



## **Bridging the Gap: Using College Athlete Support Services as Justification for Human Development in a Commercialized Sport Management**

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### ABSTRACT

*International Journal of Exercise Science* 15(6): 934-947, 2022. This study investigates the presence of competing educational foundations within college athlete support service units across the 65 'Power Five' conferences to call for more human development elements within sport management education and training. To determine the orientation of professionals within these units, educational foundation is used as the measure given the role education holds in establishing and communicating norms, values, and rules of practice for professionals within the discipline. Information was gathered through staff biographies and triangulated through secondary sources (university archives and social media accounts - LinkedIn and Twitter). Of the total population of professionals ( $n = 1095$ ), 910 professionals were verified through the data search. The distribution of educational foundations shows an approximate distribution of 51%, 41%, and 8% distribution of human development, commercially-centric, and specialized educational foundations - respectively. Discussion and implications highlight the growing presence of (non-sport management) human development professionals within college athlete support services and calls for more human development orientation within the field of sport management.

**KEY WORDS:** Education, professional competencies, intercollegiate athletics

### INTRODUCTION

While existing scholarship has highlighted individual actions or broader systemic issues within intercollegiate athletics, additional investigations into more abstract and under-investigated elements that impact practices within college athlete support services is limited (14, 17, 18, 64). Rubin (45) provided a much-needed exploration into the field of athletic academic advising - a core component of college athlete support services. Rubin (45) offered valuable insights into the experiences of athletic academic advising professionals, while also bringing attention to the state of the profession. Of the narratives included in her study, two highlighted theoretical and practical elements that call for further exploration. The first being an explicit piece of advice to others considering entering the field and the second being a reflection from professionals regarding their educational background before entering the field. The first narrative speaks to the athletic subculture that prioritizes the importance of meeting and maintaining Academic

Progress Rate (APR) and Graduation Success Rate (GSR) instead of achieving college athlete success outside athletics (14, 45, 47). This narrative reiterates the conflicting nature of college athlete support services by noting the emphasis on eligibility at the expense of true academic and professional development (1, 52, 56).

The second narrative speaks towards the disconnect professionals found between their graduate education background and position. This narrative exposed an athletic advisors' disconnect between their academic training and the expectations of the field. Specifically, the narrative spotlights the difference between sport management and college student personnel (Higher Education-Student Affairs) graduate programs and post-graduate applicability to the field of athletic academic advising (45). While the concerns of intercollegiate sport being commercially grounded have been investigated, the problem of educational training impacting one's performance has not been fully explored. Within this study, primary conflict is the divide between academic foundations of college athlete support service professionals. Considering the role of educational training as the guiding principle within respective fields, further investigation can provide deeper insights the presence of conflicting educational foundations within fields (20, 40, 59, 60).

In this regard, Passow (41) called attention to the primary competencies for professional engineers that should be obtained through undergraduate education and training. While collaboration and teamwork ranked as the highest competency for engineering professionals, ethics falls to the middle of the importance ranking, and the understanding of contemporary issues and societal impact within the field of engineering falls to the bottom to the importance ranking (p. 106). Similarly, Basinger et. al's (3) Delphi study regarding professional competencies within agriculture showed technical and content-based elements as important, but competencies associated with broader social, cultural, and political elements held lower acceptance rates by professionals and students.

Centered upon the narratives featured within Rubin (45), the purpose of this study is to explore the presence of college athlete support services professionals with human development and commercial educational backgrounds. The guiding research question for this study is: what is the distribution of human development and commercially-centric educational foundations within Power Five college athlete support services units? Through exploring the presence of conflicting educational foundations, the findings from this study can be used to leverage more human development-centric competencies within the field of sport management. To achieve this, a content analysis of college athlete support services (CASS) staff directory biographies was conducted to obtain educational background information, along with alma mater(s), and former college sport participation. To triangulate the data, social media accounts and archival sources were also used in the analysis. Upon gathering information for all CASS professionals within the 65 Power Five institutions, educational foundations were compared along organizational rank.

College athlete support services (CASS) has grown to become a fixture in the realm of collegiate athletics administration. Originally stemming from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) CHAMPS program, the core components of college athlete support services are personal development, career development, community service, athletic excellence, and academic excellence (62). With college sport and the experiences of college athletes being prominent in social, political, and educational landscapes - considerable attention has been given to the services provided to college athletes (34). Navarro et. al (34) explained CASS to be an extension of the initial CHAMPS program, which has expanded to offer academic support services, athlete development or 'life skills,' community outreach and engagement, and mental health/wellness counseling (p. 52-61).

With there being a multitude of factors that have contributed to the variations in facilitation, funding, and design of college athlete support services, Comeaux (9) noted the role of commercialism in collegiate athletics with a focus on the impact on college athletes' academic opportunities and outcomes. Specifically, Comeaux spoke to the prevalence of coaches and athletic administrators guiding (controlling) athlete decisions, limiting scope regarding academic major and course selection, and missing classes (and/or course preparation time) for sport related activities. The manipulation of Academic Progress Rate (APR) and Graduation Success Rate (GSR) to ensure athlete eligibility became a common practice that led coaches and administrators to pressure academic support staff to cluster athletes into courses and programs that best benefit the athletic program (19, 63, 65). By creating and sustaining an environment that operated in the best interest of the athletic program, departments expected to achieve athletic success, which results in commercial success for the department and the university. However, the emphasis on athletic success at the expense of the goals and aims of college athlete support services - e.g. academic success, professional development, and intrapersonal growth - exposed the disconnect between big-time college sport and higher education (53).

Using the narratives highlighted by Rubin (45), the role of educational foundation is key in the experiences (and subsequent effectiveness) of CASS professionals. Being that intercollegiate athletics is an extension of the university setting; the human development emphasis of higher education served as the first educational foundation (6). Understanding the business enterprise that intercollegiate athletics has grown into (13, 21), commercial-centricity served as the second educational foundation present within intercollegiate athletics. To understand the inherent conflicts between commercially-centric and human development foundations, the current debate regarding the privatization of primary and secondary education is a key example. Pring (42) recalled that the inclusion of private sector funding can present increased funding and support, but also alters the curriculum and school mission to meet the needs of corporations. The determination of essential versus inessential can lead to a decline and complete restructuring of education (44). Due to the inherent conflict between privatization and primary/secondary education, the concept of privatized education remains tumultuous.

Southall and colleagues (55) addressed the competing educational and commercial educational foundations within intercollegiate athletics events - with commercialized logics holding the

dominant role (48). Nite and Bopp (36) expanded on the ethical challenges that are present within the conflict. In detail, decisions surrounding game scheduling, campus shutdowns to accommodate athletic competition, and stringent NCAA legislation regarding services and benefits provided towards athletes all represent the inherent conflicts between the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics and the culture of servant leadership in higher education institutions (36-38).

To further emphasize the problem within an organizational space comprised of conflicting foundations, Navarro et. al (34) highlighted that while the initial NCAA regulation required all Division I institutions to offer CASS, the operation of these services could be held through the athletic department or the university (p. 53) As explained, the shift from CASS being offered through the university and to the athletic department has been notable. This transition can be highlighted through athletic departments creating staffs and organizational approaches towards these services given the lack of formalized regulations on funding, staffing, and educational or profession expertise (p. 53). This lack of formalized structure, coupled with the mass shift from operating under the principal domains within the university, again warrants inclusion of human development competencies within sport management education and training.

The continuous development of the sport management discipline has led to numerous conversations regarding the educational and professional competencies of the field (8). Chalip (7) presented the complexity of the field by noting the social service orientation of sport and the commercial need also seen within the field. Aligned with the social service orientation of sport with the United Nations Development Programme (UNPD) (15) explanation of human development - human development within sport amplifies positive personal and group experiences, increases agency, centers awareness, and rejects an economically-centric approach to these elements. Being that sport management holds conflicting positions, one could assert that both commercial and socially-representative competencies should be reflected within sport management education and training. The socially-representative competencies, now referred to as human development competencies within the text, are seen through social intelligence and awareness, criticality, cultural leadership, coaching, mentoring, among others (15, 39, 51). Both Hums (23) and Newman (34) emphasized the need for sport management professionals to exhibit good citizenship, ethical foundations, and a balance of social-mindedness with commercial savviness. Miragaia and Soares (32) asserted that the field of sport management should reflect these elements within the curriculum - as opposed to the pedagogical and academic expertise of faculty - to ensure the discipline wholly reflects the social and developmental nature of sport. While the field of sport management has not fully transitioned from the social service orientation of sport, due diligence must be applied to ensure that the competencies within this broader realm are represented within the development of the field.

As noted by Navarro et. al (34), CASS units' lack of formalized structure and professional requirements leaves room for further inquiry. While CASS professionals represent a diverse collection of academic backgrounds, the primary focus of the study is to explore the compositional diversity of commercialized and human development-centric educational

backgrounds. Understanding the conflicts between human development-centric CASS units within a commercialized sporting space, navigation within the space can present challenges for professionals within this conflict (45, 55). Instead of further emphasizing the disconnect between commercial and human development fields, this study aims to bridge the gap by calling for more human development elements within sport management education. This is achieved through highlighting the increasing presence of formally educated and trained human development professionals within CASS units.

## METHODS

### *Participants*

Due to the prominence and visibility of the Power Five (5) conferences within college sport culture and college sport research, the 65 athletic departments served as the focus of data collection (24, 64). Through conducting a content analysis of student-athlete support services staff member biographies, the following information was collected: conference, university, position, educational background (undergraduate and graduate), university affiliation, and college athlete status (22). To further confirm and triangulate the data found within the staff biographies, the same content analysis process targeted the components was conducted on public sport media outlets and/or alma mater websites/social media pages (25, 30). All staff members whose information could not be triangulated and validated through the content analysis were not used within the dataset.

### *Protocol*

To determine the differences between human development-centric foundations and commercially-centric foundations within academic fields, a thematic analysis of the mission, vision, or purpose statements of the prominent scholarly and professional organizations connected to the academic disciplines represented in the data set was conducted (12, 61). To note, the American Marketing Association, Society for Human Resource Management, and the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) were the representative organizations for marketing, human resources, and sport management – respectively. By using both academic and scholarly organizations, and the language used, primary orientations of differing fields can be connected through their human development of commercial centrality. This aids in creating logical linkages between education and social work, along with engineering and marketing.

Following data collection and triangulation, the data were sorted into the following categories: role and role level, educational foundation(s), and socialization via collegiate background (alumni status and college sport experience). Alumni status and college athlete status were determined as socialization elements due to the roles of tradition and a collective identity (1, 4, 28, 29, 54). Alumni affiliation and college athlete status resulted in four preliminary archetypes: non-athlete non-alumnus (no institutional affiliation prior to employment), alumnus (baccalaureate graduate of employer), former college athlete (former intercollegiate athlete), and sport alumni (former athlete and graduate of institution).



Regarding the ethical standards outlined by the International Journal of Exercise Science, this study is fully compliant with the standards (33). Going further, the primary and secondary data sources are derived from public record and publicly available sources, respectively. Along with the sources of the data, the information gathered does not present risk or display protected information about the population. Given these elements, the study is deemed exempt from the Institutional Review Board process.

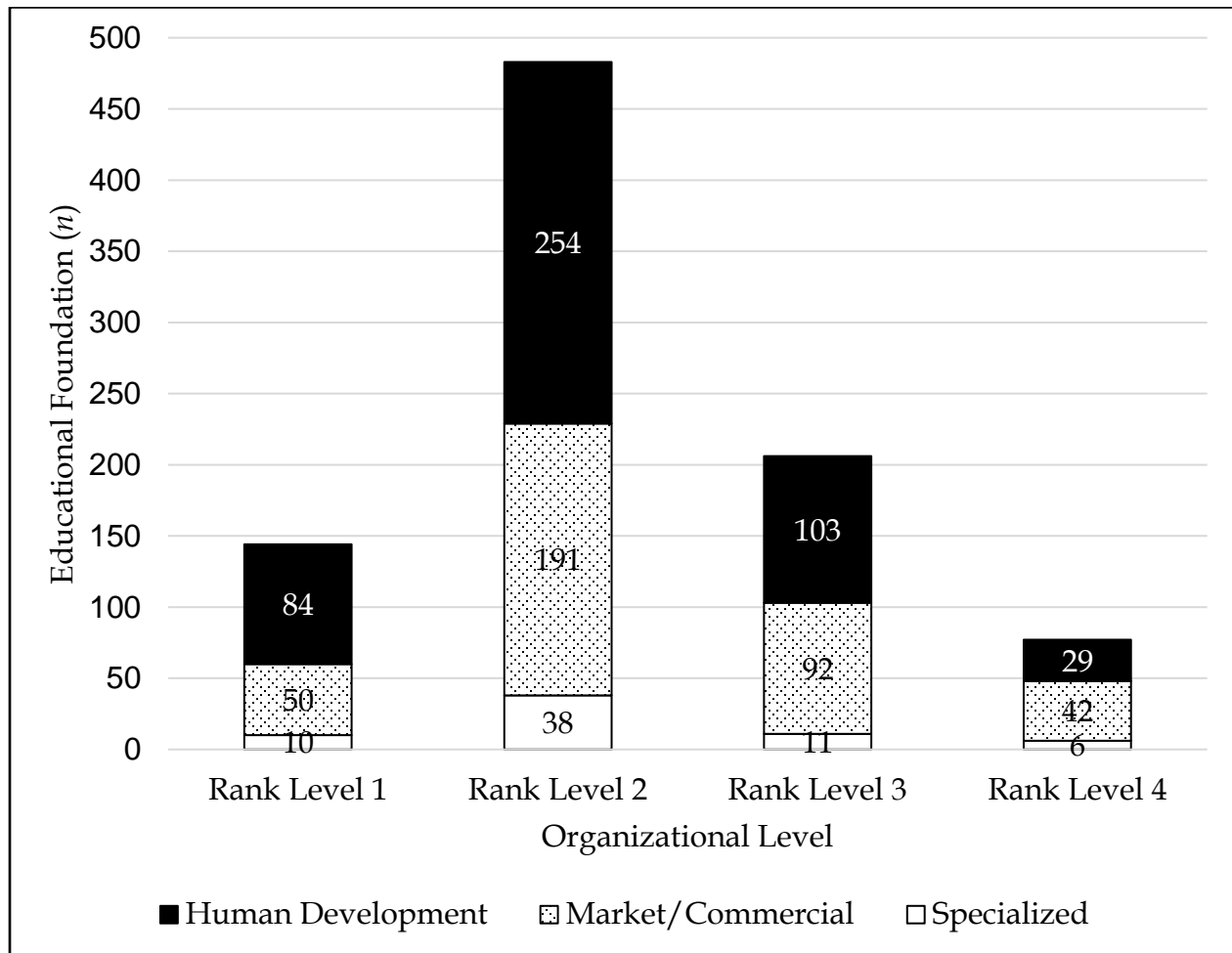
Role level was determined by title, position, organizational chart structure, along with preferred experience and requirements communicated via job descriptions from athletics departments within the scope of the study. The same content and thematic analysis procedure to determine the connection between educational field and orientation was applied to position and rank (11, 22, 61). In detail, positions titled with any level of Athletic Director/Director of Athletics were coded as level 1 due to their connection to the executive athletics staff and overall rank within their sector. Specialists, Assistant Directors, and Directors/Coordinators of specific sectors were coded as level 2 given the education and professional requirements, along with previous management and leadership expectations for the role. Entry level positions (general advisors and counselors) were coded as level 3 given the general requirements and openness to recent college graduates. Graduate assistants, interns, and volunteers were coded as level 4 due to the limited role and position within the organization.

Undergraduate and graduate education were coded into broader disciplines, i.e. elementary education and secondary education were both coded to EDUC (education), sport management/leadership/administration were all coded into SPMT (sport management). Using Hsieh and Shannon's (22) content analysis as the data collection and analysis tool, each field was coded as a specialized field (fine arts, history, law, etc.), commercially-centric field (sport management, business, communications, management, etc.), and human development-centric field (higher education-student affairs, counseling, education, etc.) based upon language communicated by the mission, vision, and purpose statements of professional and scholarly organizations. In detail, this coding process consisted of an open coding approach that focused on specific words and short phrases. Keywords and short phrases were grouped by similarity and categorized as human development-centric or commercially-centric. For example, both the American Marketing Association and American Management Association presented language that centered on organizational practices, reflecting the needs of stakeholders, and the advancement of the field. Conversely, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and the National Association of Social Workers presented language that spoke to improving the condition of the human experience – resulting in a Human Development orientation.

## RESULTS

Upon reviewing the student-athlete support services staff members of the 65 Power Five athletic departments, the findings presented a total of 1095 staff members. For staff members whose information could not be verified and triangulated through secondary sources resulted in a

refined population of 910 verifiable student-athlete support services professionals (83.8% of total population). Of this population, 7.1% ( $n = 65$ ) held specialized foundations, 41.2% ( $n = 375$ ) held commercially-centric foundations, and the remaining 51.6% ( $n = 470$ ) represented human development foundations. Considering organizational rank level, Figure 1 presents an overview of how specialized, market, and human development foundations are distributed through organizational rank. Regarding alumni status and college athlete experience 42% ( $n = 382$ ) were alumni of the institution, 30% ( $n = 273$ ) were former college athletes, 15% ( $n = 136$ ) had no educational affiliation with their employer nor did they participate in college sport, and the remaining 13% ( $n = 119$ ) were former athletes at within the university in which they are currently employed.



**Figure 1.** A graph displaying the distribution of educational foundations via organizational rank.

The distribution of foundations via rank shows human development foundations as the primary educational foundation across rank, except for level 4. In detail, Level 1 consists of 6.9% ( $n = 10$ ), 34.7% ( $n = 20$ ), and 58.3% ( $n = 84$ ) of specialized, commercially-centric, and human development foundations - respectively. Level 2 shows a considerable presence of human development foundations with a population of 254 (52.6%). Specialized foundations contribute 7.9% ( $n = 38$ ) while commercially-centric foundations contribute to the remaining 39.5% ( $n = 191$ ). With level

3 primarily consisting of entry-level and student-facing professionals, commercially-centric and human development foundations contribute to 44.6% ( $n = 92$ ) and 50% ( $n = 103$ ), respectively. Specialized foundations, in alignment with the other levels, have the lowest representation with 5.3% ( $n = 11$ ). To close, level 4 is composed of 7.7% ( $n = 6$ ) specialized, 54.5% ( $n = 42$ ) commercially-centric, and 37.6% ( $n = 29$ ) human development foundations. Level 4 is the only unit where commercially-centric foundations are more present than human development foundations.

## DISCUSSION

The findings highlight a sizeable presence of human development educational foundations over commercial educational foundations across three of the four organizational levels. This distribution of educational foundation highlights the role of organizational leaders in establishing normative practices and organizational cultures that reflect a human development foundation. Although college athletics has notable challenges in creating holistic educational and social experiences for athletes (47, 48, 49), the sizeable presence of human development professionals signal to a development in the operation of CASS units. While the athletic subculture of these units is concerning – notably the overemphasis on winning, overreach of coaches, and an organizational culture that does not prioritize the holistic experiences of athletes – the increasing presence of human development professionals signal to a change in college athlete support services. Interestingly, the only organizational level where commercially-centric professionals outnumber the others is the lowest tier that consists of interns, graduate assistants, and volunteers. While this can reflect the relationships between athletic departments and these programs, the researchers also assert that the roles of members within this space presents the ideal opportunity to integrate human development competencies into the experiences of upcoming professionals within commercially-centric fields.

Drawing connections to the narratives presented by Rubin (45), the field of college athlete support services presents a stronger connection to human development competencies over commercial competencies. With sport management being coded and referenced as a commercially-centric commercialized field, our findings bring forth a call to include more human development competencies within sport management education and training (2, 16, 35, 50). For example, Taylor and Hardin (57) highlighted the lack of education and training regarding sexual assault, harassment, and the broader scope of gender-based violence within sport management programs – which also reflected sport management professionals' ill-preparedness to address problematic subcultures within the field of sport. It is possible that the lack of training and education may leave sport management professionals unprepared as they enter a field where the experiences of individuals and communities are paramount – signaling to the social service orientation of sport and the CASS unit.

To further highlight the disconnect between sport management and human development, DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (10) noted students' perceptions of sport management course applicability to a variety of internship settings. The findings show that sport sociology, cross-



cultural perspectives in sport, sport psychology, and coaching were all seen as less relevant and applicable to the field (p. 5). Additionally, the disconnect between commercial and human development competencies, both students and professionals highlighted technical and content-specific elements (marketing, social media, fundraising, technology, etc) opposed to human development elements in studies regarding sport management competencies (10, 11, 31). Although the competencies are important, the inherent social service foundation of sport coupled with the design and intention of CASS units also call for human development elements to be considered in the education and training of future sport management professionals.

The implications of this study highlight three areas: the experiences of sport management professionals within CASS units, outcomes on athlete experience and development, and the progression of sport management education and training. With CASS units holding a higher representation of human development professionals, coupled with the commercialized orientation of sport management, graduates entering the space can find themselves lacking the proper competencies to be successful and impactful in their roles (35, 45, 46). Connecting to the student (person)-centeredness of human development foundations, Rubin (45) noted the collective emphasis of providing help and experiencing an internal reward from their work. However, Rubin found that the disconnect between educational training and the athletic environment brings forth challenges in navigating the field along with limiting tenure within the field. Burnout, a result of those challenges, was also found to have a connection with misaligned values between professionals and the department (45, 49, 58). The findings and assertions within this study can diminish the presence of burnout through the inclusion of courses in this content area, academic and professional development as professionals, or the development of inter-program collaborations between sport management programs and higher education-student affairs programs. Each of these approaches can aid in bridging gaps within competencies, while also preparing professionals for working within CASS units.

To aid in bridging the gap between educational preparedness and work experiences, sport management educators should work to shift the educational and professional paradigms of the field. As noted by Newman (35) an overcommercialized field often ignores and rejects the social and human elements of the respective field. Considering the presence of human development professionals within CASS units, the redirection of sport management provides opportunities to prepare future professionals to enter the sporting space with the necessary competencies to address problematic cultures within CASS units (27, 47). Going further, CASS units also provide an ideal space for the often-competing sides of sport management education and training to peacefully coincide. Noted by Reay and Hinings (43), leveraging CASS as an experimental site to converge competing fields presents ideal outcomes for the broader scope of the sport management.

From an athlete experience perspective, the heightened emphasis to maintain APR and GSR often leads to academic advisors clustering athletes into academic programs and courses due to a lack of rigor or prompting from coaches and administrators (14). Foster and Huml (14) suggested that academic clustering to ensure eligibility limits career exploration, preparation,

and maturation – which further delays the overall development of athletes outside of their sport. Connecting to the economic model of intercollegiate athletics, Lanter and Hawkins (26) further explain that the financial forces that drive the intercollegiate athletics structure permeate through all levels of the college experience. The ability for coaches and administrators to influence academic placement, presents a ripple effect into other components of the student experience via identity foreclosure (5). Going further, the emphasis on athletic output further amplifies the impact of identity foreclosure, resulting in athletes displaying lower rates of career exploration, campus involvement through clubs and organizations, and minimal academic exploration (p. 196).

The results of the study illuminate the presence of human development and commercially-centric foundations within CASS units, while also addressing the challenges that are inherent with the conflicts between human development and market centrality. While the overall presence of human development foundations outweighed the presence of commercially-centric foundations, the commercial-centricity of sport management draws connections to longstanding challenges within college athlete support. The majority presence of human development foundations presents the inclusion of skills, theories, and approaches that best align with the foundations of the services provided, e.g., advising, counseling, and development. While sport management programs (undergraduate and graduate) may include courses that center on human development competencies, the broader scope of the field does not reflect this educational and practical approach. Existing literature highlights the lack of preparation sport management professionals experience in CASS units – often related to the commercialized nature of sport (14, 35, 45). Although sport management professionals can obtain competencies from work experiences, their educational experiences should also develop these competencies. Going further, scholars have continuously noted the educational and professional distancing from the social-service component of sport.

The limitations of the study are primarily present in the lack of narratives provided by members working within CASS units. The inclusion of narrative strengthens arguments and illuminates patterns not found within the categorical information of this study. Additionally, the lack of narrative does not highlight the role of athlete experiences and alumni status on the experiences of CASS professionals. Going further, lack of narrative does not provide insights into the reasoning behind the selection of some academic programs or if academic programs were specialized in their approach. Although these limitations present noteworthy challenges, the overall scope and purpose of the study does highlight the disconnect between human development and commercially-driven programs while calling for the inclusion of human development within sport management. The final limitation is the lack of empirical data regarding the role of a commercially-centric education to the benefit of working within CASS units. Understanding the commercialized nature of college sport, the insights of professionals could bolster the findings and present a unique perspective within a niche area.

To expand the breadth and depth of research within this area the narratives of professionals within CASS units can provide detailed insights into the opportunities and challenges of their

educational foundations, which can be leveraged as competencies needed for the field. Additionally, reviewing sport management curriculum can expose differences in human development themes by institutional type or academic house. Building upon the data collected within the study, studies that explore the perspectives and experiences of members across the institutional archetypes can illuminate the roles of sport socialization and institutional affiliation on a professional area that experiences notable conflicts. Furthermore, using this study as the framework to explore the presence of educational foundations within the Group of Five and other conferences can offer noteworthy contributions towards strengthening the experiences of athletes outside of sport performance, while also preparing the next wave of CASS professionals. If the goal of the field is to advance all areas of sport, the discipline must include elements of all sporting spaces. CASS units, along with other community sport spaces, provide the ideal opportunity to emphasize the importance of human development competencies within sport management. With achieving the goal of using CASS units as a call for more human development elements within sport management education and training as a response to the changing composition of the field, future studies could highlight more detailed elements of this unique sport space.

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