

Career Maturity of Division III Athletes: Contextualizing the Importance of Psychological Health and Comprehensive Identity Formation to Holistic Developments

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NCAA student-athletes often become engulfed in their athletic role. While athletic role engulfment positively correlates to salient athletic identity, Division III student-athletes tend to identify with a diverse role set. Extant research has found that the prevalence of salient athletic identity among Division I student-athletes poses as a structural limitation to educational attainment and professional development. Given the unique philosophy of Division III athletics, such athletic identity formation is mitigated. Accordingly, the present study sought to examine demographic and psychographic factors of Division III student-athletes in relation to career maturity. Division III targeted populations that this information can greatly assist are university administration and intercollegiate athletic staff, including athletic directors and student-athlete support areas. Analysis of responses from a representative sample of more than 300 student-athletes ($n = 301$) indicates that psychometric factors are better indicators of career maturity than demographic factors. Given the emphasis on holistic athletic development in Division III and the corresponding mitigation of salient athletic identity formation, such findings are indicative of the importance of holistic athlete development on the career maturity of student-athletes.

Keywords: NCAA, athletic identity, athletic role engulfment, professional development, Division III

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Introduction

In a 2022 exposé on Vanderbilt University football, the director of football recruiting, Nik Valdiserri, detailed the recruiting philosophy formulated by the football staff. While Vanderbilt is considered a prestigious academic institution, Valdiserri contended that in order to achieve the quality of recruiting necessary to compete in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), prospective student-athletes must choose to enroll at Vanderbilt solely due to the football program:

We're trying to send the message, 'You're not coming here for anything but to play football' ... if we're having kids choose Vanderbilt football because of the academics, then we're doing an injustice to our program. This has to be a football decision. (Raynor, 2022, para. 29)

Such primacy in the positioning of athletics participation directly contributes to the cultivation and development of prospective college athletic recruits' athletic identity while also further stimulating athletic role engulfment (Corr et al., 2020, 2022).

While much research focuses on Division I athletics and the many facets involving coaches, student-athletes, and other emerging topics, this article focuses on Division III athletes and the career maturity process. While Division III athletes make up the largest component of NCAA divisions (NCAA, n.d.c) and include no athletic scholarships (NCAA, n.d.b), their participants give meaning to the word "student-athlete" (NCAA, n.d.a; NCAA, 2021) while attaining their degree and competing in sports are often zeroed on their professional career.

In National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, n.d.a) Division I athletics, this primary emphasis on athletics is a byproduct of the immense demands placed

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on athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches, staff) to win athletics contests and generate sport-specific revenue (Corr et al., 2023; Nite, 2017; Southall et al., 2008; Stokowski et al., 2020). Accordingly, the salient athletic identity and athletic role engulfment fostered through Division I athletics participation often manifests in an uncultivated ability to make informed career-related decisions (Blann, 1985; Fridley et al., 2023). As a primary operational objective of higher education in the United States is to professionally develop students for successful careers (e.g., Coffin et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Herr et al., 2004; Naidoo, 1998), the primacy of athletics and the resulting psychological outcomes specific to athletes (e.g., salient athletic identity, athletic role engulfment) in Division I are incongruous to the overall mission of the greater academic institution. Terry Mohajir, the athletic director at NCAA Division I member institution University of Central Florida, summated this incongruity, “We’ve allowed education to be devalued in college sports” (Bianchi, 2022, para. 5).

Whereas commercialization and professionalization comprise dominant operating functions of NCAA Division I member institutions, Division III members are called to focus on the student-athletes themselves rather than revenue opportunities or entertainment quality (NCAA, 2021). Accordingly, Division III athletic department revenues are modest and almost universally subsidized by the greater academic institution (Feezell, 2009). While not commercially viable, Division III comprises the greatest number of NCAA members and competing student-athletes (NCAA, n.d.c). Notably, Division III athletic departments must meet the educational mission of higher education (NCAA, 2022, Principle A). Given an innate purpose of higher education to cultivate student career maturity through professional development (Davis et al., 2022; Herr et al., 2004; Naidoo, 1998), Division III members are inherently expected to value and support student-athletes’ educational attainment and professional development.

Such expectation is a direct justification for Division III policy prohibiting the issuance of athletics-based grant-in-aid (GIA; NCAA, n.d.b). Whereas Division I and II members are permitted to offer full or partial athletics GIA to prospective athletes, Division III’s fixation with education and development reinforces an ideology that financial assistance may not be provided purely on one’s athletic ability (NCAA, 2021). Perhaps accordingly, extant research has found that Division III student-athletes do not strongly identify with an athletic role (Stokowski et al., 2022). Given that salient athletic identity and athletic role engulfment contribute to delayed career development and maturity among student-athletes (Moiseichik et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 1996; Stokowski et al., 2019), such minimal identification with an athletic role and corresponding mitigation of salient athletic identity may be indicative of Division III student-athletes career maturity and holistic development.

The “student-athlete experience varies considerably across institutions and NCAA competitive divisions” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 277). While the Division I level is focused on highly competitive play with a targeted focus on conference and national championships with large television financial payouts, Division III is a more student-centered approach involving competing with a student-first, athlete-second philosophy. Gurney et al. (2017) highlighted intercollegiate athletics is commonly viewed as a violation of the amateurism ideal, while Simon (2010) noted that the Division III level is the purest form of intercollegiate sport (Simon, 2010). On the NCAA Division III level, athletics and education are integrated (Cooper & Weight, 2012; Emerson et al., 2009). Division III’s goal is to ensure student-athletes have an advantageous collegiate experience in which athletics is an integral part of the educational process (Brand, 2006; Katz et al., 2015). Additionally, Williams et al. (2010) showcased the importance of understanding the experience of Division III student-athletes, while Simon (2010, p. 140) stressed the Division III level serves as an example of what intercollegiate athletics “should be.” However, as the total NCAA intercollegiate level continues to evolve, many scholars fear that Division III is leaning more toward the Division I model and has succumbed to commercialism and monetary values (Sparvero & Warner, 2013).

While extant research has found Division I student-athletes with salient athletic identities are not optimistic about pursuing careers outside of sport (Tyrance et al., 2013) and have lower overall life satisfaction (Mathews et al., 2021), empirical research on athletic identity and career maturity among Division III student-athletes is notably scarce. Although Division III comprises the greatest number of member institutions and competing student-athletes, the lack of commercial viability and fanaticism negatively affect the perceived value of research on Division III. However, as distinctions between the divisional structure of the NCAA have become more ambiguous over time (Southall et al., 2023), the destratification of the NCAA, in addition to the sheer number of participating student-athletes, gives credence to research examining Division III athletics.

Career maturity is defined as the degree of confidence an individual has in the ability to make career-related decisions (Betz et al., 1996; Finch, 2009). Brown and Hartley (1998) noted career maturity involves understanding interests, capabilities, and values associated for future career possibilities. To aid student-athletes in developing career maturity and prepare for post-athletic careers, many institutions have established career development programs (Ryan et al., 2015). Examples of possible services include career counseling, career fairs, interview training, and cover letter and resume workshops.

Accordingly, the present study sought to examine the relationship between demographic and psychometric characteristics with the career maturity of

Division III student-athletes. The authors note that this information can greatly assist the following groups within its Division III target population: university administration, intercollegiate athletic staff (including athletic directors and athletic advisors), and student-athlete support services.

The following research questions were developed to assist in developing the methodological approach and survey implementation:

1. Do demographic (e.g., age, gender) or psychometric indicators (e.g., athlete identity, quality of life) better predict career maturity among Division III student-athletes?
2. Which variable is the strongest predictor of career maturity among Division III student-athletes?

Methodology

This study employed a non-experimental survey disseminated through a purposeful sampling method that allowed the researchers to seek participants that fit the needs of the current research, specifically, students actively participating in Division III athletics.

Participants

Following institutional review board (IRB) approval, researchers contacted Division III athletic administrators via email to gauge their interest in participating in the study. Athletic administrators who expressed interest were asked to forward the created survey to all athletes at their respective institutions. Researchers compiled a list of email addresses for 445 NCAA Division III athletic directors and requested that they forward an invitation to participate in the online questionnaire to college athletes at their respective institutions. Through these efforts, we were able to collect 301 completed responses. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years. The sample included 207 (68.8%) female and 94 (31.2%) male college athletes, among whom 30 (10.0%) identified as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Twenty-six unique sports were represented by the participants, 29 of whom competed in multiple sports. A complete list of demographic characteristics and sport-specific representation can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

Measures

The questionnaire began by requesting voluntary consent followed by general descriptive inquiries: age, gender, grade point average (GPA), race, year in school, and LGBTQIA+ status. Three previously validated instruments for career maturity,

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Classification	<i>n</i>	%
Freshman	75	24.9%
Sophomore	90	29.9%
Junior	81	26.9%
Senior	52	17.3%
Graduate	3	1.0%
Gender	<i>n</i>	%
Female	207	68.8%
Male	94	31.2%
Race	<i>n</i>	%
Asian	7	2.3%
Black	16	5.3%
Latinx	21	7.0%
White	253	84.1%
Other*	4	1.3%

*Includes Native American ($n = 3$) and Pacific Islander ($n = 1$)

Table 2. Sport Representation Among Participants

Sport	<i>n</i>
Baseball	17
Basketball (men's)	9
Basketball (women's)	32
Cheerleading	2
Cross Country (men's)	1
Cross Country (women's)	9
Dance	3
Equestrian	2
Esports	1
Field Hockey (women's)	19
Football	41
Golf (men's)	1
Golf (women's)	4
Lacrosse (men's)	3
Lacrosse (women's)	33
Soccer (men's)	10
Soccer (women's)	32
Softball	27
Swimming & Diving (men's)	3
Swimming & Diving (women's)	19
Tennis (men's)	1
Tennis (women's)	8
Track & Field (men's)	11
Track & Field (women's)	16
Volleyball (women's)	22
Wrestling	5

athlete identity, and quality of life were selected to provide credibility and support for the inferences drawn from the results of this study (Cronbach, 1971).

Career Maturity Inventory

The Career Maturity Inventory-Revised (CMI-R; Crites & Savickas, 1996) measured readiness to make career choices. The CMI-R contains attitude and knowledge subscales, with 25 dichotomous items (i.e., agree, disagree) each. Subscales range from zero to 25 and are scored by adding one point for each career mature response. Before calculating the scale score, items five, six, 10, 18, and 25 must be reverse coded. Higher scores represent increased levels of career maturity. This study utilized only the attitude subscale to examine attitudes about career decision making. While the original CMI produced stronger evidence of validity and reliability, the CMI-R uses the same wording and, thus, applies to the same validity as the well-established original (Crites & Savickas, 1996).

Athlete Identity Measurement Scale

The Athlete Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993) measured the extent and exclusivity of participants' identification with an athletic role. The scale contains 10 items scored on a seven-point scale from strongly disagree (one) to strongly agree (seven). For example, participants were asked to denote the extent to which they agree with statements such as, "Sport is the most important part of my life." All item responses are summed with possible scores ranging from 10 to 70. The higher an individual scores on AIMS, the more they identify with an athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993). As demonstrated by prior research, the internal consistency coefficient for the overall scale was strong, Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$ (Beachy et al., 2018).

Quality of Life Assessment

The World Health Organization's shortened Quality of Life assessment (WHOQOL-BREF; Skevington et al., 2004) conceptualizes the highly individualized perceptions of holistic life satisfaction. The WHOQOL-BREF contains 26 items on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from very poor (one) to very good (five). The first two items measure the overall quality of life and health; however, they are not included in the scoring. The remaining 24 items are split among the four subscales: seven physical health items, six psychological health items, three social relationship items, and eight environmental items. Internal consistency reliability ratings were adequate, ranging between Cronbach's $\alpha = .68$ and $.82$ (Skevington et al., 2004). Before computing subscale scores, items three, four, and 26 must be reverse coded (i.e., inverted).

Furthermore, subscale scores must be transformed to allow for comparisons across domains, with higher scores representing greater satisfaction with one's quality of life (Skevington et al., 2004). To convert subscale scores, first sum the

items for each subscale, divide by the number of items (i.e., average), and subtract one (this accounts for the scale starting at one instead of zero). Next, divide by four (the highest possible number after subtracting one from the average) and multiply by 100.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through SPSS statistical software. Both research questions were examined with regression analysis. As such, data were checked for regression assumptions, including linearity, independence of residuals, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, leverage values, influential points, and normality. The first research question employed two multiple regression models to compare the proportion of variance in career maturity that was accounted for by a set of demographic predictors and a set of psychometric predictors. The second research question relied on a hierarchical multiple regression to determine which predictors belonged in the final model and their contribution of unique variation explained for career maturity.

Results

All assumptions were deemed tenable. Partial regression plots and a plot of studentized residuals against the predicted values assessed linearity. The independence of residuals was indicated by a Durbin-Watson statistic close to 2.0. Visual inspection of a plot of studentized residuals versus unstandardized predicted values signified homoscedasticity. There was no evidence of multicollinearity, as assessed by independent variable correlations of less than 0.7 and tolerance values greater than 0.1. Studentized deleted, leverage values, and values for Cook's were all examined, and the assumption of normality was met, as assessed by Q-Q Plot.

Research Question 1

Two multiple regression analyses were run to compare the proportions of variance in career maturity accounted for by age, gender, and GPA (demographic predictors) as well as athlete identity and quality of life measures (psychometric predictors). While both demographic predictors ($R^2 = .032$, $F(3, 297) = 3.243$, $p < .022$; adjusted $R^2 = .022$) and psychometric predictors ($R^2 = .081$, $F(5, 295) = 5.231$, $p < .001$; adjusted $R^2 = .066$) provided a significant proportion of variance in career maturity, the results found the set of psychometric measures to be a better set of predictors.

Research Question 2

A hierarchical multiple regression was run to determine if age, gender, GPA, physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and/or environment quality significantly contributed to unique variations in career maturity. The full model of age, gender, GPA, athlete identity, physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and environment to predict career maturity (Model 1) was statistically significant, $R^2 = .103$, $F(8, 292) = 4.178$, $p < .001$; adjusted $R^2 = .078$. The model was reduced by repeatedly removing the independent variable with the highest non-significant p-value.

Results indicated that the following independent variables (Models 2 – 6, respectively) did not produce a significant proportion of unique variance in career maturity, physical health ($\Delta R^2 = .102$, $\Delta F(1, 292) = .093$, $p = .761$), environment ($\Delta R^2 = .102$, $\Delta F(1, 293) = .218$, $p = .641$), gender ($\Delta R^2 = .101$, $\Delta F(1, 294) = .314$, $p = .576$), social relationships ($\Delta R^2 = .100$, $\Delta F(1, 295) = .334$, $p = .563$), and age ($\Delta R^2 = .096$, $\Delta F(1, 296) = 1.196$, $p = .275$).

While age was not a statistically significant independent variable, it is commonly discussed with career maturity and, when removed from the model, adjusted R^2 drops. As such, the final model of psychological health, athlete identity, GPA, and age resulted in a statistically significant $R^2 = .100$, $F(4, 296) = 8.203$, $p < .001$; adjusted $R^2 = .088$. Of the four predictors included in the final model (psychological health, athlete identity, GPA, and age), psychological health ($\beta = .211$, $p < .001$) was the strongest predictor of career maturity.

Discussion

While the importance of athletics success and revenue generation are emphasized across the NCAA membership, the prioritization of holistic athlete development at the Division III level curtails many of the adverse psychological conditions that affect college athletes. While athletic identity is differentiated by inter-NCAA division (Stokowski, Fridley, et al., 2020), athletic role engulfment is common among all NCAA athletes (Sturm et al., 2011). While the societal glorification of sport and collegiate athletics participation contribute to adolescent athletic role engulfment in the U.S. specifically (Adler & Adler, 1989, 1991), the overly detrimental effects of athletic role engulfment (e.g., academic failure, ignorance of injury, abusive behaviors) are largely mitigated at the Division III level due to an innate focus on comprehensive psychological development. While Division III athletes may possess the functional misrepresentation of perceived feasibility to participate in professional sport post-college, an institutional focus on multifaceted development cultivates an environment in which athletes develop academically and professionally. The corresponding levels of career maturity

among Division III athlete participants in this study are indicative of such holistic development taking place on Division III member institution campuses.

For such programmatic concentration and implementation to take place inter-NCAA division, complete organizational commitment from various athletic department institutional stakeholders must occur. With the official end of the PAC 12 Conference in the summer of 2024, the Power 5 reference (with major NCAA Division I conferences) has now become the Power 4, comprised of the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference (Christovich, 2024). The remaining Division I conferences are referred to as the Group of Five (G5) and include the American Athletic Conference, Conference USA, Mid-American Conference, Mountain West Conference, and Sun Belt Conference (Kasabian, 2024).

While non Power 4 (P4) institutional faculty indicate they can identify with the athletic experience and often occupy mentorship roles in athletes' lives (Stokowski, Paule-Koba et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2023), Division I P4 institutional faculty, specifically, are often limited in their interactions with athletes due to the sacredness of insider status within the division (Brown, 2012; Southall & Weiler, 2014). Given that holistic athlete development is an indicator of career maturity, implementing programmatic elements that foster interdisciplinary collaboration would be valuable to future efforts to nurture psychological health initiatives vital to career maturity in this study. However, athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches, staff) must actively encourage holistic athlete development for such programming to be effective (Berg et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022).

Implications

This research provides Division III university administration, intercollegiate athletic staff, including athletic directors, advisors, and student-athlete support areas the opportunity to maximize student-athlete career maturity through holistic development. The results of this study indicate that psychological health was the strongest predictor of career maturity within Division III college athlete participants. While GPA was also a significant contributing factor, the integral importance of psychological health to career maturity gives credence to the holistic model of athlete development that NCAA Division III members are called to embody. Given that Division I athletes are less optimistic about their careers outside of sport, and experience a lower quality of life than Division III athletes (Mathews et al., 2021; Tyrance et al., 2013), our findings indicate that the Division III model of holistic development may provide Division I institutions a prototypical structure in which to replicate specific practices

and standards pertaining to athlete development. As successful athletic role transition is integral to the career maturity of Division I athletes (Bopp et al., 2021), athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches, staff) seeking to fulfill the mission of higher education and adequately prepare college athletes for career and life success may consider components extolled in the Division III structure. While a need for holistic athlete development among Division I members could be easily dismissed given the commercialized and professionalized logics pervasive intra-Division I (Corr et al., 2023; Nite, 2017; Southall et al., 2008), evidence of the importance and at least pseudo commitment to athlete development is found in the growing allocation of financial resources and staff toward athlete development (Turick et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The largest segment of athletes in all NCAA levels, Division III, normally elicits the least amount of academic research and less prestigious (e.g., television, social media) public attention. However, this group is of utmost importance because of their quantity and quality of understanding of the student-athlete balance and their focus on professional career development. It is vital that Division III university administration, intercollegiate athletic staff, including athletic directors, and student-athlete support areas value their importance and laser focus for the future, and are committed to assisting them in their academic journey toward the game of life.

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