

The Student–Athlete Volunteer Experience: An Investigation of a University Athletics–Community Sports Partnership

Cailie S. McGuire, Jennifer T. Coletti, and Luc J. Martin

Abstract

Within the Canadian university sports context, athletics departments are increasingly partnering with community sports organizations to promote youth sports participation, while simultaneously providing student–athletes with volunteer opportunities aimed at developing civically engaged young adults. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of varsity student–athlete volunteers ($n = 10$) within a university athletics–community sports partnership program. Volunteers discussed their motivations to volunteer in the partnership program and highlighted various benefits for themselves (e.g., transferable skill development), the youth athletes (e.g., having relatable role models), and the institution and community more broadly (e.g., enhanced community outreach, credibility of programming). Key takeaways and practical recommendations are provided with the aim of fostering quality volunteer experiences within these partnership programs.

Keywords: community involvement, sport, student–athlete, volunteerism, quality participation



During adolescence, individuals become more aware of, and invested in, societal issues as they begin to foster their personal identities (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). As a result, adolescents seek to make contributions to issues that not only reinforce their identities and values, but that also improve conditions for others and their communities (e.g., Lerner et al., 2014). This concept, referred to as “civic engagement” (Adler & Goggin, 2005), is a key component in promoting a healthy and positive transition from adolescence into adulthood (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Volunteering is a form of civic engagement that involves volitional activities that benefit another person, group, or cause (Wilson, 2000). From a positive youth development perspective, volunteer programs can promote the acquisition of various developmental assets (e.g., self–confidence, interpersonal skills; MacNeela & Gannon, 2014) that, long–term, can support the development of thriving youth (e.g., Lerner et al., 2014).

Within the context of sports, volunteering has been associated with the development of personal and life skills, enhanced social capital (Kay & Bradbury, 2009), and the fulfillment of basic psychological needs (Deal & Camiré, 2016). Moreover, volunteers are often described as one of the most valuable resources within sporting organizations and, consequently, serve as the backbone of successful sporting events and programs (Kerwin et al., 2015). Thus, ensuring that adolescents experience quality volunteer opportunities is not only integral to the success of sporting organizations, but also to the development and well–being of the volunteers.

University Athletics–Community Sports Partnerships

It is becoming increasingly common within the higher education sports context for athletics departments to partner with community sports organizations, with clear benefits for both sides of the partnership (e.g., Kerwin et al., 2015; Svensson et al., 2014).

For instance, the National Collegiate Athletic Association Challenging Athletes' Minds for Personal Success/Life Skills Program (NCAA CHAMPS) was launched to promote the holistic development of varsity student-athletes (e.g., academics, personal life, athletics) through partnerships with community service organizations. Indeed, such partnerships provide youth with sports opportunities for continued participation while simultaneously providing student-athletes with volunteer opportunities that are aimed at developing well-rounded and civically engaged young adults (e.g., Hemphill & Martinek, 2017). Notably, the benefits of these partnerships reach both institutional (e.g., enhanced networking/marketing opportunities) and community (e.g., enhanced program delivery, achievement of intended program objectives; Svensson et al., 2014) levels.

Despite the integral role that volunteers play in the success of these partnership programs, to date, existing partnership research has emphasized the benefits acquired by the community sports organization (e.g., access to athletic facilities and institutional resources) and youth participants (e.g., coached by experienced varsity athletes; Svensson et al., 2014), with less attention being placed on the experiences of the varsity student-athlete volunteers themselves (e.g., Deal & Camiré, 2016). Given that these partnership programs rely heavily on volunteers for program execution, directly exploring their experiences within, and perceptions of, these partnership programs is worthwhile (e.g., What does a meaningful volunteer experience in a partnership program look like? What are the acquired benefits for the volunteers?). In doing so, university athletics-community sports partnership representatives can ensure that these programs are structured in a way that best promotes volunteer engagement and retention and, as a result, the attainment of beneficial outcomes for all invested partners involved (e.g., volunteers, participants, institution, and community).

In 2020, the lead researchers were contacted by a university athletics department who had recently implemented a community sports partnership program. Within this program, varsity student-athletes engage in coaching opportunities with youth programs across the city, with the goal of creating a sense of community within the sport and to potentially inspire a future generation of

athletes to attend the university. Moreover, this volunteer program aims to serve as a mentorship opportunity for the varsity student-athletes. Given that this program was implemented in 2018, and that the student-athlete volunteers play a central role in program delivery, the athletics department was interested in understanding the student-athlete volunteers' experiences within the program. Notably, with increased calls to conduct research in collaboration with end users (e.g., Leggat et al., 2021), partnering with the university athletics department represented a unique opportunity for the research team to better understand their program needs, with the goal of conducting research that is more relevant and impactful for the target knowledge users.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore varsity student-athletes' experiences with, and perceptions of, the respective university athletics-community sports partnership program. More specifically, and in line with the athletics department's needs, we were interested in uncovering (a) the potential benefits acquired from volunteering in the program and (b) the strengths and/or limitations of the program in relation to fostering an ideal volunteer position. In doing so, the research team ultimately sought to create evidence-informed recommendations for the athletics department pertaining to how they could cultivate opportunities within the partnership program that would best promote quality volunteer experiences. Altogether, our findings could serve as key considerations when developing partnership programs in the future not only to benefit the participants and community/institution at large, but, importantly, the volunteers themselves.

Method

This study employed a pragmatic approach to explore volunteers' perceptions of, and experiences within, a partnership program with the goal of generating practical recommendations to promote quality volunteer experiences (Giacobbi et al., 2005). In line with this orientation, we sought to better understand (a) the associated outcomes of volunteering in the partnership program and (b) the program's strengths and/or limitations, which ultimately would inform the development of evidence-informed recommendations for the athletics department.

Setting and Data Collection

This study was situated within a Canadian university that implemented a university athletics–community sports partnership program in 2018. The purpose of this partnership program is to inspire youth athletes to pursue varsity and academic careers at the university while simultaneously providing varsity student–athletes with mentor opportunities. In collaboration with athletics department representatives, and following institutional ethics board approval, current volunteers of the program were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. A recruitment poster and letter of information were circulated to the varsity athletics teams via the athletics department representatives, who were then asked to contact the first author directly. A total of 10 volunteers ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.8$; $SD = 1.69$; 50% self-identifying women) were recruited. Participants belonged to men’s and women’s soccer, men’s football, and women’s rugby and softball. Interviews took place in person ($n = 3$), over the phone ($n = 1$), or on Zoom ($n = 6$) and lasted on average 48:00 minutes ($SD = 8:31$). Each interview followed a semi-structured guide that was developed in collaboration with the athletics department representatives (see Appendix 1). Interviews were audio/video recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis (TA) approach was adopted to inductively identify patterns and themes across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Given the relatively sparse information about volunteers’ experiences within this type of partnership program, reflexive TA provided an opportunity to openly code (i.e., data-driven coding) with the goal of developing higher order themes (i.e., patterns of shared meaning; Braun & Clarke, 2020). The first author read and reread the transcripts, generated initial codes using the Quirkos Analysis Software (Version 2.3), and further developed themes of broader significance. Through discussion with the coauthors, themes were reviewed for coherency, defined, named, and are described in the Results section below. Given the pragmatic orientation of the project, our analysis was guided by the notion of practical utility—that is, ensuring that findings have use in the real world (e.g., Wiltshire, 2018). To protect the anonymity of participants, the partnership program’s name

has been removed; it is herein referred to as “program,” and participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Results

Pertaining to the student–athlete volunteer experience within the partnership program, the volunteers discussed a variety of reasons for volunteering within the program that ranged from intrinsic to extrinsic in nature. Stemming from these motivations to engage, important program implications were also discussed spanning themselves, the youth participants, and the institution and community more broadly (see Figure 1). In addition, based on the volunteers’ experiences, key takeaways and practical recommendations are provided for invested partners who are involved in, or seeking to develop, similar partnership programs (e.g., coaches, athletics staff) to promote quality volunteer opportunities.

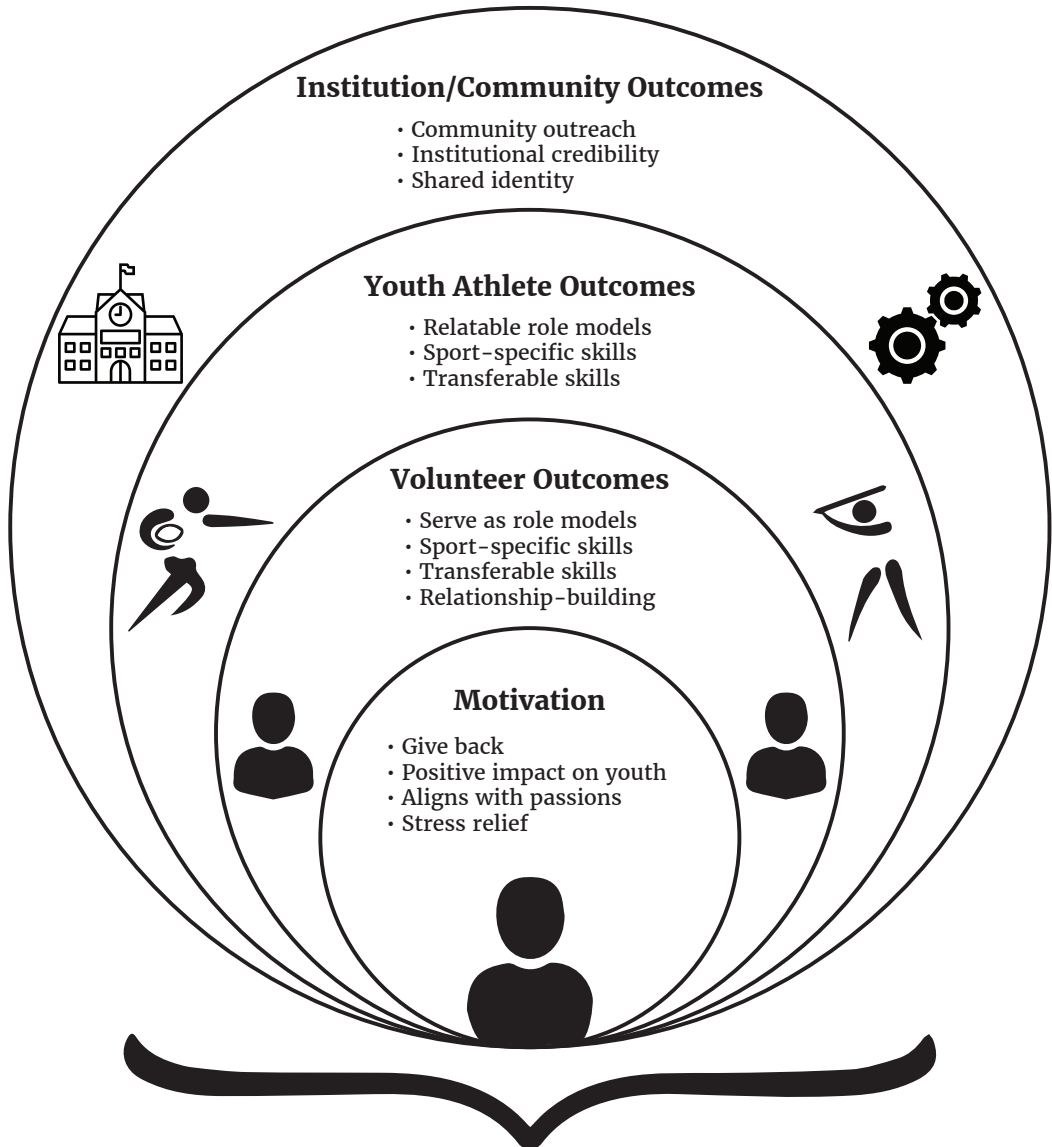
Motivation to Volunteer

Athletes discussed various motivations for volunteering in the program that ranged from being intrinsic (e.g., giving back) to extrinsic (e.g., building resume) in nature. Most often, volunteers described the program as an ideal, solidified opportunity to “give back” to the youth sporting community that they had previously benefited from by promoting positive sports experiences to the next generation of young athletes. Lionel stated:

I’ve had so many people help me in my [sports] career . . . I’ve had a ton of different coaches and people that believed in me and helped me develop into a better person. I’ve realized that coaching is a great way to give back and do the same thing for the next generation of kids . . . it feels good to try to give them the same kinds of opportunities.

The opportunity to give back also enabled volunteers to have an impact on youth athletes’ psychosocial and sport-specific development, which also motivated them to engage in the program. Kevin stated, “When [the youth athletes] do one simple thing right or just them having a smile on their face makes any effort worth it.” Thus, having a positive impact on the youth athletes was a driving force that motivated them to volunteer in the program.

Figure 1. The Student–Athlete Volunteer Experience in a University Athletics–Community Sports Partnership



Program Recommendations

- Clear and shared volunteer expectations
- Ensure meaningful volunteer opportunities
- Carefully consider logistics

Participating in the “youthful” sports environment and engaging in an activity that they loved also motivated the student-athletes to volunteer. Along these lines, volunteers emphasized that having fun and enjoying themselves were important motivators to volunteer:

When you get into the depths of your training . . . you sometimes forget to enjoy the game . . . without joy there is no game, so going back to volunteer with these kids . . . it brings you so much joy. It [reminds you why] you play—just to enjoy the game. (Kevin)

Moreover, throughout the interviews a common point of discussion was how busy the volunteers’ schedules were and the stressors associated with having to balance various life responsibilities as varsity student-athletes (e.g., academics, athletics, extracurriculars). Despite being an additional time commitment, volunteers saw this program as an excellent outlet to relieve stress: “It’s pretty much the best part of my day . . . to step away from school . . . to step away from everything for a little bit” (Devan). Altogether, the volunteers were motivated to engage within the program for a variety of reasons that ranged from giving back to sporting communities to acquiring personal benefits.

Key takeaway: Volunteer partnership programs should not serve as additional stressors for student-athletes but rather as an opportunity to foster social relationships, learn new skills, and have a positive impact on youth.

Partnership Program Implications

Although the purpose of this study was to explore volunteers’ experiences and the associated volunteer outcomes, participants emphasized a variety of benefits for not only themselves, but also for the youth athletes, institution, and community as a whole.

The Volunteer

Volunteers discussed a variety of benefits of engaging with the program, noting that serving as volunteers provided them with the opportunity to develop trusting and supportive reciprocal relationships with the youth participants. The volunteers often described a point of realization that younger

versions of themselves were looking up to them, and that they had the potential to dramatically impact their sports experiences by serving as relatable role models:

There is a sign in our changeroom that says . . . “See that little girl in the stands, she wants to be just like you, make sure you put your heart out” . . . and now it has meaning behind it. There are girls out there watching our game, trying to learn the game, to be an older female player, so that’s really cool. (Aaliyah)

Serving as relatable role models for the youth athletes and assisting them throughout their sporting careers was very rewarding for the volunteers.

Volunteers also described acquiring various sport-specific and transferable skills through engaging with the program. Whereas they prioritized the youth participants’ development, given the lessened age gap between some participants and volunteers, there was also an opportunity to further refine their own sport-specific skills: “We get to go practice with the U16s once a week, which is more reps for us to make us better, keep us in shape” (Camila). Moreover, the volunteers developed various transferable skills such as patience, problem-solving, and self-governance by interacting with the youth. Most notably, volunteers described this program as an ideal opportunity for the varsity student-athletes to develop their leadership skills that, in turn, could better their own varsity teams: “The players who have been really involved in the coaching, I’ve noticed a lot of them step up—take more vocal leadership roles on the [varsity] team . . . when you’re a coach, you have no choice but to be a vocal leader” (Theo).

In addition to fostering supportive and reciprocal relationships with the youth athletes through role modeling, volunteers also highlighted that engaging in the program served as an opportunity to build new connections with their varsity teammates. Devan stated, “Coaching with teammates gives you an opportunity to build more of a relationship with different teammates . . . teammates who you haven’t interacted with as much—people who you wouldn’t talk to as much off the field . . . or even on the field.” Thus, volunteers not only recognized

individual benefits, but also discussed the broader implications for their varsity teams.

Key takeaway: Partnership programs provide varsity student-athletes with unique mentoring opportunities that have implications for the individual volunteers (e.g., skill refinement) and their respective varsity teams (e.g., developing athlete leaders).

The Youth Athletes

Just as the volunteers were able to serve as role models for the youth, volunteers emphasized that they believed the youth also benefited from the reciprocal, supportive relationships they built together: “[The youth athletes] are so excited that they get to interact with actual varsity athletes and to them, we’re their role models . . . they want to hear everything I have to say” (Aaliyah). Given the close proximity in age between the volunteers and athletes in comparison to parents and full-time coaches, the volunteers saw this as a unique opportunity to serve as relatable role models for the youth participants to assist in positively shaping their sport experiences: “In two years they’re going to be choosing universities . . . maybe they’ll be more likely to stay because they’ve grown up cheering for [University] . . . so having us involved . . . it’s just something more you can relate to” (Kevin). Volunteers described how important it was for the youth athletes to have relatable role models with whom they could envision themselves being in the future. Volunteers emphasized how this experience could have important implications for long-term participation in sports and decisions pertaining to advancing one’s varsity athletics career.

Another prominent outcome that volunteers described for the youth participants was the development of sport-specific (e.g., technique) and transferable (e.g., teamwork, communication) skills. Zane highlighted that being so well-versed in the sport provided a unique and fresh perspective when coaching the youth athletes, which, in turn, had positive developmental implications for the participants. In addition to skill development, volunteers also discussed their important role in trying to prevent sport dropout by increasing the quantity and quality of available sporting opportunities for the youth:

When I was in youth soccer, they

didn’t have any specific goalkeeper coaches, it was like “Oh yeah, hold your hands up, don’t let it hit your face.” So I think the parents are grateful they have . . . more relatable, younger coaches, and the fact we are coaching them and we’re varsity athletes, the kids think just that’s the coolest thing because they hope to one day to play for [University]. (Aaliyah)

Key takeaway: Highly skilled and more relatable volunteers served as exemplar role models for the youth and promoted sport-specific development/skill acquisition among the athletes.

The Institution and Community

Volunteers reflected on how their involvement within the program also benefited the institution and community through enhanced outreach, credibility of the university and community sports programs, and the development of a shared identity. Volunteers discussed the importance of building positive relationships with community members to enhance their program’s reach and image outside the University district. Devan recalled:

It’s beneficial for us [varsity athletes] . . . it’s beneficial for [University]. It looks good on the program because we’re obviously getting out, helping the community, it looks good on our team . . . it gives opportunities to build relationships with people who are eventually going to become fans of our team . . . come to our games—come cheer us on.

Thus, creating positive relationships and enhancing the university’s connection with the community had important implications for garnering support for one’s respective varsity team.

Volunteering for the program was also described as an avenue to increase the perceived credibility of both the youth sport and varsity athletics programs. Theo stated,

I think the program just [being associated] with [University] . . . is a really great partnership. [University] has a lot of resources and facilities that may not be open

to smaller community–based programs, so sharing those resources . . . is definitely great for the development of the athletes.

Thus, volunteers perceived the youth programming to be more established and of higher quality when associated with the university. In relation to the credibility of the varsity program, volunteers emphasized that partnering with community teams provided them with the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and abilities through coaching and, as a result, the team experienced increased community support during competitions, which strengthened their team’s reputation.

In addition, volunteers described that, through their involvement in the program, a greater sense of connection and shared identity were established between the university and community sports programs. For instance, Jasmine stated, “You hear from other universities that they don’t get as involved as joining literally with a club. [Program] is joining directly [with the University] so, that’s pretty cool . . . just seeing the kids walk around with their [program] hoodies and their sweaters.” Volunteers often discussed how they would see youth participants sporting the university’s colors and clothing within the community, reflecting their enhanced connection and shared identity with one another.

Key takeaway: Building supportive relationships between the institution and community sports organizations can serve as a solidified pathway through which youth can pursue varsity athletic careers while promoting and enhancing the reputation of said university.

Enhancing the Quality of Volunteer Opportunities Within the Partnership Program

Despite the many beneficial outcomes associated with the program, it became apparent through the discussions with the volunteers that some aspects of the program hindered quality volunteer participation. More generally, these barriers included a lack of communication between community sports program representatives (e.g., coaches) and volunteers, not being given meaningful roles, and logistical concerns (e.g., location, scheduling). Therefore, to maximize

the benefits associated with volunteering in this program, we propose the following recommendations for invested partners within these organizations (e.g., full–time coaches, athletics department staff).

Establish Clear and Shared Expectations for Volunteer Roles and Responsibilities

Whereas volunteers acknowledged that they were primarily there to assist the full–time coaches, a lack of clearly outlined expectations often resulted in volunteers acting in a more reserved way out of fear of overstepping. Zane recalled, “I always find myself having to ask, ‘Okay, what’s the plan for practice? What do you want me to do?’ [The coach] never makes that public at the start . . . I think [that discussion] is really important.” Thus, volunteers highlighted the benefit of having transparent conversations instigated by the head coaches prior to the start of their training sessions. These discussions, in turn, could enhance the volunteers’ abilities to fulfill their expected level of engagement.

Ensure Meaningful Opportunities Through Quality Interactions

Volunteers described their roles as meaningful when they were given autonomy or could embody a leadership role (e.g., provide input on drills to implement, give technical feedback). When their involvement and responsibilities were described as meaningful, participants discussed feeling valued and appreciated, which in turn, promoted volunteer retention:

As soon as we come to the practice the [coaches] shake our hands and will be like, “Hi, we’re super happy to have you and the girls are super excited to have you guys here!” . . . they’ll integrate us into every drill . . . [I] always feel welcomed. (Jasmine)

As highlighted previously, the volunteers described having extremely busy schedules as varsity student–athletes, and thus it was imperative to feel as though their time was valued and that they were having an impact on the youth participants through meaningful roles and responsibilities.

In addition, all of the volunteers discussed the importance of building quality interpersonal relationships with the youth participants. Notably, the volunteers highlighted that building those quality relationships

took time and thus emphasized the importance of having continuity and longevity when volunteering with specific teams:

I've been able to work continuously with one team. So, I got to know the team and really have an impact on them personally rather than just jumping in on random training sessions. . . . I feel like being able to get to know the girls and actually work with them one on one has been really impactful. (Jasmine)

Thus, many volunteers recommended a more consistent training schedule in which volunteers could work with the same athletes over the course of a season as an avenue to develop quality connections and reinforce a sense of relatedness with the youth.

Carefully Consider Logistics to Facilitate Volunteer Involvement

Many volunteers discussed the difficulties of attending scheduled practices that were extremely far away from campus and required public transportation. Aaliyah noted that given their time-constrained schedules, spending an additional hour commuting to their already hour-long sessions was often not feasible:

Most university students don't have vehicles or modes of transportation, so when they're training out at [location], that's kind of tricky because you're only spending an hour with the team but actually you're spending 40 minutes to get there in a cab and 40 minutes after—it's your whole evening.

Given the time commitment required when traveling to training locations, volunteers discussed frustrations that arose when there was a lack of organization and communication with the partnered organization upon arrival (e.g., being given the wrong practice time, facilities being locked). Scheduling was also a concern for the volunteers when balancing their own training schedules with the program's training sessions. For instance, many volunteers highlighted that after a weekend away at a varsity competition, volunteering on Sunday evenings was often not feasible or ideal. Thus, it is crucial for athletics departments and sports organizations to be transparent and open with one another in regard to scheduling program

practices to minimize scheduling conflicts. Improved communication and planning would provide more opportunities for student-athletes to attend volunteer sessions and, as a result, enhance the quality of the youth sports programming.

Discussion

Through the varsity student-athlete interviews, numerous motivations to volunteer (e.g., ranging from intrinsic to extrinsic) and associated program benefits were highlighted, spanning the volunteers themselves (e.g., serve as role models), the youth participants (e.g., sport-specific skill development), and benefits at community/institution levels (e.g., enhanced community outreach, credibility of programming). Whereas similar implications have been discussed in university sports partnership literature pertaining to the benefits acquired by the youth (e.g., skill development; Hemphill & Martinek, 2017) and the institution/community (e.g., increased organizational capacity; Svensson et al., 2014), this study extends this body of literature to encompass benefits acquired by the volunteers themselves.

Accordingly, targeted recommendations have been provided on how to generate quality volunteer experiences to promote retention in these partnership programs (i.e., the development of clear and shared volunteer expectations, providing meaningful opportunities through quality relationships, and carefully considering logistical concerns). These findings are further supported by existing literature pertaining to volunteer motivations and future intentions within the sports context. For instance, individuals are more likely to continue to volunteer when they feel a sense of belonging with their respective community (e.g., Kerwin et al., 2015; MacLean & Hamm, 2007; Wicker, 2017). This finding aligns closely with the current recommendation to promote consistent volunteer interactions with the same team over time to enable the development of high-quality relationships. In doing so, volunteers may feel a greater sense of belonging through more meaningful interactions with the youth.

More broadly, these recommendations are further supported by research examining university student-athlete volunteer experiences grounded in self-determination theory (e.g., Deal & Camiré, 2016). In relation to the satisfaction of basic psychologi-

cal needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness; Ryan & Deci, 2017), student–athletes are more motivated to volunteer when these needs are satisfied (e.g., Deal & Camiré, 2016). In relation to the proposed recommendations, establishing clear and shared expectations may provide volunteers with the opportunity to adequately display their existing competencies (e.g., leading specific drills). Moreover, carefully considering logistical concerns (e.g., scheduling of varsity athlete practices, location) may provide more opportunities for athletes to engage meaningfully in their volunteer positions and, subsequently, further develop their own sport-specific and transferable competencies. Similarly, although having the opportunity to build quality relationships with youth over time could enhance feelings of relatedness, being given meaningful roles and responsibilities may satisfy volunteers' needs for autonomy. Thus, in alignment with existing literature on varsity student–athlete volunteers (e.g., Deal & Camiré, 2016) and volunteer literature more broadly (e.g., Bidee et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2016), fostering volunteer positions that fulfill the aforementioned basic psychological needs may be an important consideration for these partnership programs.

Next Steps

To develop a more well-rounded understanding of these implications, it is integral to engage with multiple invested partners of the program (e.g., Goodman & Sanders Thompson, 2017). Thus, to further explore the outcomes associated with the respective program, the researchers will seek to engage with other social agents such as the youth participants, community coaches, and the athletics department staff to obtain a better understanding of their perspectives of, and experiences within, the program. Moreover, within the field of sports psychology, behavioral observation methods have been employed to examine coach–athlete interactions (e.g., Turnnidge et al., 2014). Implementing an observational technique may serve as a fruitful avenue to obtain information about the interactions (e.g.,

feedback, instruction) that occur between the volunteers and key partners of the program. These interactions may subsequently influence the aforementioned outcomes and thus can be used to inform future program recommendations.

Given the benefits associated with program evaluations (e.g., program enhancement), adopting evidence-informed evaluation tools is critical for better understanding how a program can be improved to benefit the intended end user (e.g., Lawrason et al., 2021). One particularly relevant evaluation tool that has been used across a range of research fields is the RE-AIM framework (Gaglio et al., 2013). The RE-AIM framework encompasses five dimensions: (a) reach (the number and characteristics of individuals who engage in the program), (b) effectiveness (the positive and negative outcomes of the program), (c) adoption (the proportion and representativeness of the setting), (d) implementation (the cost and extent to which the program is delivered as intended), and (e) maintenance (assessing individual- and organization-level outcomes beyond 6 months; Glasgow et al., 1999). Thus, implementing the RE-AIM framework may serve as a salient avenue to inform recommendations with the goal of enhancing the program for all of those involved.

Conclusion

This study reinforces, from the volunteer perspective, the many motivations to volunteer for, and the benefits of engaging with, a university athletics–community sports partnership program. Institutions and community sports organizations are encouraged to cultivate partnerships that not only promote long-term sports participation, but also assist in fostering quality volunteer opportunities. Based on the volunteer experiences, key considerations and program recommendations are provided. Altogether, it is the hope that institutions and community sports programs adopt similar partnerships to maximize sports as a salient avenue to develop well-rounded and civically engaged varsity student–athletes.



Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Athletics Department representatives, research assistants, and the varsity student–athlete volunteers who dedicated their time to engage with this project.

Declaration of Interest

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

About the Authors

Cailie S. McGuire is a PhD candidate in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen's University. Her research interests fall within the umbrella field of sport psychology, exploring how team dynamics principles such as trust, subgroups, and leadership influence athlete well-being and performance. Cailie completed her master of science at Queen's University in sport psychology.

Jennifer T. Coletti works as a research associate for the Sport Information Resource Center in Ottawa, Ontario. Her research background is in the field of positive youth development with a specific focus of engaging women and girls in sport. She previously completed a master's degree in sport psychology from Queen's University.

Luc J. Martin is an associate professor in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen's University. His research interests focus generally on group dynamics principles, with particular attention to topics such as subgroups/cliques, leadership, social identity, and team building. He received his PhD from Western University and did a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of British Columbia.

References

- Adler, R. P., & Goggin, J. (2005). What do we mean by “civic engagement”? *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(3), 236–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344605276792>
- Bidee, J., Vantilborgh, T., Pepermans, R., Huybrechts, G., Willems, J., Jegers, M., & Hofmans, J. (2013). Autonomous motivation stimulates volunteers’ work effort: A self-determination theory approach to volunteerism. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 24(1), 32–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-012-9269-x>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Deal, C. J., & Camiré, M. (2016). An examination of university student–athletes’ motivations to contribute. *Journal of College and Character*, 17(2), 116–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2016.1159227>
- Flanagan, C., & Levine, P. (2010). Civic engagement and the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20(1), 159–179. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27795064>
- Gaglio, B., Shoup, J. A., & Glasgow, R. E. (2013). The RE–AIM framework: A systematic review of use over time. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(6), e38–e46. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301299>
- Giacobbi, P. R., Poczwadowski, A., & Hager, P. (2005). A pragmatic research philosophy for sport and exercise psychology. *The Sport Psychologist*, 19(1), 18–31. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.19.1.18>
- Glasgow, R. E., Vogt, T. M., & Boles, S. M. (1999). Evaluating the public health impact of health promotion interventions: The RE–AIM framework. *American Journal of Public Health*, 89(9), 1322–1327. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.89.9.1322>
- Goodman, M. S., & Sanders Thompson, V. L. (2017). The science of stakeholder engagement in research: Classification, implementation, and evaluation. *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, 7(3), 486–491. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13142-017-0495-z>
- Hemphill, M. A., & Martinek, T. (2017). Community engagement through sport: University partnerships to promote youth development. *Kinesiology Review*, 6(4), 311–316. <https://doi.org/10.1123/kr.2017-0027>
- Kay, T., & Bradbury, S. (2009). Youth sport volunteering: Developing social capital? *Sport, Education and Society*, 14(1), 121–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573320802615288>
- Kerwin, S., Warner, S., Walker, M., & Stevens, J. (2015). Exploring sense of community among small–scale sport event volunteers. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 15(1), 77–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2014.996581>
- Lawrason, S., Turnnidge, J., Tomasone, J., Allan, V., Côté, J., Dawson, K., & Martin, L. J. (2021). Employing the RE–AIM framework to evaluate multisport service organization initiatives. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 12(2), 87–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2020.1773592>
- Leggat, F. J., Wadey, R., Day, M. C., Winter, S., & Sanders, P. (2021). Bridging the know–do gap using integrated knowledge translation and qualitative inquiry: A narrative review. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 15(2), 188–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2021.1954074>
- Lerner, R. M., Wang, J., Chase, P. A., Gutierrez, A. S., Harris, E. M., Rubin, R. O., & Yalin, C. (2014). Using relational developmental systems theory to link program goals, activities, and outcomes: The sample case of the 4–H Study of Positive Youth Development. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 144(1), 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20110>
- MacLean, J., & Hamm, S. (2007). Motivation, commitment, and intentions of volunteers at a large Canadian sporting event. *Leisure/Loisir*, 31(2), 523–556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2007.9651394>
- MacNeela, P., & Gannon, N. (2014). Process and positive development: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of university student volunteering. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(3), 407–436. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413510968>

- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Publications.
- Svensson, P. G., Huml, M. R., & Hancock, M. G. (2014). Exploring intercollegiate athletic department–community partnerships through the lens of community service organizations. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 18(4), 97–128. <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1169>
- Turnnidge, J., Côté, J., Hollenstein, T., & Deakin, J. (2014). A direct observation of the dynamic content and structure of coach–athlete interactions in a model sport program. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 26(2), 225–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2013.821637>
- Wicker, P. (2017). Volunteerism and volunteer management in sport. *Sport Management Review*, 20(4), 325–337. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.01.001>
- Wilson, J. (2000). Volunteering. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), 215–240. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.215>
- Wiltshire, G. (2018). A case for critical realism in the pursuit of interdisciplinarity and impact. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 10(5), 525–542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2018.1467482>
- Wu, Y., Li, C., & Khoo, S. (2016). Predicting future volunteering intentions through a self-determination theory perspective. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 27(3), 1266–1279. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-015-9570-6>

Appendix 1

Interview Guide

Before we begin, I would like to confirm your consent to participate.

I would like to remind you that you are able to stop participating in the interview at any point, and do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. You do not have to provide any reason for declining to answer a question.

To analyze the interview, we will audio/video-record it so it can be transcribed verbatim afterwards and we will be using quotes during the write up of the analysis. Your name will be removed, do you consent to the interview being audio/video-recorded and the use of quotes?

Part I: Contextualizing Participant Volunteering Experience and Establishing Rapport

Contextualizing Description—We will begin with a definition of volunteer-based experiences. In our interview, volunteer-based experiences will refer to any activity in which your time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or cause (e.g., an after school reading program, providing assistance at a hospital information booth).

The first topic I would like to ask you about is the different volunteer experiences that you have taken part in throughout your life. Can you begin with your first volunteer experience, and then walk me through any others that you've done?

- *Probes:*
 - Tell me more about that.
 - When was this?
 - What did you do after that?
 - How old were you during these experiences?
 - Why did you begin volunteering at this time?

For each volunteer experience, the interviewer will also try to obtain the following information:

- How often did you take part in this activity?
- How many hours a week did you dedicate to this activity?

Considering all of your volunteer-based positions we have discussed:

- Which experience has meant the most to you?
 - What aspects of the experience made it more meaningful?
 - Tell me more about these aspects.
 - Who played a key part in this?
 - Can you tell me a story of a time when an activity felt meaningful?
 - Why was that a meaningful moment?
- Which experience meant the least to you?
 - What aspects of the experience made it less meaningful?
 - Tell me more about these aspects.
 - Who played a part in making it less meaningful?
 - Can you recall an example of when an activity did not feel meaningful?
 - Why was this activity not meaningful?

Part II: Student–Athlete Experience Generally and With Volunteering Specifically

Before we discuss your most current volunteering here at [University], I would like to know a bit more about your day to day life as a varsity student–athlete.

- Can you start by telling me about the academic program that you are in?
- What about the sport that you are involved with?
- Can you walk me through a typical weekday from start to finish?
- What about the weekend?

On top of the schedule that you’ve described, you’ve become involved with the [Program name]. I would like to spend the remainder of our time discussing this experience.

- What is important for you to experience in an ideal volunteer position?
 - *Probes:*
 - Why?
 - What do you mean by that?
 - How would this make you feel?
- Very generally, what would you say you’re “getting” out of your involvement in volunteering with [local sport organization]:
 - *Probe for skills, opportunities, networking, etc.*
- If we met at the end of the school year, what do you hope you would be telling me about your volunteering experience?
 - *Probe for variety of elements ranging from psychological, physical, social*
- How have you been received from the organization/youth/parents that you’re working with?
 - Can you provide an example of why you think that?
- How (if at all) do you think the organization generally, and youth specifically, are benefiting from this program?
 - What would you say you individually are contributing to this?
- If a close friend asked you about a quick snapshot of your experience in the [Program], what would you say to them?
 - Why would you choose to share these particular items?
- Thinking back on your involvement, can you tell me a story about something meaningful that happened within the [Program]?
 - Why was this important to you?

I would like to finish by speaking with you about this program at more of a team level.

- For starters, whose decision was it to become involved, and how were you and your teammates notified?
- What has the “buy in” from your fellow teammates been like?
- Can you provide any examples of how it has affected the environment around the team?

I have covered everything I would like to ask you about today . . . is there anything else you would think would be important to share with me?

Thank you for your time, again if you have any questions feel free to contact me.