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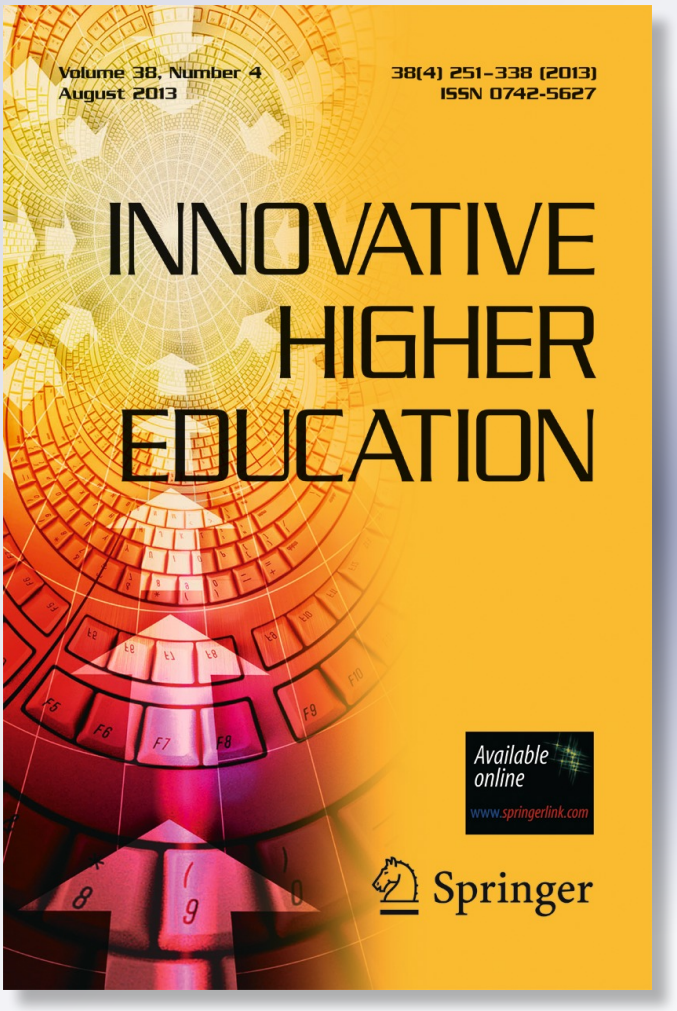

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Rethinking Academic Reform and Encouraging Organizational Innovation: Implications for Stakeholder Management in College Sports

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Abstract There are increasing concerns about the educational experiences of Division I student-athletes in big-time college sports. Calls for reform have come from within colleges and universities and beyond. The literature of innovative management offers ideas that can help mitigate the academic and athletic divide and offer new ideas for athletic departments. Specifically, this body of literature is placed within the context of academic support centers for student-athletes to underscore the importance of new ways of thinking and to shed light on the centrality of the champion in the successful implementation of innovation. The article also introduces the Career Transition Scorecard, a practitioner-as-researcher model that fosters evidence-based practices among practitioners in athletic departments as they improve the well-being of Division I student-athletes. Implications for stakeholder management in college sports are discussed.

Keywords Student-athlete · Practitioner · Athletics

Background

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and others have been deeply concerned about the educational experiences of Division I student-athletes in big-time college sports. Considerable public attention to discouraging graduation rates for football and men's basketball as well as numerous academic fraud cases add fuel to this fire (NCAA 2009). At the same time, the effectiveness of intervention strategies for student-athletes—such as those employed by academic support centers—is being called into question (Comeaux 2010). Indeed, discovering meaningful ways to achieve a healthy balance between the student and athlete roles has been an ongoing struggle. While numerous reform initiatives (e.g., Benford 2007; Gerdy 2006; Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics

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2010; NCAA 2011a) have been introduced, debated, and in some cases enacted to improve the conditions of intercollegiate athletics generally and to strengthen the learning and personal development trajectories for college student-athletes specifically, most have been replete with half-hearted measures that offer minimal systemic change (Gerdy 2006).

Arguably one of the most visible efforts has been the NCAA's Academic Progress Rate (APR) initiative, which measures the academic performance of Division I student-athletes in team sports. Under this system, which was recently revised, each student-athlete earns a maximum of two points, one for maintaining academic eligibility and another for staying in school. The team members' scores are tallied and divided by the total number of possible points, and then multiplied by 1,000, yielding a maximum score of 1,000. Teams that fail to achieve the minimum APR score of 930 are subject to contemporaneous penalties such as loss of scholarships, reduction in practice times, suspension of coaches, and a ban from post-season competition (NCAA 2011b).

There are compelling educational benefits to the APR. For one, these standards place the onus on member colleges and universities to police themselves and to ensure that all student-athletes are progressing toward degrees. As such, more and more athletic departments have both expanded their academic facilities for student-athletes over the years and hired more specialized personnel such as life skills and eligibility coordinators (Covell and Barr 2010; Wolverton 2008a). In addition, the APR holds head coaches more accountable for the academic success or failure of student-athletes they recruit. Prior to 2010, eight teams had received penalties due to APR violations (NCAA 2011b).

While the APR has shown some promise, this initiative would benefit from an innovative supplemental component that includes more robust indicators and evidence-based approaches that promote student learning and success at member institutions. The APR in its current form uses graduation rates as the primary indicator of academic success, and the measure is rather ambiguous (Astin 1993; Eckard 2010). Moreover, it leaves much to be considered about the quality of educational experiences for student-athletes and, more precisely, the extent to which higher education practitioners[1] are creating environments that influence their learning and personal development (Comeaux and Harrison 2011). Linking the existing APR system to a more comprehensive, evidence-based framework at each participating institution might contribute to organizational innovations that benefit student-athletes in both their sport and their studies.

In his State of the Union address in January 2011, President Barack Obama asserted:

> The first step in winning the future is encouraging American innovation… What we can do—what America does better than anyone else—is spark the creativity and imagination of our people. We're the nation that put cars in driveways and computers in offices; the nation of Edison and the Wright brothers; of Google and Facebook. (National Public Radio 2011)

President Obama's reference to innovation goes far beyond the auto industry and social media: it is critical that colleges and universities continue to encourage educational innovation, and this need is apparent in both athletic departments and the broader academic community.

With this background in mind, the purpose of this article is to emphasize the need for and value of innovation in current practices designed to support student-athletes. I will first briefly describe the current state of academic support centers for student-athletes. While these centers are a vital resource for students who play for Division I sports teams, they currently have important limitations that must be addressed if they are to meet their goals. I

[1] "Practitioner" refers to academic advisors, counselors, staff, tutors, and administrators.

will then discuss the management of innovation literature within this particular context and, in doing so, address issues of innovation, resistance to change, and the role of the champion in innovation implementation. Finally, I will introduce the Career Transition Scorecard (CTS), a practitioner-as-researcher model designed to foster evidence-based practices for improving the well-being of Division I student-athletes and to shape and advance the future direction of athletic organizations. This study can serve as a foundation on which to build related studies that focus on the educational innovation of practitioners and other internal and external stakeholder groups in the affairs of intercollegiate athletics such as faculty members, head coaches, community advocates of student-athletes, and researchers.

Academic Support Centers for Student-Athletes

Almost all athletic departments in colleges and universities have developed and expanded their academic support services for college student-athletes over the past three decades (Wolverton 2008a). These centers have focused primarily on three main areas—academic scheduling, academic tutoring, and time management (Broughton and Neyer 2001; Shriberg and Brodzinski 1984)—with the ideal goal of enabling all student-athletes to develop the skills necessary for academic, athletic, and personal growth and success. Despite the development and expansion of these types of supports, however, student-athletes, particularly in the revenue-generating sports of football and men's basketball, continue to show a lower level of academic success than their non-athlete counterparts (Comeaux and Harrison 2011; NCAA 2009).

Considerable scholarly and public scrutiny is placed on numerous explanations for this more limited academic success, from heightened commercialization and misplaced priorities in big-time athletic departments to a lack of intervention strategies that maximize how students successfully participate in the athletic, social, and academic systems of college (Comeaux 2010; Eitzen 2009). Academic reform has been at the forefront of discussions about how to improve the academic/athletic divide (Sack 2009), but practitioners who manage academic support centers must also find new and imaginative ways to engage and re-engage student-athletes. One potentially viable approach is through evidenced-based practices (see Comeaux 2010).

In a survey of advisors and counselors in academic support centers for student-athletes at Division I colleges and universities, Comeaux (2012) explored the extent to which these practitioners engaged in any type of data-driven approaches to assist with student learning. Less than 3% of participants reported that their programs and services included an assessment plan to measure the impact on learning outcomes for student-athletes. Yet data-driven practices coupled with assessment tools to understand how and if program outcomes are being achieved are imperative. Without these components it becomes almost impossible to offer feedback or to identify performance gaps that should be addressed in order to increase the academic productivity of student-athletes. The question remains, then, of how best to approach this type of reform. In other words, how can academic support centers that serve student-athletes bring innovation to their practices so that students are better-served? The body of literature on innovation management offers some answers.

The Literature of Innovation Management

Over the past 35 years, innovation has received considerable attention in the management literature. This growing interest is perhaps due to the understanding that organizations need

to be both imaginative and innovative in order to lead, compete, and even survive in today's business world. It is not surprising that successful brands such as Google, Apple, Nike, and Microsoft have actively embraced the management of innovation. Their objectives in part are to drive growth, to gain a competitive advantage, and to remain at the forefront of breakthrough design thinking (Brown 2009; Isaacson 2011).

Scholars define innovation generally as a process of developing, adopting, and applying new ideas to generate new products, practices, programs, policies, technologies, services, or structures for organizational members (Albury 2005; Daft 1982; Damanpour and Evan 1984; Galbraith 1982; Luecke and Katz 2003; Wolfe 1995; Zaltman et al. 1973). This essentially means that organizations cannot discover or adopt new ideas and simply apply them. Instead, they must engage in a very deliberate process that requires them to develop, interpret, and implement new ideas in their own way and likewise to consider the challenges associated with these new activities (Galbraith 1982).

Types of innovation can differ considerably from organization to organization, and Galbraith (1982) made a distinction between two particular types—incremental and radical. Incremental innovation, in Galbraith's view, can include style or positioning changes to improve an existing service or product line. Here, there is low uncertainty about the process because organizations usually take advantage of known entities. For example, Nike tends to release a new Air Jordan basketball shoe line each year; and each is considered "newer" than the last because its style and/or features are different. Radical innovation, on the other hand, involves "genuinely new products, new business models, and new technologies, which cause discontinuities in current practices and products" (Galbraith 1982, p. 3). As such, radical innovations tend to have a high degree of uncertainty because these businesses usually explore new products, services, or technologies with atypical features.

To date, few reform proposals related to student-athletes' academic success have explicitly addressed existing practices or offered new ideas or strategies about changing the culture of academic support centers for student-athletes (see Comeaux and Harrison 2011). Academic reform combined with radical innovation design and implementation should be of interest to practitioners who manage academic support centers. In line with Galbraith's (1982) definition of radical innovations, I propose radical rather than incremental innovations for most, if not all, big-time athletic departments because there is a critical need (a) to develop a new philosophical foundation and (b) to promote new academic models and practices through creative, evidence-based activities that lead to positive gains in the learning and personal development of student-athletes. In the midst of an athletic subculture that resembles a business model and that trumps academic obligations (Eitzen 2009), today's successful academic support centers for student-athletes will have to forge a more authentically responsive plan to address the current realities and the future directions of intercollegiate athletics in American higher education.

Resistance to Educational Innovation

Wolfe and colleagues (2006) highlighted several attributes that help us ascertain how organizations design and implement innovation. Although these attributes are described within the context of human resource management, they are nonetheless relevant to academic support centers for student-athletes as well. For example, according to Wolfe et al. (2006), the degree of uncertainty about a given innovation—or "lack of knowledge concerning the link between an innovation's inputs, process, and outcomes" (p. 114)—will, in part, dictate levels of resistance to it. While most if not all kinds of organizations have

some level of uncertainty in the implementation of innovation (Storey 2004), the degree of that uncertainty tends to matter the most (Wolfe et al. 2006). All too often, innovation resistance occurs as a result of ineffective organizational leadership that fails to manage both a new idea and existing organizational practices (Galbraith 1982).

Another salient factor that might obstruct the design and implementation of innovation and contribute to innovation resistance is organizational context. This is especially problematic in tradition-bound organizations (Damanpour 1991), which tend to fall short of an innovation culture because they perpetuate the status quo and lack organizational diversity and likewise fail to recognize and accept innovation and change (Hamel 1996). In other words, the promotion and encouragement of diverse new ideas and processes are absent within the organization. Wolfe and colleagues (2006) concluded that, in tradition-bound organizations

> …strategic frames of reference, which had provided direction, often become blinders; established processes, which had provided efficiencies, become mindless routines; commitment to particular constituencies (e.g., employee, suppliers), which had provided resources, restrict flexibility; and values, which once unified and inspired, harden into rigid rules and regulations. (p. 114).

Indeed, it is important to understand the new idea and the extent to which it fits within the broader organizational context (Howell and Boies 2004).

As part of larger colleges or universities—which are mired in tradition—academic support service centers for student-athletes tend to suffer from complacency and tunnel vision (Comeaux 2010). Since 1975, the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) has served as a liaison between academic and athletic communities at colleges and universities. With members consisting of academic support and student services personnel, their stated purpose is "to assist the student-athletes in *maintaining their eligibility* [emphasis added] and achieving a viable education leading to graduation" (National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics 2010). In addition to addressing the academic and counseling needs of college student-athletes, N4A's efforts have led to the development of other specializations such as sport psychology with a concentration on performance enhancement and mental health counseling (Chartrand and Lent 1987; Miller and Wooten 1995; Petitpas et al. 1995).

Despite the stated goals of N4A and academic support services for student-athletes, the reality is that they do not increase graduation rates, much less enhance the academic and personal talent development of student-athletes (Comeaux 2007; Hinkle 1994). As it stands, most academic support centers focus on merely keeping student-athletes eligible (Knight Commission 2001), which clearly reinforces the status quo and creates an athletic subculture of low academic expectations, thus diminishing the possibilities for developing lifelong learners. Unfortunately, there have been few visible changes to this very traditional and outdated approach.

Support service practitioners for student-athletes tend to place blame on several interrelated factors that are believed to contribute to the lack of new ideas and limited opportunities for empowering student-athletes academically. Broadly speaking, practitioners point to the organizational structure of athletic departments, making the charge that their hands are tied because head coaches in major athletic programs are given great organizational power yet have limited academic investment in the student-athletes they recruit (Comeaux 2012). Student-athletes spend more than forty hours per week on sport related activities (Wolverton 2008b); and head coaches have incredible control over their lives, essentially determining their academic priorities (Jayakumar and Comeaux 2011).

To a significant degree, head coaches have failed to demonstrate the kind of academic leadership and accountability necessary for student-athletes to maintain a proper balance between their student and athlete roles (Comeaux 2012). Therefore, head coaches' resistance to educational innovation or opportunities for student-athletes to engage in more educationally purposeful activities is not surprising and should be understood within the larger context of the business enterprise of intercollegiate athletics. Any educational innovation would inevitably require that student-athletes devote less time to their sport. Unfortunately, academics are not a top priority for most head coaches in big-time athletic programs, in part because their job security depends on their ability to deliver winning seasons and to secure corporate sponsorship, not on whether or not they develop the academic talents of the student-athletes they recruit (Comeaux 2007, 2012; Eitzen 2009).

Overcoming Resistance: The Role of Innovation Champion

With competing interests and varying agendas among primary and secondary stakeholder groups and an organizational context that, in many cases, perpetuates the status quo, successful implementation of new ideas can be a tall order. With this potential challenge, the role of the innovation champion is important to the adoption and implementation of organizational innovation (Howell and Shea 2001; Markham and Griffin 1998). A champion can be an individual or a group of individuals who informally emerge to promote a particular innovation actively within an organization (Howell and Boies 2004). Champions generally have a clear vision of their role, the necessary energy, strong networks within the organization, and ability not only to challenge traditional boundaries but also to tie innovation to positive organizational outcomes (Frost and Egri 1991; Howell 2005; Howell and Boies 2004; Mumford et al. 2002).

An individual's position or status within the organizational context will dictate the level of support necessary to design and implement innovation (Galbraith 1982). For example, Galbraith (1982) noted that, when an idea champion emerges from a lower level or marginal position, he or she will require the support of "someone who has the authority, resources, and credibility to take ideas to further stages to test them" (p. 11). In addition to securing an influential stakeholder group, the champion may need to gain support from other powerful and committed leaders in the organization for the full design and implementation of innovation to happen (Daft and Weick 1984; Howell 2005).

New ideas can emerge from top management level positions in the organization. In their article on innovation management, for example, Wolfe and colleagues (2006) described Billy Beane of the Oakland Athletics, who only required the support of the team ownership for the implementation process. As the general manager, Beane was able to hire like-minded personnel and had the intellectual curiosity and enough organizational power to challenge the traditional boundaries of major league baseball. As a result, he was able to adopt and implement sabermetrics—a radical, evidence-based innovation used to manage and to assess baseball talent statistically.

In academic support centers, practitioners tend to be in direct contact with issues affecting the academic well-being of student-athletes and would therefore be likely to develop new ideas. Because of their limited organizational power within the athletic department hierarchy, however, they would be less likely to champion innovation successfully on their own. Drennon and Cervero (2002) remind us that "a hierarchy of organizationally-structured power relationships is also present in inquiry groups, wherein relationships are played out based on role status" (p. 195). There is certainly unequal power inherent in the relationship

between practitioners in support centers and coaches or athletic directors even though they may be stakeholders of the same inquiry group, working toward the same desirable outcomes for students. In addition, innovation management theory causes us to realize that an academic practitioner who pushes for educational innovation within a support center for student-athletes would require support from one or more high-powered stakeholder groups—such as a head coach, an athletic director, or a university president—who are willing to advance a new idea. Furthermore, because new ideas can originate from anyone within the organization, student-athletes themselves can also emerge as champions; and they would also need to seek out support and request (or even demand) greater academic leadership from their coaching staff in order for innovation to be implemented.

The time is ripe for head coaches to serve as the authority to help champion educational innovation to the next level. With pressures from the new APR structure requiring them to be more accountable for the academic outcomes of the student-athletes they recruit, it is imperative that they consider alternative academic game plans to avoid costly penalties, from loss of athletic scholarships to postseason tournament bans, all of which could potentially lead to an unprecedented early termination from their coaching position. In other words, coaches may want to "adapt or die," as asserted by Billy Beane in the film *Moneyball* (De Luca et al. 2011).

Head coaches should consider working closely with practitioners in academic support centers. Practitioners that regularly serve these students-athletes should be an integral part of the agenda of head coaches. It is practitioners who are now compelled to provide more supportive environments for student-athletes and to monitor their academic production and progress towards their intended degrees. Moreover, to a larger extent than in previous years because of the revised APR, practitioners in academic support centers have to understand and explain the extent to which contextual factors such as course offerings, degree selection, campus involvement patterns, and academic support services affect the learning and personal development of student-athletes(Comeaux and Harrison 2011). To this end, it would be instructive for both head coaches and practitioners who make management decisions in intercollegiate athletics to think about educational innovation and, more precisely, about how student-athletes can maximize their opportunities to engage in educationally purposeful activities such as student-faculty interaction, non-athlete peer interaction, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, and writing-intensive courses to name a few (see Gaston-Gayles and Hu 2009; Umbach et al. 2006). This, in turn, will likely lead to positive gains in student learning (Gaston-Gayles and Hu 2009).

Framework for the Career Transition Scorecard

As the above discussion makes clear, innovation is both necessary and possible within the context of academic support centers that serve student-athletes. I propose that the Career Transition Scorecard (CTS) for student-athletes is one possible innovation because it has the potential to address these academic concerns and could bring about positive change in big-time athletic programs.

The CTS is a tool and a process that provides an immediate 'snapshot' of the academic culture and could bring about positive change in big-time athletic programs. The CTS and its methodological approach evolved from the Diversity Scorecard (Bensimon et al. 2004), which has been used to address the achievement gap for historically underrepresented students. It is based on the assumption that shedding light on educational outcomes through relevant data can motivate individuals and organizations to seek improvement and change.

More precisely, the Diversity Scorecard is premised on the understanding that awareness of inequities leads to interpretations of the situation, which can then lead to action.

Drawing from this general framework, I designed the CTS (1) to help bridge the chasm between research and practice in academic support centers for Division I student-athletes and (2) to address the lack of explicit learning environments designed to influence desirable outcomes. The CTS is an action-oriented approach to accountability and change in intercollegiate athletics. It is intended not only to foster evidence-based approaches among higher education practitioners in order to understand the educational landscape of student-athletes but also to enhance the quality of student-athletes' school-to-career transitions. Thus, like the Diversity Scorecard project upon which it is based, the CTS is designed generally to improve educational outcomes for certain student groups.

To reconcile ongoing concerns about the gap between research and practice (see Kezar and Eckel 2000), the CTS employs the practitioner-as-researcher model developed by Bensimon and colleagues as an alternative methodology of knowledge production, where "individuals conduct research about their own institutions, and by doing so they acquire knowledge that they can use to bring about change in these institutions" (p. 108). In a traditional approach, a professional researcher would seek to influence practice by collecting and analyzing data from a participating athletic department and reporting the findings to practitioners in the athletic department. The roles in the practitioner-as-researcher model are somewhat reversed. That is, practitioners within an academic support center for student-athletes assume the role of researcher; and the outside professional researcher takes on the role of professional facilitator or consultant. Unlike the traditional methodology, this approach provides opportunities for practitioners to construct their own knowledge within their own context, to examine their own assumptions about students, and also to increase their awareness of issues affecting students (Bensimon et al. 2004).

The practitioner-as-researcher model contains aspects of participatory action research because it encourages practitioners to reflect on their own practices in order to enhance the quality of education for themselves and their students (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993; Johnson 2008; McNiff 1988; Zeichner and Noffke 2001). In contrast, however, to participatory action research—where all participants involved in the work collectively decide on the problem areas, research questions, and methodological approach—the practitioner-as-researcher model requires that the facilitator (i.e., the professional researcher) individually assume those responsibilities (Bensimon et al. 2004). Only the facilitator determines the conceptual framework and research agenda, but the practitioners must assume responsibility for their findings and for working closely with the facilitator to develop and implement intervention strategies (i.e., action plans) so as to improve outcomes for students. During this time, the professional facilitator will also have opportunities to build a professional learning community (PLC). PLCs in this context can be defined as stakeholders in the campus community engaging in critical thinking and dialogue to improve their practices in a collaborative, data-driven, reflective, inclusive, action-oriented, learning-oriented, and results-oriented way (Mitchell and Sackney 2000; Toole and Louis 2002). The goal in part of this shared vision, values, and actions within the PLC is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals, promote a collaborative culture, produce high-quality research that the community can support and trust, and ultimately to improve the well-being of students. The practitioner-as-researcher model, according to Bensimon and colleagues, has resulted in positive changes for individuals at participating institutions.

The Scorecard

Both the Diversity Scorecard and the CTS consist of desirable outcomes in the following general areas: access, retention, institutional receptivity, and excellence/high achievement. The CTS also adds an engagement domain (see Fig. 1). The professional facilitator works closely with practitioners and other stakeholders at participating athletic departments to help create an institution specific CTS, including the selection of measures as well as defining baselines and improvement targets under each domain so as to enhance the quality of student-athletes' career transition. A measure is an indicator of a problem area that impacts quality career transition, a baseline is the current status of or initial information about the measure, target improvement serves as a marker of progress made for a given measure, and quality career transition is the period at which student-athletes successfully transition from school-to-career. Each participating athletic department might have different circumstances, needs, and interests within the CTS framework and thus might select specific domains on which to focus. Prior to developing the scorecard, the professional facilitator will gain a better understanding of the data collection process of each participating athletic department and current policies and practices that might influence student outcomes. Likewise, the facilitator will examine existing baseline data disaggregated by subgroups (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport) to facilitate greater awareness about a broad range of campus patterns and conditions that impact students' subsequent college outcomes. In doing so, the professional facilitator and a team of practitioners can identify problem areas and construct measures and benchmarks to assess and evaluate the socialization patterns and conditions of student-athletes linked to desired outcomes, all of which are ongoing processes.

To achieve desired outcomes, participating athletic departments might begin by asking thoughtful questions that are linked to outcomes such as the following. In what majors are student-athletes underrepresented or overrepresented (under the "access" domain)? What are the types and magnitude of student-athlete interactions with faculty members (under the "engagement" domain)? How do the answers to these questions vary by subgroups? In

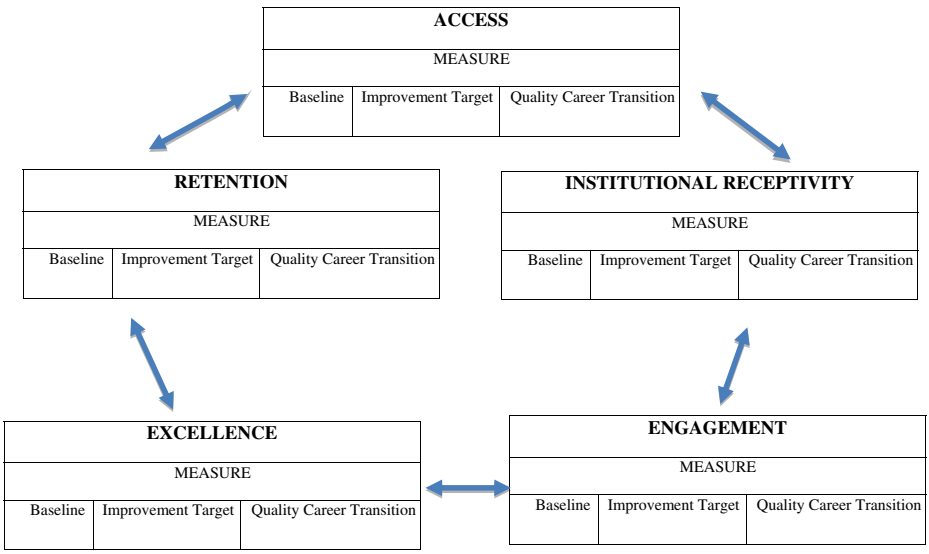

Fig. 1 Career transition scorecard

understanding the frequency or quality of student-athlete interaction with faculty members, for example, practitioners in support centers are more likely to respond meaningfully and take action (e.g., establishing a faculty mentoring program) and to improve in part the quality of their career transition by focusing on a fundamental area, engagement. Through the process of creating the Career Transition Scorecard and examining the data disaggregated by subgroups, practitioners essentially become knowledge *makers* rather than merely knowledge *users*. In addition, they gain a sense of ownership over their own practices and likewise enhance their awareness of student-athlete socialization patterns. This ongoing process enables practitioners to identify and explain, rather than simply view from a distance, the academic culture of student-athletes. This, in turn, leads to informed rather than intuitive decisions about their campus experiences. In the final phase, the practitioners and facilitator collectively develop and implement responsive intervention strategies both to circumvent any impediments that student-athletes may encounter and to achieve desirable outcomes based on data, not anecdotal evidence. In athletic departments that use the CTS framework, professional facilitators have already witnessed changes to existing practices as evidenced by interviews with participants. More structured interviews are underway. It is too soon, however, to evaluate student-athlete outcomes and behavior changes among practitioners because the CTS framework is longitudinal in nature and thus requires longitudinal data. To produce findings through the practitioner-as-researcher model generally requires more time than traditional methodological approaches.

In sum, the Career Transition Scorecard can serve as a useful tool and a process to help fill information gaps and deficiencies in academic support centers for student-athletes and also to broaden the ways in which we define and measure academic success related to the Academic Progress Rate initiative. Indeed, given the existing conditions of academic support centers for student-athletes, higher education practitioners and the NCAA can certainly benefit from the CTS. It would be prudent for the NCAA Board of Directors and other academic leaders to encourage practitioners to examine student-athlete data in greater detail than they have in the past. Specifically, academic support centers would benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of the extent to which experiences vary by subgroup and also of how a broad range of contextual factors impact subsequent college outcomes. Through this understanding, practitioners could, to a significant degree, address many of the assumptions and traditional practices that might have toxic effects on the academic well-being of student-athletes in college and beyond.

Conclusion

Educational innovation is critical in current practices designed to support Division I student-athletes. Today, the academic well-being of student-athletes will largely depend on new academic models and responsive intervention strategies such as the Career Transition Scorecard and other comprehensive, evidence-based approaches. Through evidenced-based inquiry, head coaches and practitioners, for instance, will have opportunities to increase their awareness about specific campus conditions that impact subsequent desirable outcomes for students and to reflect more deeply on their views of and current practices relating to the success of student-athletes (Bensimon et al. 2004). When practitioners in academic support centers are not engaged in the kind of innovative research that influences their decision-making, they are less likely to be fully aware of the types and magnitude of

academic and personal issues that student-athletes encounter. Likewise, they are less likely to respond to them in meaningful ways. In the absence of evidence-based practices, practitioners and head coaches generally rely on assumptions and in some cases develop internalized biases about student-athletes that too often present them through a deficit lens (Comeaux 2007).

The extent to which champions (e.g., practitioners) are trusted, supported, and/or sponsored (see Galbraith 1982) by salient stakeholders of the athletic organization and the professional learning community will play an important role in the successful implementation of new ideas in academic support centers. Innovation is not an individual endeavor. Rather, it requires stakeholders in different roles working collectively to develop and implement a new idea. Without support from within the athletic organization and the PLC, innovation and quality research in academic support centers for student-athletes will be doomed to fail from the start. It is therefore necessary for leaders in the affairs of intercollegiate athletics to promote a collaborative culture where new ideas that help to improve the learning and personal development of student-athletes are supported and encouraged, and even rewarded when successfully implemented.

Galbraith (1995) argued that organizations and firms need strong leadership in order to develop and manage the capability to innovate. Thus, it would be wise for stakeholders in the realm of collegiate athletics, such as an athletic director and/or faculty athletic representative, to consider developing and offering incentives to academic practitioners who successfully engage in evidence-based work and other best practices (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics 2010). Student-athletes themselves also can benefit from incentives that are linked to their academic performance (Harrison and Boyd 2007). Incentives and rewards can serve as an effective way to motivate behavioral change among both student-athletes and higher education practitioners. In addition, internal stakeholders such as an athletic director or a institutional president, should consider contract provisions for head coaches that reward them for the academic success of their student-athletes to a greater degree than winning games (Eichelberger and Levinson 2007; Finley and Fountain; 2010; Greene 2008). This adjustment to coaching contracts might change the ways in which they prioritize academics. In all, there is certainly a need for more breakthrough design thinking in athletic departments and the broader academic community. Because the learning and personal development of student-athletes, in part, depends on educational innovation, expanding our knowledge of how champions within athletic departments identify and promote new ideas is critically important.

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