

POSTGAME:

A Professional Development Program for Oklahoma State University Student-Athletes

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1. Abstract

This project was inspired by the unfulfilled need and a desire from administration to implement a professional development program for student-athletes at Oklahoma State University. Through research on career development in student-athletes, the guidance of successful Division-I student-athlete professional development programs, and a coalition of experiences, those personal and of other superiors, POSTGAME directly targets the student-athletes of Oklahoma State University.

2. Introduction

Over 480,000 student-athletes compete at the Division-I, Division-II, or Division-III collegiate levels, yet only a few from each sport continue after college to play at the professional level or compete as an Olympian (“Estimated probability of competing in professional athletics”). According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, a governmental system that creates rules and regulations and runs championships for its college athletic program members, of the most popular sports within the body, that being baseball, men’s basketball, women’s basketball, football, men’s ice hockey, and men’s soccer, an average of 3.2% of student-athletes will be drafted to the major professional level. However, the probability of an NCAA student-athlete earning his or her bachelor’s degree is an approximate 81% among all three divisions (“Estimated probability of competing in professional athletics,” “What is the NCAA?”).

In order to obtain a decent job, the applicant must have *some* sort of work experience to validate his or her ability to be a successful and contributable employee for the company. Student-athletes are extremely desirable for employers; they bring to the table paramount skills that include time management, teamwork, determination, the ability to efficiently adapt to their surroundings, a hard work ethic, effective communication, and a background working with diverse group of people, whether that be nationality, race, religion, geographic location, or personality. Within the past five years, prominent news providers, such as *Forbes*, *Entrepreneur*, *Inc.*, and BBC, have covered the trend of businesses intentionally hiring former student-athletes because of the motivation and skill set that they bring to the workplace. Yet, student-athletes have been found to lack “professional readiness” as they ready for employment after college.

Because of the high unemployment rate for recent college graduates during the recession from 2007 to 2013, a greater focus in higher education became helping students enter the workforce after they obtain their degree. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Journal:

A number of states have mandated the tracking of graduates in their states to assess the effectiveness of the degree. The Obama administration has created a college "scorecard" to rate schools on their performance in terms of accessibility, graduation rates, and eventually outcomes. The president has also suggested that federal student aid coming to a school will be tied to these ratings. In this, the federal government is following the direction of many states: Currently, there are 25 states that tie state dollars to higher education institutions to some form of performance measurement.

In response to immense governmental pressure placed on colleges and universities for their students to acquire a job after graduation, a higher emphasis has been placed on developing the Career Services departments in order to track students' postgraduate destinations and income levels to secure federal and state tuition funding. Career Centers educate students on the elements of a workforce, show how the student might fit in that spectrum, and seek to enhance their skills and job-search documents through individual appointments, career fairs, and other specialized programs throughout the academic year (Koc and Tsang, 2015).

This is where student-athletes become disadvantaged to the rest of the student body. Many researchers have found that student-athletes have a limited amount of time to devote to activities beyond their sport and academics, and this circumstance impacts their career "intellect." In addition to practices and games, many athletes still have to attend team meetings, special meals, and more workouts, while devoting the rest of their time to required study hours, meeting with learning specialists and tutors, completing homework and projects, and studying

for exams. Martens and Lee (1998) states that any further activities for career development, such as making time to visit the career coordinator, revising job-search materials, or finding an internship that fits within their already hectic schedule, is time that the student-athlete feels that he or she may not have. So, the fate of a student-athlete's career marketability comes down to two paths: 1) lose more sleep and time devoted to studying to obtain a resume similar to their peers, or 2) fall back on skill sets from their limited amount of work-related experiences. Though student-athletes are highly sought after by top-ranking companies, recruiters ultimately have to hire candidates who possess the most favorable combination of skills *and* work experience that translates to the role and company (Davis, 2018).

Many Division-I universities see this issue, and have not only stationed a career center in student-athlete academic services, but created a career development program for student-athletes to follow that fits in their busy schedule, develops their professional skills, and communicates to potential employers dedication and maturity. The University of North Carolina teaches career development in their Life Skills Program, where in four years, student-athletes will participate in the Alumni Network website, shadow program, professional programs, resume and cover letter creation, career and graduate school counseling, university career fairs, and the Life After Sports program (Lane, 2003). George Washington University outlines their Colonial Career Development Program into four stages: Career Assessment & Exploration, Career Preparation, Career Practicum, and Transition ("Career Development"). At Virginia Tech, the Office of Student-Athlete Development has called their career development program "The Career Game Plan," where every student-athlete who completes the program receives a complementary suit for interviews and the next step after collegiate athletics ("Career Game Plan").

This thesis is to innovate a professional development program specifically tailored for the needs of student-athletes at Oklahoma State University. Through the study of existing programs at other Division-I universities, identifying research that co-aligns career development events with the correct year in which to experience them, and discovering a methodology, that persuades student-athletes to invest their limited free time to mature their professional skills and exploits already existing requirements within their classes, the goal is to create program that will advance Cowboy and Cowgirl student-athletes in an efficient and effective way, building upon OSU's Athletics foundation and persistent drive for academic, athletic, and personal excellence.

3. The Four Year Plan

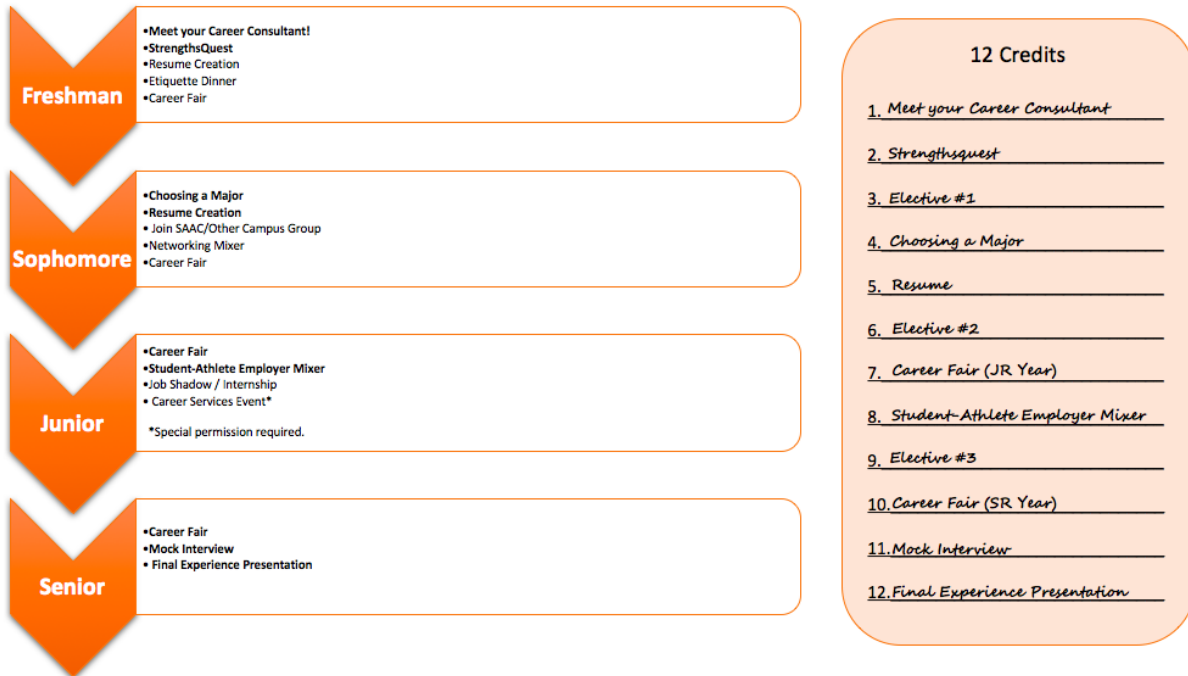
3.1 Overarching Goals and Requirements:

The Student-Athlete Professional Development Program will require the completion of at least twelve total credits (or activities) to obtain the certificate. Every year, for four years, student-athletes will be required to complete at least three credits in order to stay in the program, with two of those three activities being a mandatory session (outlined on the Process Sheet). These two credits required per year are known as the **Foundational Credits**. Nine in total, each activity “foundational” is a critical element for professional development in our student-athletes. The third credit, and any other career-related events beyond the minimum of three that the student-athlete has participated in, are **Elective Credits**, chosen by the student-athlete to personalize his or her career development experience. Kee et al. (2017) reports that when students are given the opportunity of autonomy, conceptual understanding, grades, motivation, productivity, and psychological health all increase and the probability of burnout decreases. However, even though the student-athlete is given the freedom to choose his/her third credit, recommendations are given in each academic year (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior) which are parallel with research’s findings.

Each year’s required amount of activities sum to six to ten hours of time investment, which equates to approximately one hour of career development per month. Though this may not seem like a very difficult time contribution to complete, many student-athletes use this “extra hour” to complete projects for other courses, study for exams, rest, or devote more time to their sport, especially when they are in-season. Also, with set practice, class, and travel/game times, many career-related events are not attended by student-athletes, especially during the Spring

Semester, when most sports are competing. Despite time being one of the greatest concerns for a student-athlete, this program was created with these potential issues in mind (Martens and Lee, 1998). Many of the Foundational Credits, as well as a few Elective Credits (depending on the year), are mandatory in other courses that the University requires all students to take. For example, from personal experience, several Freshman Orientation, Business Communications, Media, and popular Professional Development courses require students to turn in a resume as an assignment. The student-athlete can get “credit” for completing a resume with the Career Coordinator, for both the course and for the Professional Development Program—whether it is a Foundational or Elective Credit will be contingent based on the academic year of the student-athlete. This not only functions as a “two-birds with one stone” approach, but it also brings the Self-Efficacy Theory¹ into practice (Rasmussen, 2009). By setting up an extracurricular academic program with a predetermined outline, and overshadowing assignments from other courses that are frequently taken by the population, many student-athletes will believe they are able to meet the stipulations to complete the program.

¹ The SET explains that if one believes he will be successful at a certain task, then he will be more willing to put effort and time into completing it than a task that he does not feel as confident about.



Graphic 1: Outline of POSTGAME

3.2 Freshman Year:

The primary focus when educating freshman student-athletes on career development is merely letting them know what career development entails and where they should go to seek help in a career-related assignment or ambition (Martens and Lee 1998). The Joe and Connie Mitchell Academic Enhancement Center for Student-Athletes, located within Gallagher-Iba Arena, has established a permanent office for career development—known as the Student-Athlete Career Center, which is an outpost of OSU Career Services. Despite it being several years since the office was first dedicated, many student-athletes do not know about its opportunities. In fact, some student-athletes are shocked to find out that “that office” is specifically dedicated to advance and nourish their future careers. This is why it is imperative for all freshman student-athletes to **meet their Career Coordinator**: not only will they be exposed

to this office and its placement in the academic center, but also, freshmen will be able to individually discuss with the Career Coordinator their future aspirations for a major of study or career, or simply talk about optional routes they take if they do not specifically have something in mind. This appointment lays the foundation of trust between the student-athlete and the Career Coordinator, which opens future possibilities for the coordinator to take on a more significant role as counselor for circumstances beyond career readiness, a situation, according to Winston (1996), that is what makes it necessary for career counselors to have specific counseling skills and career development should not seem dramatically different from personal counseling.

According to Etzel, Barrow, and Pinkney (1994), one of the greatest needs for student-athletes in career development is for each individual student-athlete to understand their career-related personality. Riffie and Alexander (1991) recommend that the “assessment phase” of career development, or exploring a student-athlete’s interests, skills, and preferences, take place as soon as possible, or in this case, freshman year. This is where **StrengthsQuest** comes into play, now known as *CliftonStrengths for Students*, after rebranding the assessment. This analyzes 177 self-describing questions that allow a student to pinpoint their likes/dislikes or the accuracy of “opportunities”—i.e. the correctness of the statement “I read instructions carefully,” or the overall attitude of “I enjoy spending time outdoors.” The responses of students generates their Top 5 Strengths from their personality, an element of deduction of Personal Psychology (“What is the CliftonStrengths assessment?”). In a study by Angela Robles, she interviewed seventeen “elite softball players,” where they completed the Gallup *Clifton StrengthsFinder Inventory* (CSF) and applied their top strengths to past experiences, whether it was a situation of succeeding, overcoming adversity, failing, or watching their peers be subjected to the previously mentioned circumstances. Robles found that most athletes have “achieving” and/or “relational”

strengths, which are foundational elements of what motivates them to accomplish their goals.

She also notes that most of her participants stated the difficulty of adjusting to college their freshman year. She adds:

Participants who went to college out-of-state shared how much difficulty they faced in their first year. One participant talked about how it took a few years for her coach to finally “get her” (i.e. understand her). Jaylynn, a collegiate player, described using her strength of Focus to overcome being away from home and playing out-of state.

She explained, “You have to be focused to achieve at a high level. Especially being away, you have all the odds against you.” This raises the question, would freshman athletes have a more smooth transition if they knew their role and place on the team earlier in the year? Could the strengths philosophy help address this dilemma?

After surveying over two million adults, the Gallup Organization found that the top achievers from almost every career or work position understood what their strengths were, which means that simply taking *Strengthsquest*, people will be primed to approach circumstances in ways that will play to their top strengths and abilities (Braskamp). However, application of strengths must be taught and explained in order to achieve successful results. By requiring student-athletes to complete this assessment, and discuss it in a session of other student-athletes and an experienced career coordinator to understand how to apply their strengths in individual situations, they will THEN have an immense understanding about how they think, are motivated, and perceive situations.

To develop competence in an area of inquiry, students must: (a) have a deep foundation of factual knowledge, (b) understand facts and ideas in the context of a conceptual framework, and (c) organize knowledge in ways that facilitate retrieval and application (National Research Council 1999).

The recommended credits to accompany the first year pertain to requirements in other courses. Freshman Life Skills and Business Freshman Orientation almost always require their students to work on their resumes, whether updating it from high school, creating a completely new document, or developing the format and grammar. Furthermore, these courses include the Career Fair, whereby students complete an assignment involving going to the event and reflecting on observations. That may be a specific company caught their eye or it was more overwhelming than they imagined it would be. As well, many freshman student-athletes have the opportunity to attend an Etiquette Dinner put on by OSU Athletics or one of their colleges.

3.3 Sophomore Year:

The NCAA has specific academic checkpoints that each student-athlete must meet in order to maintain eligibility, which are referred to as Progress-Toward-Degree Requirements. Specifically for Sophomores, or second-year students, they are mandated beginning in their third year to only take classes that count toward their degree program. This means that by the end of Sophomore Year, they must have a declared major (“Division I Progress-Toward-Degree Requirements”). In the Student-Athlete Professional Development Program, this deadline is met through the **Choose Your Major** appointment with the Career Coordinator. By sitting down with an experienced career consultant, with knowledge of how majors work with a student-athlete’s schedule, the majors that can be expressed beyond the common jobs they are associated with, and a foundation of trust already set with the individual, the student-athlete will be able to discover possibilities of majors and how they can use that after collegiate athletics. This in-depth, one-on-one meeting helps a student-athlete find an area of study that will best-fit their career goals independently of “outside influences.” The immensely controlled structure and *continual*

assistance that a student-athlete receives may deter to conformity, and a choice apart from what is normal could be intimidating or seen as a disconnect from their team (Martens and Lee, 1998).

Martens and Lee (1998) labels the Second Year as the “time of decision making;” in addition to selecting a major, student-athletes should begin strategically planning out career goals and how to accomplish them. By requiring a **resume**, a career counselor and student-athlete can explore ways to improve their identity “on paper” and discuss any weaknesses they may face when pursuing employment. Because student-athletes already have a full-time job being a competitor in their sport, most have to rely on their title as a student-athlete or camp coach for “work experience.” To further his or her desirability as a well-rounded candidate, the emphasis on resume development should focus on campus and community interaction. Listed as an Elective recommendation for this year, the professional development program guides student-athletes towards extracurricular growth by promoting the idea of joining the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) or another organization on campus. For additional volunteer involvement, SAAC also works with Orange and Black Gives Back, a community outreach program of OSU Athletics, to engage student-athletes in the local community and region.

3.4 Junior Year:

Riffee and Alexander (1991) express the importance in the third academic year, athletic career coordinators should promote internships and job shadow opportunities to students. For most, this type of work experience needs to occur during the Summer Term, where no sports are “officially” practicing and the amount of classes taken are at a much smaller scale compared to the Spring and Fall Semesters. By **attending one of the Career Fairs** put on by Career Services, and per assignment, meeting with at least five different recruiters and reflecting on the event, this

will introduce the student-athlete to the manic and competitive environment of an on-campus recruiting event and potential companies that show interest in giving the student-athlete an internship, job shadow, or just become a new contact to their network.

The Student-Athlete Employer Mixer, or simplified as the **Networking Mixer**, is an event put on by the Career Center that invites back former OSU student-athletes, who now work in companies that frequently recruit at Oklahoma State (like Frito-Lay™, PepsiCo™, etc.), to connect with student-athletes, providing advice and sharing their own personal story of how they ended up where they work. This mixer is casual and relaxed: no resumes exchanged or positions offered, and student-athletes need not to dress up, in order to increase the attendance, especially as athletes come straight from practice or training table. With interactive games, a temporary panel, and a light-hearted atmosphere, the event pushes student-athletes out of their comfort zone, but they land into a setting of people that they can relate to and connect with on a personal level.

The importance of networking is exemplified in an article by the *New York Times*. Schwartz reports that large firms like Ernst & Young™, Deloitte™, and Enterprise Rent-A-Car™ now rely more than ever on employee referrals to fill positions in their companies. Ernst & Young™, an accounting firm, admit that 45% of new hires in non-entry level jobs were recommended by current employees. Deloitte™ receives over 400,000 applications per year, but when a candidate is referred, a specific team of twelve people accompanies them through the process. These companies even offer expensive prizes, like TVs and Apple™ devices, as incentives for their employees to call attention to high-quality applicants.

And it's not just about who you know, but how you interact with others. Since 2000, firms have had a greater focus on hiring candidates possessing mature social skills, compared to

decades before (Deming, 2017). Deming found that employment and wage growth, from 1980 to 2012, was consistent in jobs that require strong math skills and positions with developed interpersonal skills. Through practice, even with professional skills, research proves that *more frequent practice of nearly all 38 skills was associated with greater satisfaction with field education and greater self-evaluation of performance...practicing about one-third of the skills was also associated with field instructors' evaluations of students* (Fortune et al., 2008). So practice may not equal perfection, but through networking and acquainting one's self with the hiring-process of networking and "awkward" small talk, student-athletes will be one step ahead when the time comes to interview for internships, job shadowing experiences, and employment.

The Elective Option helps student-athletes obtain an Internship/Job Shadow experience and summarizes the experience (what project was completed, what was learned, etc.) in a short presentation. The reason for not requiring an internship or job shadow experience is most sports practice year-round. This makes it difficult for student-athletes to allocate the required time to an summer-long internship. As a reminder, their funding for school is contingent on athletic talent and membership on an OSU team; not only that, but summer internships are often the shortest length for companies to offer students. Finally, some student-athletes do not have a means of transportation to be able to take them to and from a place of employment five days a week, nor the required attire of (at least) business casual or money to purchase professional clothing, because they already have a full-time job being a student and athlete for a highly competitive and athletically successful Division-I university.

To balance the playing field for all student-athletes wanting to complete POSTGAME, if a student-athlete is not able to job shadow or intern, participating in a Career Services Event and writing a reflection will play the part as a substitute option.

3.5 Senior Year:

In the final year, the programs *should be focused on the practical skills to obtain employment* (Martens and Lee, 1998). The student-athlete will be required to attend one of the **Career Fairs** again; this time, their assignment will not be a report of the event itself, but rather, there will be mandatory appointment(s) with the Career Coordinator, to revise and tailor their resume to the industry they are looking enter and talk “strategy” for the Career Fair—what to wear, rehearsing their 30 Second Personal Pitch, making positive impressions, remembering specific recruiters and information, what to bring, who to target, and other crucial information that will make an impact in how their experience turns out (“Career Fair & Event Tips). A relaxed **mock interview** performed by the career coordinator helps them prepare. American University (2016) reiterates the importance of “practice makes perfect,” and says that a mock interview will reduce stress, give critical feedback to praise the positives and critique the negatives, and increase self-confidence for the “real thing.” Lammers et al. (2013) concluded that self-confidence and positive thinking of interviewers contribute to greater success in an interview.

In order to fully complete the professional development program, student-athletes will create a presentation over their four years through the program: what they learned and any personal development POSTGAME helped to generate. With the skills they gained through interviews and networking—confidence, eye contact, clear speech, effective communication, answering questions impromptu, etc.—these student-athletes will present their experiences to a small group of people, possibly including (but not limited to) the Career Coordinator stationed in OSU Athletics, and a mix of select staff from OSU Career Services, the Student-Athlete Academic Enhancement Center, upper-level administration in the Athletic Department (Athletic

Director, Deputy Athletic Director, select Associate Athletic Directors), upper-level administration for Oklahoma State University (President, Vice President, Provost, Chairs of Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education), and any personal connections the student-athlete may want to also be in attendance. The presentation need not be more than five minutes, in order to fit multiple presentations into one time period, give time for questions, and to retain the audience's attention (Fisher, 2013). Phil Schibeci, an author and corporate speaker for over twenty years, says that many PowerPoints® lack participation and engagement from the audience when the slides are mainly just words instead of pictures. Therefore, a PowerPoint® will not be allowed during the presentation, unless the student-athlete would like to show pictures from his/her experience; the overall goal for the presentation is for the student-athletes to use the communication skills they have gained within the course to talk openly and naturally to the audience, as if they were in an interview with a potential employer.

3.6 Completion of POSTGAME

Upon completing the requirements for POSTGAME, nine Foundational Credits and three Elective Credits, student-athletes will be recognized for this achievement at the Student-Athlete Academic Awards Banquet, which is held at the end of each Spring Semester, and receive a certificate of completion. Additionally, this award will show in their resume, enlightening employers of the professional skills these students will be able to use as a competitive advantage in their place of work.

Along with the certificate, a suit will be granted to the student-athlete for their hard work and dedication to professional development. To fund this portion of what would be considered part of a student-athlete's uniform, administration should seek to find a donor or sponsorship

company who are willing to make a commitment to the improvement of development programs within academia. However, this “gift” must be verified through Compliance, that this opportunity for student-athletes does not break any NCAA rules, specifically regulations that are put in place to maintain equitable circumstances between student-athletes and other students. Oklahoma State University does in fact have free suits for their students, which are housed in the Eastin Center. Yet, this still must be approved by the Compliance Department, to avoid any possible chance of violating statutes put in place for Athletics to adhere to.

In their Career Game Plan, Virginia Tech has a complementary suit as a reward set in place for their student-athletes upon their completion of the professional development program. I have reached out to Virginia Tech’s Student-Athlete Development staff, but have yet to receive the needed information of how they were able to accomplish the approval of this reward.

4. Discussion

Nelson (1982) found that a five session career counseling program with freshman student-athletes correlated with higher GPAs at the end of the semester, and these results were analogous to the same study done the following semester. Also, Riffie and Alexander (1991) say that the most effective approach for preparing student-athletes in the senior year is to create a career and life plan course. In an effort to solidify student-athletes' foundation of career development, it would be advised to implement POSTGAME as a mandatory program for student-athletes to complete as a course curriculum.

By offering the professional development program through a series of classes that will account for credit to a college degree, many student-athletes will find the opportunity and motivation to invest further in their professional development. As mentioned earlier with Martens and Lee (1998), time is one of the most influential factors that either causes a student-athlete to pursue or refrain from doing an activity, followed by the limited autonomy of a student-athlete for course outline, a strong identification to an athletic identity, and an overcommitment of time and energy to his or her sport. Furthermore, student-athletes would have the ability to pursue elective courses that would be extremely worthwhile and positively impact their future, building relationships with student-athletes from other sports and creating a tight-knit environment at OSU Athletics—a synergetic force that would push the Athletic Department to new heights of cultural strength and universal cohesion. Relative to a cohort² in graduate programs, by joining together “dissimilar” individuals, or in this case a class of athletes from different sports, the discussions and assignments student-athletes complete with one another strengthens bonds, further expands professional networks, and familiarizes an

² *As opposed to a traditional graduate program where students are expected to change courses every semester, a cohort engages a tight knit learning community of students, usually ten to twelve, throughout their entire academic program (“4 Ways Cohort Models Benefit Graduate Students”).*

administration with each specific class's qualities and characteristics. This allows the instructor to teach in a more effective manner, catering to each group's needs ("4 Ways Cohort Models Benefit Graduate Students").

Lastly, in order to enhance the depth of relationships between upper and lower classmen, and construct a more connected culture in the Athletic Department, for future years of POSTGAME, juniors and seniors should be required to serve as mentors to younger student-athletes. North Central College, in Naperville, Illinois, pairs first-year student-athletes with an upperclassman student-athlete, where they meet weekly for half an hour to an hour, on time-management and how to accomplish tasks. Thus far, freshmen noted the instant connection they have found with their mentors. These junior and senior student-athlete leaders are trained by a Career Coordinator on how to resolve conflicts and problems, analyze personalities, and ask the "right" questions to younger students to find the truth of a situation or root of an issue (Prinster, 2016). Additionally, mentoring is a mutualistic relationship. Knowles and Parsons (2009) discovered that as mentees' confidence and behavior improves, their mentor's Curriculum Vitae³ and applicable skills also profited.

With these further improvements to POSTGAME, Oklahoma State University will be able to send off their student-athletes with the necessary professional and social skills to be successful, whether in the workplace, as a professional athlete, or the circumstances they face in life beyond their career.

³ A Curriculum Vitae is largely used in academia to exhibit skills and experience, while resumes are more common in business in the United States.

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