

Enhancing Student-Athlete Transitions Through Peer Mentoring and Leadership

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Student-athletes experience unique challenges as they transition into collegiate environments, including academic stress, athletic responsibilities, and the evolving landscape of name, image, and likeness (NIL) rights. These demands often limit their engagement and connection with the broader campus community. A structured peer mentoring and leadership development initiative was designed to address these issues by providing holistic, team-based support. The program matches experienced student-athletes with newcomers, including first-year and transfer students, and guides them through a curriculum focused on academic success, identity development, and leadership skills. Mentors are selected based on communication abilities, peer rapport, and leadership potential, and they receive formal training to effectively support mentees. Through regular team meetings, reflective sessions, and engagement activities, the program strengthens interpersonal connections and builds student capacity for resilience, self-regulation, and institutional navigation. Since its implementation, the program has shown positive impacts on social integration, academic behaviors, and team cohesion. Mentors have reported enhanced leadership skills, while mentees described improved confidence and campus engagement. This scalable, adaptable model demonstrates the potential for replication in diverse athletic environments. The program's embedded structure within team culture allows for seamless adoption without intensive customization, offering a forward-thinking solution to the evolving needs of student-athletes.

Keywords: Student-athletes, peer mentoring, leadership development, NIL, college transition

Introduction

Student-athletes face layered transitions that are complex, extending beyond those encountered by the general student population. Alongside academic and social demands, athletes manage competitive schedules, public expectations, and the evolving legal and cultural landscape shaped by name, image, and likeness (NIL) rights. These overlapping pressures heighten risks of disengagement, stress, and identity confusion. While traditional student support systems exist, they often lack the personalization and scope necessary to support athletes comprehensively. Peer mentoring, particularly when structured intentionally, offers an avenue to bridge these gaps.

Literature Review

Structured engagement in college is linked with increased persistence and success (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2001). However, student-athletes are uniquely constrained by their time commitments and responsibilities (Simons et al., 1999). Literature on student development emphasizes the importance of social connection, leadership

opportunities, and identity integration for holistic growth (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Tinto, 2012). Peer mentoring has been recognized as a promising intervention strategy, particularly in helping students navigate identity, resilience, and institutional systems (Ferrante & Etzel, 1991; Pinkerton et al., 1989).

Mentorship in athletics has traditionally lacked formalization and leadership training components (Brown et al., 2018). Athlete-centered mentoring programs, particularly those embedded within team culture, are rare but offer significant promise. Research supports the integration of leadership development into mentoring frameworks to build both personal and team capacities (Carter & Bloom, 2009; Parham, 1993).

Program

A structured, peer-based mentoring program was developed and implemented within a Division I athletic department to support incoming student-athletes. The initiative pairs veteran student-athletes with new team members, including transfers and first-year students. The program includes a mentor selection process

based on demonstrated leadership potential, peer rapport, and communication skills. All mentors participate in pre-service training, covering confidentiality, mentoring ethics, conflict resolution, and cultural competence. Mentorship is guided by a curriculum that spans academic preparedness, leadership development, NIL and branding education, community engagement, and identity exploration. Digital tools, including e-mentoring platforms and tracking templates, support the program's management and scalability.

Results

Program outcomes were assessed through participant feedback, mentor/mentee reflections, and coach input. Common themes included improved academic self-regulation, increased confidence, and greater campus resource utilization. Mentors reported growth in leadership, communication, and responsibility. Observational feedback from coaches indicated enhanced team cohesion, proactive help-seeking behavior, and reduced transitional stress among new student-athletes.

Discussion

The findings align with previous research emphasizing the value of mentoring and structured leadership development in fostering student success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The integration of NIL literacy and identity-based training further reflects the evolving context of college athletics. Limitations include a lack of longitudinal data and potential variability across sport cultures. Future research should focus on comparative evaluations across teams and the development of standard impact metrics. The practical implications suggest that structured peer mentorship programs can fill critical support gaps and enhance leadership pipelines within collegiate athletic programs.

Conclusion

This structured mentoring model supports a broad range of student-athletes as they transition into collegiate life. Designed to address social, academic, and athletic development, the program fosters evidence-based practices that empower student-athletes to succeed. It benefits both mentors and mentees and is scalable across institutional contexts. Future directions include developing replicable toolkits and extending research on long-term impacts.

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