyzed. This study also aims to uncover and mitigate first-generation study athletes' unique challenges and seeks to identify contextual insights.

The disadvantages of the mixed-methods study are that the study results and proposed future application may be limited given the specific context of first-generation student-athletes career preparedness from a small, private, liberal arts institution. Additionally, despite efforts to minimize bias, the subjective interpretation of qualitative data could influence the researcher's conclusions.

Research Context

This study took place on Rockton University's campus in Rockton, Illinois. Rockton University is a private, four-year liberal arts institution in Northern Illinois. The researcher is employed by the university and is therefore considered the practitioner-researcher due to the positionality in the study, as defined by Herr and Anderson (2015). The researcher recruited participants by emailing all undergraduate student-athletes from Rockton University and posting a flyer digitally on the student portal website and physically around campus. Participants of this study must be the first in their immediate family to pursue a post-secondary academic degree and participate in a competitive sport. Participant age ranges from 18-22 years of age, and they may be or identify as any gender and must be enrolled as full-time students at the university.

Using the non-probability method, this study used volunteer sampling as defined by Vehovar et al. (2016) as "a type of convenience sampling, where the decision to participate

strongly relies on respondents due to the non-individualized nature of invitations” (pg. 325). In an action-based research study, employing this method offers several advantages. Firstly, this approach allows for immediate data collection, the insights of which are used to inform future interventions to respond to student needs. This sampling method also lends itself to empowering individuals to actively engage in the research process and give their genuine perspective along the way. Finally, the decision to use volunteer sampling was made in an effort to increase the equity and inclusivity of career development resources for any student wishing to participate, not merely a selected group.

There were a total of six participants. This sample size is used to provide a broad representation of students who make up the Rockton University demographic. These participants were from various Division III athletic teams and of any gender.

Research Methods

Data Collection

Data collection and the subsequent analysis of such will follow the ethical principles and guidelines regarding the use of human subjects, and subject identities will be protected using pseudonyms, as outlined in Nolen & Vander Putten’s study (2007). Written consent to participate will be secured before beginning any data collection. Participation is voluntary, and subjects may opt out at any time. Data collection methods will utilize platforms such as Jotform for surveys and quantitative data, as well as some face-to-face interviews taking place for qualitative data points. Jotform is an online platform that allows users to take surveys and upload documents as submissions. The researcher will ask participants to use Jotform for the weekly reflections surveys and as a medium to submit their weekly assignments. Data collection will take place over eight weeks, during which participants will complete a series of professional development

tasks and a pre- and post-survey regarding their opinions and perceptions of their career preparedness. Throughout the eight weeks, the researcher will be conducting group workshops in the following order: creating a S.M.A.R.T. Goal, resume and cover letter introduction, creating a personal statement, professionalism, and job interview skills. Participants will also be asked to submit their completed or revised professional documents following each workshop to receive feedback and review the completion of tasks from the rubrics provided.

Along with the professional document submissions and weekly reflection surveys, participants will also be asked to complete a brief post-survey in which they outline the effectiveness of the workshops for their professional/career readiness. Combining quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys and interviews will offer a comprehensive understanding of the participants' career preparedness before and after the intervention. The structured workshops equip participants with the necessary skills for professional success, while the ongoing feedback and reflection pieces aim to enhance the learning process.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data uncovered in this study, the researcher will begin by taking any qualitative data and organizing it following the steps of inductive analysis, as identified by Mertler (2020). Quantitative data will be compiled into spreadsheets for each question of the surveys and reflections. Open-ended questions on surveys, reflections, and interviews will be coded to uncover themes. That organizational process will also help lead to the data analysis, where identifying key themes and patterns emerging from the research design and framework will be the primary focus. This will also help triangulate how the data sets seem to support one another. The data will then be parsed into categories based on the key elements, likely the topics

of the career preparedness portfolio. Once those pieces are done, the researcher will use Creswell's (2009) framework to analyze and interpret the data.

In summary, the researcher will synthesize qualitative and quantitative findings to generate new insights and hypotheses. In doing so, the researcher aims to construct a narrative that weaves together the quantitative trends with qualitative anecdotes or explanations.

Chapter Summary

The study aimed to explore the effectiveness of academic support, specifically a career development program that integrated professional portfolio creation and the utilization of campus resources, in improving career preparedness and academic success among first-generation student-athletes. Moreover, it investigated the gaps in career preparedness encountered by this group and suggested measures to enhance competence based on social cognitive theory. In Chapter 4, the study's outcomes and results will be reported and discussed, focusing on the effectiveness of academic support interventions in enhancing career readiness among first-generation student-athletes.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

Throughout an eight-week study focusing on career preparedness among first-generation student-athletes, a series of career workshops were held, and surveys were distributed to participants seeking feedback on their personal perspectives on their career development. This research aimed to identify effective student support strategies through the implementation of a career development program. This program included activities such as creating professional portfolios and utilizing campus resources to enhance career preparedness among first-generation student-athletes during their postsecondary academic journey. The research sought to address the following inquiries, and this chapter will present the findings to the following questions:

1. What academic supports can be instituted to promote career preparedness and academic success among first-generation student-athletes?
2. What challenges do first-generation student-athletes encounter in preparing for their careers following completion of their postsecondary education?
3. What interventions can enhance competency in social cognitive theory among first-generation student-athletes?

Throughout Chapter 4, quantitative and qualitative data will be explored to identify the patterns found within participant responses from the surveys distributed. Once the findings were revealed, the researcher delved further into the themes and their connection to the research questions and literature. The chapter will conclude with a summary and discussion.

Results and Findings

This action-based research project utilized a mixed-method approach to examine the impact of a career portfolio development program on the career preparedness of first-generation student-athletes at a post-secondary institution. Quantitative data was obtained from self-reported grade point averages and student demographics from focus group participants. Qualitative data was obtained through structured surveys with open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews conducted as the focus group students completed the components of the career-preparedness program.

Quantitative Data

This data also provided insights into the student profile of the six participants. All participants self-reported to be the first in their family to attend college and actively on a University sports team. Figure 1 shows the respondents' profiles based on their survey responses at the beginning of the study.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Profile	Age	GPA	Gender	Sport
<i>Student 1</i>	22	2.98	Male	Football
<i>Student 2</i>	22	3.41	Male	Football
<i>Student 3</i>	22	3.75	Female	Soccer
<i>Student 4</i>	20	2.8	Male	Football
<i>Student 5</i>	20	2.56	Male	Football
<i>Student 6</i>	20	3.5	Female	Volleyball

Each participant was currently involved with a Division III sports team during the study. Of the 6 participants, four were on the men's football team, one was on the women's soccer team, and one was on the women's volleyball team. Each participant has played on their team since freshmen year. Three of the participants are from the class of 2024, and the other three are from the class of 2026, making them seniors and sophomores, respectively. Participants were asked to access their unofficial transcripts to report their cumulative grade point averages. University policy states that student-athletes must maintain a minimum grade point average of 2.5 to participate in their sport. The mean GPA was calculated to be 3.15, and the median GPA was 3.195. The reported GPAs and the calculated mean and median can reveal several insights about the academic performance of first-generation student-athletes on this campus. First, the mean GPA of 3.15 indicates that, on average, the student-athletes are performing at a solid academic level. This suggests that the group as a whole is maintaining satisfactory academic progress. Additionally, a conclusion can be drawn that student-athletes have allocated more time to their studies due to required study table hours.

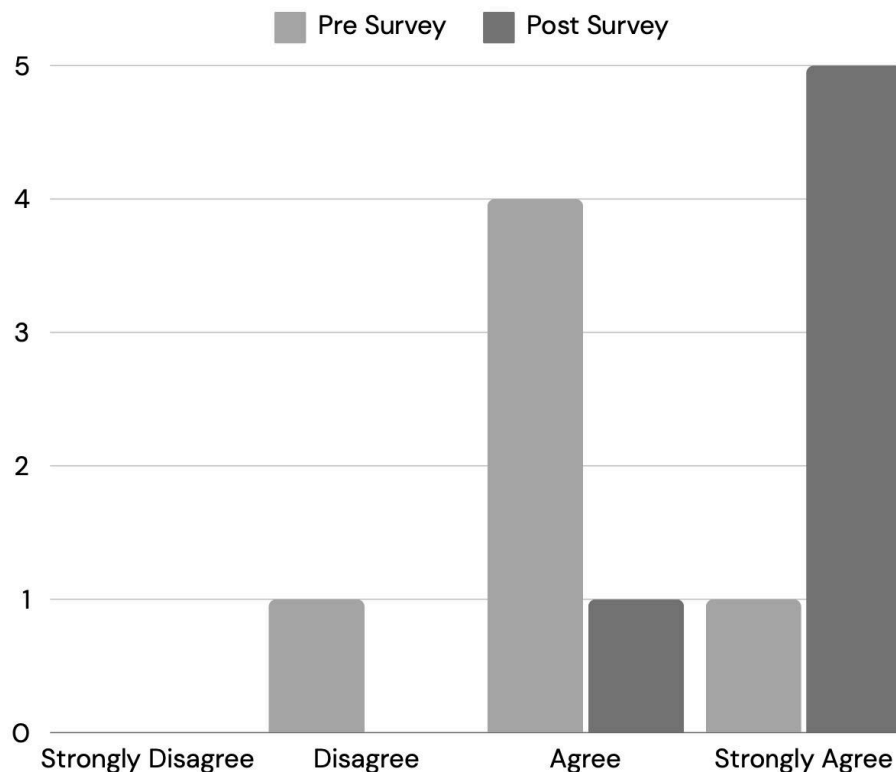
The median GPA of 3.195 is close to the mean, which indicates that the distribution of GPAs is relatively balanced, with no extreme outliers skewing the average. One can imply that most first-generation student-athletes participating in this study performed consistently within a similar range. Overall, this data suggests that while most first-generation student-athletes are maintaining good academic standing, some variation could be addressed with additional support services to ensure they reach their academic potential.

Participants took a pre and post-career development program survey in which they were asked to reflect and respond on elements of their resource utilization. To gain a sense of first-generation and student-athlete utilization of campus resources such as career development,

the question “I understand and utilize the resources available to me on campus” on both the pre and post-survey. Figure 1 shows the responses from both surveys.

Figure 1

Survey Question: I Understand and Utilize the Resources Available to Me on Campus



Some examples of participant answers could be the mention of the Office of Career Development, the Center for Learning Strategies, the Health and Wellness Center, and various campus events, all of which are free for all students to use or attend. In the pre-survey, one participant disagreed with the statement, “I understand and utilize the resources available to me on campus,” while five agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Following the conclusion of the professional development sessions, all participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, with 83% of the responses being of the latter. The data suggests that the career development program was effective in increasing students’ understanding and utilization of

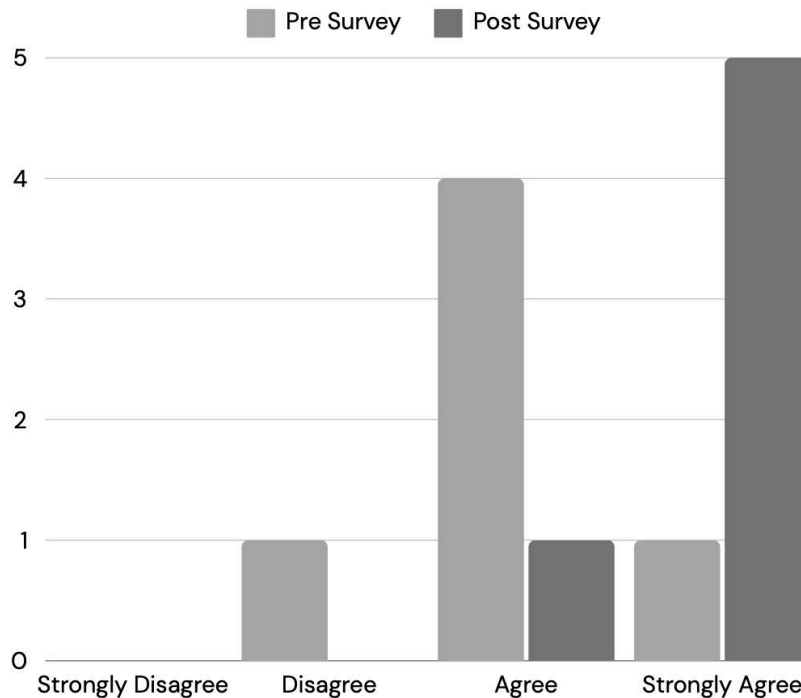
campus resources. Initially, one participant was not confident in their knowledge and/or use of available resources, while the majority were already fairly confident. After completing the program, however, all participants reported an improved understanding and use of the campus resources. This indicates that the career development program had a positive impact on student engagement with supportive campus resources.

The post-professional development program survey results indicate that all participants felt positive about their growth both professionally and academically. When participants were asked to self-reflect on their level of professional and academic growth on campus, 50% of participants stated they strongly agreed that there were growing professionally and academically, while 50% agreed with the above statement. This unanimous positive response suggests that the program successfully contributed to the participants' overall development despite their differing levels of years at a post-secondary academic institution. These results demonstrate that the program was successful in reinforcing their academic learning with practical skills and professional growth opportunities often sought by employers in the workforce.

In conjunction with using campus resources to capitalize on their time at the university, it is also imperative that students understand their career trajectory and how their academics align with that. Survey question number 3 was, "I can see a path for me to begin my desired career with the work I have done while on campus," and participants answered both pre- and post-survey. The responses to this question provided valuable insights into how students perceive the connection between their academic efforts and future career prospects. Figure 2 highlights the assessment results on whether their on-campus experiences are effectively preparing them for their desired career paths.

Figure 2

Survey Question: "I can see a path for me to begin my desired career with the work I have done while on campus"



On the pre-survey, 1 student disagreed with the statement, 4 students agreed with the statement, and 1 strongly agreed. The improvement in perception can be seen in the responses in the post-survey. 100% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they now did see a path for themselves to begin their desired career with the work they have done while on campus. This can be attributed not only to the work on their professional portfolio, i.e., resume and cover letter, but also to a greater depth of understanding of campus resources. Throughout the development program, conversations were held regarding internships, campus job boards, and work-study site placements. The combined efforts to deliver a more robust scope of social cognitive exercises throughout the program did show benefits for participants.

The last question of both the pre-and post-survey was, “When people ask me about my future career plans, I feel _____.” They could choose from seven responses, with no limit to how many answers they could choose. The choices were confident, bored, unsure, worried, ready, excited, and not-so-ready. From the pre-survey, participants showed a certain degree of hesitation or anxiety surrounding their career plans, with four students marking “not so ready,” three students marking “unsure,” and two students marking “worried.” Additionally, with only one participant checking the “ready” box, it is clear that participants felt their career preparedness and overall social cognitive behavior could use further development. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of answers.

Table 2

Pre-Survey Question: When People Ask Me About My Future Career Plans I Feel:

Profile	Confident	Unsure	Worried	Excited	Ready	Not So Ready
<i>Student 1</i>		X		X		X
<i>Student 2</i>	X			X	X	
<i>Student 3</i>		X				X
<i>Student 4</i>			X			X
<i>Student 5</i>		X	X			X
<i>Student 6</i>	X			X		

Results from the post-survey were much more confident in their preparedness regarding their future career plans, with a marked improvement in positive responses. This shift demonstrates that participants concluded the eight-week study feeling significantly more equipped with both the knowledge and skills necessary for them to succeed post-graduation. However, there was one participant whose answers remained the same for both the pre and

post-survey, suggesting that they saw no change in their career preparedness as a result of this study. This could be a result of the student's lower grade point average, point in academic career, or chosen major as well. A further analysis of this will be discussed further in the qualitative analysis.

Table 3

Post-Survey Question: When People Ask Me About My Future Career Plans I Feel:

Profile	Confident	Unsure	Worried	Excited	Ready	Not So Ready
<i>Student 1</i>	X			X	X	
<i>Student 2</i>	X				X	
<i>Student 3</i>		X		X	X	
<i>Student 4</i>	X				X	
<i>Student 5</i>		X	X			X
<i>Student 6</i>	X			X	X	

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data to be analyzed in this study provides a deeper insight into participant experiences and perceptions during and after the professional development program. Through open-ended responses and reflection discussions, this data captured the ways in which first-generation student-athletes felt about their academic progress and career prospects. By examining these qualitative responses, we aim to uncover the underlying themes that contributed to the observed or reported improvements as well as identify any areas for further enhancement. This data will also contribute to the conclusions to be drawn for research question three.

During each career development workshop, participants had the opportunity to ask questions, seek feedback, and discuss with the researcher and other participants in a focus group

setting. Throughout the course of the study, the students were overall very engaged, participated in the activities mapped out for the session, and stayed for the discussion and questions portion of the workshop. In the final session, participants were asked to reflect on what it means to be “career savvy,” which they defined as being prepared to apply and interview for jobs, knowing the steps to finding the right jobs in their majors or fields, and keeping professional portfolios up-to-date and relevant. The active participation and engagement of the students throughout the program suggest that they did find value in the sessions, which likely contributed to their improved understanding of what it meant to be career savvy. The participant’s ability to articulate their perception of career preparedness indicates that the workshops did create an environment where they could better understand the theoretical definition of that phrase. Among those answers were “workshops, presentations, and classes,” “getting feedback on professional documents at any stage in the process,” and “practicing in group settings for things like mock interviews.”

Another question posed to participants centered around the resources provided for career development and how those resources can help with career preparedness. The resources and services that students identified were “helping students feel confident when applying to jobs,” “matching majors to careers and jobs,” and “giving feedback or assistance with professional documents such as resumes.” While it is important to note that all participants did state that they were aware of or had used the Office of Career Development prior to the study, not all were familiar with the scope of resources and services offered. Additionally, many students were unaware of the varying styles in which those resources could be accessed, i.e. online, in-person appointment, at a career development event, etc. At the end of the program, participants were also able to identify or further articulate the strategies that career development offers that can

assist students with their career preparedness. It is important and valuable that at the conclusion of the six-week program, participants were able to better articulate the resources available to them as both students and alumni. This shows that it may be imperative that university staff equip students not only with the skills to improve their own career savviness but also with the knowledge of where to find resources and points of contact to assist in that process.

Upon concluding the professional development program with the six participants, the researcher asked, “What professional development skill or task did we not cover in the course of this study that you could/would have benefited from?” This was asked both in the post-survey and at the conclusion of the final focus group session. Responses revealed that some examples of additional support strategies sought by students were “real-world practice for interviews,” “applying to graduate schools and writing entrance essays,” “what to do following job interviews,” and “how to communicate and learning career vocabulary.” Participants expressed an interest in having community or business members come to hold mock interviews as an added dimension to their practice. Additionally, two of the participants stated they were interested in attending graduate school after graduation and felt that they would benefit from more assistance in that area. To expand on the answer of “how to communicate and learning career vocabulary,” the participant stated that they felt that they did not fully equip the nuances and subtleties of professional communication required to network in their field. Participants felt they would find value in experiences or resources that could help them to improve upon this skill.

To revisit the question on the survey, “When people ask me about my future career plans, I feel _____,” which had the response choices of “confident,” “bored,” “unsure,” “worried,” “ready,” “excited,” and “not-so-ready.” participants were asked to reflect and respond on why they answered the way they did on the post-survey. Participants who marked “confident” or

“excited” cited knowing the process and resources better, having more done or being more prepared than before, finding new ways to shine on professional documents, and improving communication skills among the reasons they feel that way. Those who indicated they were “ready” on their post-survey felt more confident about their professional documents after receiving feedback, found the practice in that setting and useful, gained a better understanding of available resources, and established connections with the right people. These responses could highlight the impact of the career development program, as participants who felt confident, excited, or ready about their future career plans attribute their assurance to the program’s benefits. The improvements in understanding the job application/interview process, the enhancement of their professional documents, and the strengthened communication skills all contributed to their readiness and proficiency in those skills.

Chapter Summary

Throughout Chapter 4, both quantitative and qualitative data were presented from mixed-methods study. Quantitative findings revealed that tailored career development instruction was beneficial to participants’ overall feeling of preparedness in their chosen field. Specifically, students who engaged in structured small-group career counseling through targeted workshops reported higher levels of confidence in success after graduation in their careers. Qualitative data further supported these findings, with participants expressing that as a result of the career preparedness program, they were able to better articulate their career goals and the steps needed to achieve those, as well as how to align and apply those to their academic coursework. Additionally, students completed the study feeling that they better understood the resources available to them and how to best utilize them while on campus because of their participation in the program. The combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrates the

importance of delivering personalized career development to student groups that are traditionally underserved. Chapter 5 will bring this scholarly action research program to a conclusion by exploring the practical implications of the findings from Chapter 4, as well as suggesting areas for future research.

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of aligning academic pursuits with meaningful career outcomes. This thematic trend underscores the need for tailored academic supports that not only enhance academic performance but also foster career readiness and alignment with their individual goals. First-generation student-athletes have a myriad of time commitments and obligations that can limit their ability to fully engage in traditional career preparation activities. However, the investment of time and effort placed in their personal career development will be returned to them in the ability and proficiency to express their strengths, make meaning, and pursue a purpose (Dik et al., 2014). Moreover, by aligning their career path with their personal values and goals, student-athletes can achieve a deeper sense of achievement during their academic experience.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the most impactful student support strategies and implement a career development program that includes creating a professional portfolio and utilizing campus resources that will help first-generation student-athletes for career preparedness during their postsecondary academic experience. The research questions for this study were:

1. What academic supports can be implemented to serve first-generation student-athletes to ensure career preparedness and academic success?
2. What gaps do first-generation student-athletes experience in preparing for a career after their postsecondary degree completion?
3. What measures can be taken to improve competency in social cognitive theory for first-generation student-athletes?

This study aimed to explore the efficacy of academic support, particularly a career development program incorporating professional portfolio creation and campus resource utilization, in enhancing career preparedness and academic success among first-generation student-athletes. Additionally, it investigated gaps in the career preparedness experienced by this demographic and subsequently proposed measures to bolster competence in social cognitive theory.

Discussion

Purpose-Driven Career Decisions

At the beginning of the study, students were asked to state their S.M.A.R.T. goals in line with their career goals and academic aspirations. The acronym stands for creating goals that are

specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time specific. By creating these goals and submitting them, the researcher was able to gain better insight into their aspirations and ambitions in working on their professional development. In doing so, a dialogue was framed in which student support strategies could be identified to match student needs using those goals. Those who felt comfortable discussing were asked to share their goals and why they made them. Among the participant responses was, “I want to find a job after college that will feel like I’m doing something with my degree.” In this conversation, this student stated that it took a lot to get him to college, both from his own hard work and his family. Without a purposeful or rewarding career, in the end, he did not feel like college would be “worth it.” Another student stated that it was important for the job they found after college to “make enough money to support the life I want.” This participant envisioned how his career goals would support his personal ones and felt that that would be a measure of his success. Among the answers stated in the conversation, a common thread could be traced throughout, which is *purpose-driven career decisions*. Carrying that sense of satisfaction and success with them post-graduation will also give way to making meaningful contributions to society as they will feel more positive and assured of the work they are doing (Otu, 2024).

The idea of offering purposeful career development exercises through multiple mediums is supported by Buford et al (2022)’s suggestion of hosting both structured and unstructured opportunities for students to develop professionally. Additionally, career development opportunities should be accessible to students in the spaces where they are already devoting their time. This could mean working with faculty to ensure career development processes are embedded in the curriculum (Lawrence-Fowler et al., 2017). In doing so, they are exposed to the practical application of employable skills while learning the academic content.

Instead of offering a “one-size-fits-all” approach, it may be in the best interest for career development professionals should aim to design workshops, mentoring sessions, and events to cater to the diverse needs, backgrounds, and career aspirations of the students they serve. This will ensure resources and strategies are relevant, inclusive, and adaptable to individual circumstances.

Bridging the Divide

Throughout the course of the six-week study, participants were asked to allocate their time to creating or improving their professional portfolio in an effort to fill the gaps they may otherwise have had in their career preparation. In those six weeks, participants often identified that they did have areas for improvement in their career savviness, some of those being limited access to career resources, time constraints, lack of real-world opportunities, and cultural capital. Thus, the theme of bridging the divide is an apt description to adequately acknowledge the systematic challenges many first-generation student-athletes face. As an institution, staff and faculty must be devoted to serving the students and helping them achieve their academic goals. By ensuring career development programs are tailored specifically to the group they serve, personalized support in the form of flexible scheduling, one-on-one counseling, and adapted experiential learning, gaps in students’ career development can be appropriately addressed and mitigated.

Given the time constraints of most student-athletes, flexible scheduling and access to resources and programs could significantly improve their engagement in professional development opportunities. These could include resources being available on a student portal or learning management system, recording webinars and publishing them for later access, and

individual coaching sessions. This flexibility ensures that students can still engage in purposeful career development without sacrificing academic, athletic, or personal responsibilities.

Another way in which career development can be more equitable for all student-athletes is to collaborate with athletic coaches to ensure the programs complement one another. Colvin, Bloom, and Bastin (2013) assert that a student-athlete and coach relationship is one of the most meaningful in one's collegiate career. By forging those relationships and appreciating that sports play a major role in a student's identity, there are intentional ways that social cognitive theory is exposed to them. Critical thinking, problem-solving, and time management are all skills that student-athletes practice, so combining those efforts shows them the transferable nature in which they can be used to shape their vocational identity (Sung et al. 2013).

Answers to the Study's Research Questions

Communication and collaboration with coaching staff can help career development staff aim to instruct students with a holistic approach and more meaningful connection. The research sought to address the following inquiries, and this chapter addressed the findings to the following questions:

1. What academic supports can be instituted to promote career preparedness and academic success among first-generation student-athletes?

Personalized career coaching and mentorship can be invaluable services for first-generation student-athletes. Understanding and navigating their challenges, objectives, and aspirations will serve both the advisor and student to have productive and intentional professional development sessions.

2. What challenges do first-generation student-athletes encounter in preparing for their careers following completion of their postsecondary education?

First-generation student-athletes often face challenges such as limited access to career resources and networks, lack of mentorship in this area, and difficulty with time management. These hindrances can severely impact their future employment prospects if not addressed.

3. What interventions can enhance competency in social cognitive theory among first-generation student-athletes?

Interventions that enhance competency in social cognitive theory among first-generation student-athletes include workshops, mentorship programs, and opportunities for practice and self-reflection. In doing so, constructive feedback can be given, and students can identify ways to continuously improve their skills.

Implications for Practice

By acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by first-generation student-athletes, the researcher is led to believe career development departments can create purpose-driven career development experiences such as mock interview workshops, networking events, and personalized career advising sessions that align with their goals and help them to succeed. This could involve continuing to further develop tailored career development experiences that specifically focus on how athletics, academics, and career aspirations intersect. Expansion of the programs within the office of career development could include targeted mentorship from peers, alumni, support staff, as well as specific workshops offered strategically throughout the academic year, and an emphasis on resources available for students to navigate at their will such as job search strategies, financial literacy workshops, and online professional presence development. By creating accessible learning opportunities through a variety of mediums, but with consistency in career development objectives, first-generation student-athletes will be empowered by their expanded knowledge and skillset to pursue their

professional goals in an inclusive and supportive environment. Institutions with a large student population of first-generation student-athletes have a responsibility to ensure they are receiving adequate resources and ample instruction towards their professional development and career goals. These could include internship placement programs designed to account for athletic time commitments, career development workshops delivered to targeted teams, and dedicated career advising specialized in supporting student-athletes. By offering services such as a professional portfolio program, students can gain experiences that will enhance their chances of standing out to employers.

Limitations

There are several limitations that may impact the scope of this action-based research study that the researcher acknowledges. The study was conducted at a single location, a small, private, liberal arts institutions, which does limit the applicability of the findings and implications for practice for other types of institutions not fitting this profile. Additionally, the number of participants in this study does limit the findings as the representation of a diverse population is not present. The specific nature of the focus on first-generation student-athletes also narrows the generalizability, as the unique challenges faced by this group may not fully reflect the experiences of other student populations. A consideration should also be made that some of the data collected was self-reported by participants of the study and therefore may not be fully accurate or without bias.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further and future research could expand on this study by exploring the impact of a career development portfolio program for first-generation students involved in other affinity groups on campus in order to examine a more diverse range of student populations. This would

allow for further exploration into the needs and specific barriers these students face in regards to career preparedness. Students belonging to organizations such as multicultural clubs, LGBTQA+ groups, or pathway programs may also face unique challenges or limited opportunities in their career aspirations, but tailored support from the career development department and a portfolio program could help to identify, address, and potentially alleviate many of the barriers they face. This could enhance their sense of belonging, foster a more inclusive approach to student support services, and assist in the retention and success of these students.

Chapter Summary

This study sought to examine the effectiveness of a career development program that included a professional portfolio creation in improving the career readiness and social cognitive theory in first-generation student-athletes. It also explored the gaps in career preparedness within this group and offered recommendations to enhance their competencies in these areas. In conclusion, the mixed-methods action based research project highlights the critical role that tailored career development programs play in enhancing the career preparedness for first-generation student-athletes. Through the strategic use of campus resources used to create professional portfolios, students are better equipped to pursue their professional aspirations and capitalize on their coursework with intentionality. Moving forward, the results of this study can offer a foundation for expanding career development initiatives to a broader range of students to ensure all students are receiving the necessary support and resources to thrive.

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APPENDIX A: Recruitment Email

Dear [Name]:

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about first-generation student-athlete career preparedness. This study is being conducted by Chelsea Minor, a student in the Ed.D program for higher education administration at Bradley University, and the principal investigator is Dr. Scott Estes.

To participate, you must be between the age range of 18-22 years of age, a first-generation student, and a student-athlete in a competitive collegiate sport, and you must be enrolled as a full-time student at the university. Participation will take about **3** hours a week for **8** weeks. Participants will be asked to complete a series of professional development tasks that coincide with career preparedness and complete a series of brief surveys. Some tasks will be done individually, and some will be done as a group.

If you are interested, contact the investigator, and you will receive further instructions will follow in a separate letter. There are no known risks involved in this research.

Should you have any questions, please let do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you,

Chelsea Minor

APPENDIX B: Recruitment Flyer



Participate in a Bradley University Research Study

Chelsea Minor & Dr. Scott Estes

815.226.4022 cminor@mail.bradley.edu

SUMMARY

First-generation student-athletes will complete a succession of tasks in which they demonstrate leadership, professionalism, and competency in their content area. Throughout the semester, students will be given opportunities to develop these skills and will be expected to demonstrate the ways in which they have become proficient in these areas.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

We are looking to recruit individuals whose ages range from 18-22 years of age, who identify as any gender, and who must be enrolled as full-time students at this university.

INCENTIVE

Participants of this study can expect to benefit from participation in this study by increasing knowledge and access of career development and professional development opportunities through a post-secondary institutional department.

COMMITMENT

Participants of this study will commit to an eight-week program where they will be asked to complete a series of professional development tasks that will help them to develop their career preparedness. Location of activities will be across campus or virtually. Participants can expect to spend no more than three hours a week devoted to this study. If chosen, you will be given opportunities to grow and learn beyond the classroom. As part of the career development program, participants will participate in forums & lecture series, and attend career preparation events such as resume building and employer visits.

If interested, contact cminor@mail.bradley.edu for next steps!

APPENDIX C: Screening Form

The purpose of this screener is to see if you meet the criteria for taking part in our research study, “Creating a Culture of Career Preparedness for First-Generation Student-Athletes in a Postsecondary Academic Institution.” This survey will take approximately five minutes. After this session, the researcher will notify you if you are eligible to participate in this study. Eligibility depends on the study's research questions. We are looking to recruit individuals whose ages range from 18-22 years of age, who identify as any gender, a first-generation student, and a student-athlete in a competitive collegiate sport, and who must be enrolled as full-time students at the university.

If you decide to participate, you will complete the attached questionnaire. This survey should take approximately five minutes of your time. Participation in this survey is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the project at any time without consequence.

Your information will be recorded in writing, and kept confidential, as required by law. If you are eligible and interested in the study, then the researcher will record your name and contact information; this information will be kept confidential. If you are not interested in the study, then any personal information you provide will be destroyed. There will be no ramifications for declining to participate in this study.

There are minimal risks to you for participating in this project, including the inconvenience of time and/or emotional distress. Participation in this project may benefit participants by increasing their knowledge of career development and professional development opportunities through a post-secondary institutional department. Survey responses will be kept strictly confidential, and no attempt will be made to link identifying information with survey responses. No compensation will be given for participation.

Should you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact Chelsea Minor at cminor@mail.bradley.edu (the study's principle investigator) or Bradley University's CUSHR office can be contacted with general questions regarding conducting research involving human subjects.

Do you agree to answer a series of questions regarding your eligibility to participate in our study?

Printed Name _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Questionnaire:

Are you currently enrolled in a college or university as a full-time student? (12 credit hours or more per semester)

Did either of your parents complete a 4-year college or university degree?

Do you currently compete in a competitive sport for your college or university? What sport?

What gender do you identify as?

APPENDIX D: Survey #1

Career Development Survey

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Chelsea Minor, Ed.D. in Educational Leadership student at Bradley University. The purpose of the study is to identify career preparedness in students currently enrolled in a college or university. If you decide to participate, you will complete the survey below. This survey should take approximately 10 minutes of your time. Participation in this survey is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the project at any time without consequence.

Age:

Year in School:

Parent or Guardian Highest Level of Education:

Are you involved in a sport?

I understand and utilize the resources available to me on campus.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

Through the course of my studies, I feel that I'm growing professionally as well as academically on campus.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

I can see a path for me to begin my desired career with the work I have done while on campus.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

I know my interests and how they related to my desired career.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

I understand my areas for professional growth.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

I know how to research careers that are relevant to me.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

I have long term goals for my career.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

I regularly re-asses my career goals and action steps.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

When people ask me about my future career plans I feel

Confident | Worried | Excited | Bored | Ready | Not-so-Ready | Unsure | Other

I have these professional documents created

Resume | Cover Letter | Curriculum Vitae | Personal Statement | Letter(s) of Reference | Other

What specific job skills would you like to develop?

APPENDIX E: Survey #2

Career Development Survey

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Chelsea Minor, Ed.D in Educational Leadership student at Bradley University. The purpose of the study is to identify career preparedness in students currently enrolled in a college or university. If you decide to participate, you will complete the survey below. This survey should take approximately 10 minutes of your time. Participation in this survey is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the project at any time without consequence.

After completing the professional development program, I better understand and utilize the resources available to me on campus.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

Through the course of my studies as well as the professional development program, I feel that I'm growing professionally as well as academically on campus.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

After completing the professional development program, I am more confident in my plan to begin my desired career with the work I have done while on campus.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

As a result of the professional development program, I know my interests and how they related to my desired career.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

After completing the professional development program, I understand my areas for professional growth.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

After completing the professional development program I know how to research careers that are relevant to me.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

After completing the professional development program I have long term goals for my career.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

After completing the professional development program I regularly re-asses my career goals and action steps.

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

After completing the professional development program, if people ask me about my future career plans I feel

Confident | Worried | Excited | Bored | Ready | Not-so-Ready | Unsure | Other

After completing the professional development program, I have these professional documents created

Resume | Cover Letter | Curriculum Vitae | Personal Statement | Letter(s) of Reference | Other

What professionalism development skill or task did we not cover in the course of this study that you could/would have benefitted from?

What specific job skills would you like to develop?