An Evaluation of the Career Game Plan Program at Virginia Tech

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to gain a better understanding of the perspectives and experiences that student-athletes have with the Career Game Plan program at Virginia Tech. In addition, the project sought to identify areas of improvement so that the program can further benefit the future student-athletes who participate. This qualitative study consisted of semi-structured interviews to identify the development of the student-athletes' career skills. Data was collected by interviewing ten student-athletes who had most recently completed all four events of the Career Game Plan program. After research and analysis of the data, common themes emerged for the aspects of the program that are most valued by student-athletes, highlighting meaningful connections, quality communication, opportunities, and preparation for post-graduate life. The student-athletes also noted inconsistencies with their experience throughout the program and provided some suggestions that they felt would further enhance the student-athlete experience through this program. Interviews revealed that student-athletes truly value this opportunity that Virginia Tech provides for them, and they believe that all student-athletes should take advantage of it.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For many young athletes, their biggest dream is to play their favorite sport at the collegiate level. Once they get there, especially in Division I, they see how much sacrifice is required. Student-athletes put so much time and effort into perfecting their craft, that they tend to prioritize these activities over other aspects of their lives. An area of growth that often gets overlooked is their career development (Steele at al., 2020). Whether they purposely overlook it because they think they are going pro, they do not have time because they are always training, or because they do not know where to start, it happens. The NCAA began to take notice of this gap in growth in the 1990s, and took initiatives to produce their student-athletes into more well-rounded human beings (NCAA, 1999). This initiative eventually led to offices at each institution, commonly referred to as the department of Student-Athlete Development. This office is committed to supporting student-athletes in their lives outside of sport, because as we all know, sport will not last forever. One area that Student-Athlete Development specializes is the career development of their student-athletes. Each school has a different process of how they go about educating their student-athletes, and Virginia Tech utilizes their own program, Career Game Plan (Appendix A).

Background and Setting

Virginia Tech is committed to preparing their student-athletes for life beyond sport (Virginia Tech, n.d.). In an effort to provide opportunities for their student-athletes to develop their career skills, the Student Athlete Development Department put together a series of four voluntary events for student-athletes to attend over the course of their time

at school. This series of events is called the Career Game Plan. The department of Student-Athlete Development has been hosting career programs since their office started in 2013, but the current version of this program began in 2017. Slight changes have been made over the years to continue to make it a beneficial experience for the student-athletes. In 2019, the added incentive of customized suits for each student-athlete who completed all four events was implemented (Virginia Tech, 2020). It was initially structured so that the student-athletes would attend one event each year, but has since been changed to be more flexible, allowing student-athletes to form their own path through the program.

A brief description of each event in chronological order are as follows:

- Career 101 - a brief online questionnaire matching interests and skills of student-athletes to potential majors or career paths.

- Resume Remix - An online event with an opportunity for resumes to be reviewed by professionals or tips for building one from scratch.

- Career Jumpstart - A career fair event aimed to help student-athletes build their network and practice speaking with professionals.

- Beyond VT - A panel of Virginia Tech alumni speak with student-athletes about post-graduate life covering paths of graduate school, beginning a career, or playing professionally.

See Appendix A for the brochure that Student-Athlete Development provides for these programs.

The events are all led by directors of Student-Athlete Development as well as invited professionals, some of which are Virginia Tech Alumni and even former Virginia Tech student-athletes.

There has been previous analysis on the final event of the program, Beyond VT (Johnson, 2020). This research presented findings based on just this event, rather than the program as a whole. It was also conducted four years ago, so the program and events have changed slightly. This research aims to provide the same type of evaluation and understand the effectiveness for the student-athletes who participate.

Purpose, Research Question, and Objectives

There has been a recent change in the staff of the department of Student-Athlete Development. The previous director of Career Game Plan abruptly departed during this past school year (2023-2024). The rest of the staff is working to make sure the program runs smoothly until they can secure a new member who can put all of their time and focus into the program. There were few notes left behind on the state of the program, and the current staff noted that hearing feedback from student-athletes who recently completed the program would be very valuable (C. Spera, personal communication, March, 2024). This will provide the incoming director with a starting point and an understanding of how the program is currently impacting student-athletes. The goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of student-athletes' experiences through this program, evaluate the program's usefulness, and be able to provide beneficial feedback and recommendations for the future of the Career Game Plan. The research questions that guided this study are:

- How do student-athletes at Virginia Tech who participate in the Career Game Plan program perceive their experiences?

- How might Student-Athlete Development improve their program(s) to further benefit future student-athletes at Virginia Tech?

I worked to answer these research questions by asking open-ended questions to participants that allowed them to speak on their experiences. The probing questions were used when necessary to dig a little deeper and understand their perspectives better. The final objective was to be able to report all of the findings back to the staff of Student-Athlete development so that they can improve the events and be able to further enhance the overall experiences of the student-athletes.

Definition of Key Terms

- **Career Game Plan:** A targeted student-athlete career development program to help facilitate a student-athlete's transition to their professional aspirations.

- **Student-athlete:** A student who participates in an organized competitive sport that is sponsored by their educational institution.

- **Student-Athlete Development:** An office of support staff that aims to provide student-athletes with the resources to grow in areas outside of their sport, preparing them for success both in college and after graduation.

Limitations of the Project

There are a few limitations to this project. The first is that the pool of participants that I was pulling from was very small to begin with. There were only 20-25 eligible participants since the intended target population were those who were completing the program in the spring semester of 2024. These student-athletes have busy schedules,

receive countless emails and messages, and also may not want to participate, so many of the student-athletes did not respond to the invitation for an interview. In addition to that limitation, since the pool of participants was very small, not all teams were represented by the participants. I worked to incorporate as many sports as I could to have a variety of perspectives and experiences, but it was not as diverse as I would have liked. Along with this, the small sample size made it difficult to have equal gender-based findings.

Another limitation to this project is the constantly changing aspect of the program. While I do think this is a strength of the program as a whole, collecting data became difficult at times since the participants were of varying ages and experienced some of the events at different times and saw different versions. A specific variant in this is that some participants began the program during COVID, so it certainly looked a lot different than it does now. Along with this, some of the participants completed the program in as little as two years, where others took up to four. This made it difficult for some of the participants to recall detailed experiences of the events.

The final limitation of this research is that I had participated in this program myself, so there is a possibility for bias in my findings. I think it can serve as a strength as well given that I have personal experience and can better understand what the student-athletes are referring to, but there is definitely the possibility that questions or data could be geared towards my own experiences as well.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Student-athletes often place a lot of their focus on their performance within their sport. Regardless of what sport it is, one day it will come to an end. According to a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) report, fewer than 2% of student-athletes go on to play professionally after college (NCAA, 2024). Most athletic administrators are aware of these statistics and understand that the majority of their student-athletes will not play professionally (McCarthy, 2017). Due to this, it is important that student-athletes are prepared for life after sport and gain career skills, and many programs have been created to prepare student-athletes for their careers. The importance of growing these skills along with the many processes for these programs will be a large focus of this review.

A Need for Career Development with Student-Athletes

Being a student-athlete requires countless hours outside of the classroom to be devoted to sport. The NCAA has rules in place to regulate these hours including twenty hours per week for in-season Division I athletes, with a four hour limit per day (NCAA, n.d.). Regardless of having these rules in place, many student-athletes have reported participating in up to forty hours per week of related activities (Miller & Buttell, 2018). Some of these extra activities that do not always get officially counted towards the hourly count can include meetings, film sessions, study hall, conditioning, team activities, and many more. While these activities may enhance their collegiate and athletic experience, they leave little room for any other activities or experiences. Student-athletes often even prioritize these additional athletic activities over their academic commitments (Brewer et al., 1993). One area of development that often gets overlooked during this time is career

planning, which can lead to career uncertainty or confusion (Eiche et al., 1997). Eiche also states that student-athletes have been shown to change their majors or career paths more than nonathletes, which could be attributed to the lack of time given to explore career interests and the pressure to choose a path without adequate knowledge of it.

Student-athletes naturally obtain many skills and attributes that make them attractive to employers because sports and good business practice have a lot of similar qualities (Phare, 2017). However, many student-athletes are not entirely aware of these transferable skills that can relate to success in their careers (Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000). Due to this, many career development programs aim to show student-athletes how they can leverage their time as a collegiate athlete and present their skills to employers. It is well known that student-athletes often gain strong mindsets and skills that equip them for the challenges they may face in the workplace (Danise, 2022). Some employers specifically seek out student-athletes during the hiring process because of these innate skills. A few of these skills that can be related back to sport include coachability, teamwork, resiliency, a strong work ethic, performing under pressure, etc. (Linfield College Career Development, 2020). Many of these attributes cannot be taught, which is why student-athletes can be seen as valuable hires.

Career Development as a Whole

Career development is an important area of growth for everyone, not just student-athletes. The process and skills that are taught during this development are generally the same regardless of who is learning. While some tools may be more useful for student-athletes or specific to their skills, there are many skills that apply to everyone. There are also constant changes happening in the workplace, which makes it important

for counselors and educators to stay aware of these trends and be able to implement changes in their career development activities (Hughey & Hughey, 1999). This constantly changing landscape requires employees to have traditional skills along with adaptability to acquire new skills (Gupta, 2022). Some critical components of effective career development programs include self-awareness, selecting the right topic and securing funding, getting adequate support, working with others, and managing yourself, your career, and your demands (Rubio et al., 2017). These categories encompass many subcategories such as personality assessments, initiative, networking skills, time management, etc. Processes of career guidance programs should follow a plan that will allow students to achieve many different career development competencies while also addressing the needs of diverse student populations (Athanasou & Perera, 2019; Richard, 2005). In addition, many students benefit from experiential learning, essentially getting to practice their skills and learn along the way by doing. Investing in programs that provide these kinds of opportunities for students leads to greater success, and this creates an immediate impact as more employees can go beyond their job description and bring more value to their organization (Gupta, 2022).

Programs in Place

The NCAA has taken notice of the importance of developing career and life skills with their student-athletes. In 1991, the NCAA Foundation initiated efforts to create a total development program for student-athletes called CHAMPS/Life Skills (NCAA, 1999). This program eventually launched in 1994 with forty-six NCAA member institutions participating; and since then, about fifty more have joined each year. Each institution that participates is provided with materials and supplemental resources to

encourage this development (Thor, 2024). While the program does cover more developmental areas, the career development aspect focuses on encouraging the student-athletes to pursue their career goals.

Although some schools may still use this framework, the CHAMPS/Life Skills program essentially morphed into the department of Student-Athlete Development or Student-Athlete Support Services at each institution (C. Spera, personal communication, March, 2024). It served as a basic outline of what programs should look like, and now schools have grown and transformed it to fit their own institutions. A perfect example of this is the Career Game Plan program at Virginia Tech, a program unique to the institution. Student-Athlete Development also hosts other programs to build life skills for student-athletes, but this is their career development one. There are many other examples of programs that are unique to each university. The University of Pennsylvania has a program of their own in which they hone in on providing their student-athletes with meaningful connections. The Penn Athletics Mentor Program matches each Penn undergraduate student-athlete with former Penn student-athlete alumni (University of Pennsylvania, n.d.). This provides the current student-athletes with networking opportunities, career insights, and a sounding board for additional life decisions. Michigan State University also has a program of their own that is described as a three-part process of career exploration, career development, and career placement (Michigan State University, n.d.). Similar to Virginia Tech, this includes a series of events including a career fair, career exploration course, networking, and financial literacy workshops. A common theme among many of these programs is building

connections with alumni and professionals and a commitment to the entire career development process, from gaining skills to securing a job.

Student-athletes don't always understand the value of these types of programs or feel compelled to participate. Literature suggests that leadership training (similar to career development) is most effective when it is developed and delivered with a student-centered approach with the goal of impacting the student-athletes' lives through transformational leadership experiences (Rosch & Anthony, 2012). In order to make an impact and entice the student-athletes, there needs to be educators that model the style of leadership they are teaching (Komives et al., 2005). Building this credibility is important for the learners to grasp what they are being taught. This is a similar concept to what many student-athlete career development programs aim to incorporate by utilizing former student-athletes and alumni from their schools. This brings a sense of comfortability for the student-athletes, knowing that they are hearing from people who were once in their exact shoes, and have successful careers now. Many of them even went through the same programs and learned the same skills, so they just continue to model what they have learned, which shows the student-athletes that this process is effective.

Similar Research Framework

Evaluating programs such as the Career Game Plan are important in order to strengthen the quality of it and improve the overall outcomes (Metz, 2007). With all of the demands that student-athletes face, it is important that programs like this be evaluated and are as effective as possible to lead to success in their future careers. Evaluations can help determine whether the needs of student-athletes are being met and if they are benefiting from the program in the way they are intended to. It also opens up the door to

make changes or additions to the program to improve it and better suit the needs of student-athletes during their career development processes.

A similar case study to this research was conducted in 2021 at fellow Atlantic Coast Conference school, Clemson University, on the student-athlete career development program that they provide (Coffin et al., 2021). Their focus was to examine the Clemson student-athletes' perceptions of participating in the University Professional Internship and Co-op (UPIC) Program that began in 2012 and is open to all undergraduate students who have a GPA of 2.0 or higher. This program is slightly different from the one I am reviewing in that it is a program that is open to more than just student-athletes, however they are only focusing on their experiences. This Clemson study serves as a framework for my research in terms of the goals of my research and the type of qualitative data collected.

Another study to take into consideration is one that was conducted by a Virginia Tech Student in 2020, that is a program analysis of the final of the four events among Career Game Plan, the Beyond VT event (Johnson, 2020). This research gives a glimpse into the student-athletes perception of the program by focusing on one specific event. It has similar themes and concepts such as networking and participation, but has a much more narrow focus.

Summary

Career development is extremely important for student-athletes given that the majority of them do not go on to play their sport professionally after graduation. Any program that focuses on career development should be constantly evolving to keep up with the current work environments and be able to prepare their students best. It is also

important to regularly evaluate programs to make sure they are up to date and effective, which brings us to the purpose of this project. Each school may have their own career development program, but our goal is to understand the effectiveness of Career Game Plan and see where it can continue to improve to benefit future Virginia Tech student-athletes.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I chose to study the development of career skills of student-athletes after completion of the Career Game Plan program at Virginia Tech. The Career Game Plan program is a series of four events that provides student-athletes with a format to gain insight into their career goals and opportunities. The department of Student-Athlete Development commits to helping their student-athletes identify their strengths, learn new skills, and prepare them for success. This study focused on the student-athletes' perception of their experiences through this program along with the impact of the events on their career development. Qualitative methods were used to collect data in the form of Zoom interviews. The interviews were framed with two primary research questions:

- How do student-athletes at Virginia Tech who participate in the Career Game Plan program perceive their experiences?
- How might Student-Athlete Development improve their program(s) to further benefit future student-athletes at Virginia Tech?

Reflexivity Statement

This topic and program are very relevant to me for a few reasons. I was a student-athlete during my time at Virginia Tech and I completed the Career Game Plan program. I faced many challenges in my career development due to my demanding athletics schedule on top of my schoolwork, and saw this program as an opportunity to gain some skills in the small window of time that I have available. I understood how fortunate I was to be able to pursue my dreams as a Division I athlete and have these resources available to grow in other parts of my life, because not every school has that. In talking to younger teammates throughout my years, I noticed that aspects of the

program were constantly changing, and at times, a bit unorganized. I was interested in hearing what other student-athletes' experiences were like, especially since I had completed the program over two years ago and things seemed to have changed. I was also well aware of the sudden departure of the director of this program, and I was hoping that it would not negatively impact the future of this program. After speaking with other staff members in the department of Student-Athlete Development, I felt I had an opportunity to help them.

I understand the importance of developing career skills during your time as a student-athlete. I am currently in the job search process and have been trying to apply what I have learned from these events into my applications and conversations with prospective employers, along with the way I present myself. I have also been using connections that I have made along the way to continue to help me succeed. This has served as a time of reflection for me as I start to notice there were resources from Student-Athlete Development that I did not take full advantage of or I did not put in/get out what I should have from this program. I have strong feelings towards this topic due to my personal experiences and my desire to help future student-athletes be able to develop their career skills to be successful.

Data Collection

Qualitative data was collected by means of semi-structured, open-ended interviews, each lasting around 30 minutes. A staff member from the department of Student-Athlete Development selected student-athletes to interview. These student-athletes were chosen because they were set to complete the program (all four events) during the 2024 spring semester. This staff member had been covering the

program for the semester while they searched for someone to fully take over, so she was able to provide me with a list of student-athletes that met this criterion along with their emails so that I could reach out to them about participating (see Appendix B for the email script). The ten student-athletes participating in the study included seven juniors, two sophomores, and one senior. Two of the participants were also transfers, so they started their athletic and academic careers at a different school. The different sports represented include soccer, lacrosse, football, swimming, and diving. The interview protocol allowed for the participants to share their experiences in their own words and provide their attitudes and perspectives of the program as a whole.

The recruitment email included an information sheet (Appendix C), which explained what participants should know should they agree to participate in an interview, along with who they can contact regarding questions. Participants also received a program recap sheet (Appendix D) with a quick summary of the Career Game Plan to jog their memory and get them thinking about their experiences with the program. All interviews were conducted via Zoom video calls and each call was recorded using a function on Zoom. The interview was broken into three sections of open-ended questions, along with follow-up questions for each to allow the researcher to probe for better understanding or greater detail. The three sections included questions about reaction/learning, behavior, and reflection/results. Appendix E contains the interview protocol, which includes the main questions being asked along with the option for probing questions.

Data Analysis

The Otter.ai application embedded within Zoom was used to create a transcript of each conversation. After conducting the interviews and gathering the transcriptions, I began coding each of the interviews. I coded these interviews using a coding technique learned in my qualitative research class, extracting quotes that stood out and organizing them into categories (Drape, 2020). Then, looking at the codes, I was able to determine some recurring themes and examined how certain parts of the data would be useful together to paint a picture. After these themes were identified, I was able to solidify my findings and support them with quotes from participants.

The Kirkpatrick Model for evaluation was used as part of my interview process and data analysis to assess the impact that the Career Game Plan program had made on each of the participants. This model breaks a process into four levels in order to identify the effects of the training and how well they translate to successful learning outcomes (University of San Diego, n.d.). The four levels are as follows:

- Level 1 - Reaction: Gauges how participants respond from training.
- Level 2 - Learning: Determines what participants have retained the intended knowledge, skills, attitude, confidence, and commitment based on their participation in the training.
- Level 3 - Behavior: Examines the degree to which participants make changes to their behavior and are able to apply what they learned back to other settings.
- Level 4 - Results: Measures long-term outcomes and benefits as a result of the training.

This type of evaluation can be seen as a framework for the questions asked in the interview and in analyzing the data (Appendix E).

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this project was to gain a better understanding of the experience that student-athletes at Virginia Tech have with the Career Game Plan program. The aim is to gain insight into how effective the program is in their career development, learn about what aspects are most valued by the student-athletes, and hear their thoughts on how the program can better suit student-athletes in the future. At the request of the directors of the department of Student Athlete Development, the interviews were conducted with a group of student-athletes who were the most recent participants to complete the full program. This ensured that they had experienced all of these events and could speak on their personal experiences with each. This section contains results collected from the interviews with 10 Virginia Tech student-athletes in the spring of 2024. In this study, I examined Virginia Tech student-athletes using a qualitative study design. The results are broken into themes that stood out among all of the participants' responses, including valuable feedback for the department of Student-Athlete Development on both the positive and negative experiences of the student-athletes and possible ways to improve the program. The themes that emerged from the interviews are as follows:

1. Yearning for Meaningful Connections

2. Realizing Opportunity

3. Valuing Quality Communication

4. Preparing for Life After Sport

5. Inconsistency with Experience

These themes help to paint a picture of the student-athlete experience with the Career Game Plan program. Student-athletes from lacrosse, soccer, swim and dive, and football were interviewed on their experiences. To remain anonymous, they were each given a number and will be listed as SA(1-10).

Theme 1: Yearning for Meaningful Connections

Throughout the interviews, each participant shared how much they value the networking aspect of this program, and how beneficial it is for them. They cited various reasons for wanting to make these connections. Some used this as an opportunity to practice speaking with professionals but in a low-stakes environment, some felt a sense of comfort hearing from alumni who were once in their shoes, and others sought out job and internship opportunities in their conversations.

One student-athlete spoke about the conversations they had with some alumni, and how these are connections that are not only helping them now, but will be beneficial to them in the future as well:

> "At Beyond VT, I was able to build strong connections with alumni that I plan to reach out to and get their advice from. They've been so helpful, and they explained their journey to get to their career, which is of a similar interest to mine. I think networking with them will be so beneficial because connections are everything nowadays. I've been leveraging that and just using their advice to continue searching for those careers and understanding how they got to where they are today." (SA3)

That same student-athlete shared why they valued these connections so much, and also commented on their disappointment on the limited variety of career fields represented by

the professionals that were brought in. While they were able to have great conversations, they wished there could have been more resources to speak with in their career field (Public Health):

> "I was more hopeful that I would meet more people within my specific career interests or major. I felt like Career Jumpstart specifically was great for practicing networking, but I was kind of disappointed that there weren't people that I could actually utilize that were in my career field." (SA3)

Another participant shared the comfort that they felt speaking to successful alumni that were once student-athletes at Virginia Tech, going through the same experiences as them:

> "Talking to the Virginia Tech alums was so beneficial because they're so easily relatable. Everyone says you're going to be fine, which in reality, you probably will be. But hearing how they went through similar challenges and everything, and still got to where they are today and have successful careers was really helpful." (SA7)

Similarly, another student-athlete had the goal of making connections with these former Virginia Tech student-athletes from the start:

> "I was looking forward to meeting people that were in your shoes as an athlete—waking up, going to practice in class, all that good stuff—meeting them and understanding how they did it, how they went about it, and then how what they're doing right now since they're out of sports." (SA5)

Student-athletes shared how the connections they built at these events led to career opportunities:

"So I got an offer from a gentleman at [Company Name], and as I was talking to him, he was asking me what I like to do and what I'm interested in. I kind of told him that I really just want to get into strength and conditioning. He responded with, 'No way, me too! We have a similar interest,' and we started talking about it. Afterwards, he told me, 'Hey, if you ever need to talk to somebody, if you ever need some advice, come to me. If you ever need a job, let me know and I will help you out.' I thought that was really cool and just one example of the opportunities I've gotten through growing my network at these events. It was a super informal conversation, but it was still really cool." (SA6)

Another student-athlete added that they appreciated that each of the professionals who are brought in to network and speak with the student-athletes at these events genuinely want to be there and help them out:

"I've definitely met people that I probably would have never met if I didn't go to these events. They tell us to reach out to the professionals, so I did that, and I still keep up with some of the people today. It's cool because they're still interested in me, and I'm still interested in them. The people that they bring to the events want to be there and want to make connections with student-athletes." (SA5)

Each of the student-athletes noted the importance of connecting with professionals, and especially former student-athletes and Virginia Tech alumni. They cherished these opportunities to pick their brains and get something out of each conversation that will benefit their career development in some way. The only negative aspect of this is that because they value these meaningful connections so much, they wish there were even more people there from a variety of backgrounds and career paths.

Theme 2: Realizing Opportunity

An important part of making this program successful is understanding what motivates people to get involved in it along with what they are hoping to get out of it. This program is not required for any of the student-athletes, yet a large portion of them still attend the events and complete the whole program. Some student-athletes look ahead and know their time as an athlete will come to an end one day, so they need to prepare for a career. Others feel that they miss out on many of the typical career opportunities that are offered to college students due to their strict schedules and demands from their sport, so they take advantage of these events. The department of Student-Athlete Development offers a custom suit for any participant who completes the whole program, which typically piques the interest of many.

The custom suit was definitely the first thing that caught the attention of one of the interviewed student-athletes. Then, after learning about the program, they realized that there were many more benefits they would be getting out of the events:

"I think coming in my freshman year and hearing that I would get tailored—like fit to me—[a] VT specialized jacket was definitely something that I was like, 'Oh my gosh, that's something I want to strive for.' I definitely wanted that and going through each level to get that jacket was definitely something that motivated me. But also coming in as a freshman, I was very unsure of what I wanted to do. I actually came in as a business undecided major, so I wasn't even sure what I wanted to do with my academic career and how I wanted to go through college. So I think starting that process, and just kind of learning more about myself about what Virginia Tech can provide in those kinds of aspects definitely, made me

more interested in being involved in wanting to figure out the business side of
college." (SA1)

Another participant realized that their sport cannot be played forever, so they need to start
preparing for their career and this is an opportunity to figure that out:

"I know for a fact that one day football is going to be over, because it's like that
with all sports. So I figured that I need to take a step towards what's next. I'm a
senior, and I'll be graduating soon, so I want to know what's available and what
my options are for this next journey." (SA6)

Another participant reflected on how much sports have consumed their life, taking away
from other opportunities to grow and focus on their career. They were looking for an
opportunity and a place to start turning their focus to this part of their life:

"I think being an athlete our whole lives, we are constantly focused on sports.
When I got to college, I realized I really need to get more involved with the career
plan lifestyle and get more invested in that part of my journey as well. I think that
the main goals I had going into it were to learn about the ins and outs of getting an
internship and how to talk to employers." (SA4)

A recent change that has been made to the program is the ability to complete it at a faster
pace and attend events earlier than they are intended (typically it is Career 101 freshman
year, Resume Remix sophomore year, Career Jumpstart junior year, and Beyond VT
senior year). As you can see from the description of the participants, many of them saw
this as an opportunity and took advantage of it:

"I liked being able to attend the events earlier, because it gets the idea of thinking
further ahead into your life after athletics in your mind earlier than it otherwise

would be… You kind of get a head start on thinking about all the different places where these alumni may have had to adjust, and you can go ahead and prepare for that earlier." (SA8)

All of these participants saw an opportunity to grow through attending these events. They reflected on their past and thought about their future and saw this program as a tool to help them be successful. Student-athletes often have very different paths and approaches to their careers than other college students, so it is important that the department of Student-Athlete Development highlights their ability to guide them toward success when informing them of this opportunity.

Theme 3: Valuing Quality Communication

Throughout the interviews, many of the participants discussed how impactful it was for staff members or teammates to be in person talking about the events and encouraging participation. Student-athletes have very busy schedules and also receive countless messages per day from coaches, teammates, or support staff, so sometimes emails or other digital forms of communication can get lost or forgotten about. Having personal conversations with staff members or other student-athletes seemed to have a positive impact on the participants of these interviews as well as their teammates when it came to attending the events.

Many student-athletes noted the impact of a staff member of the department of Student-Athlete Development taking the time to come out to practices and discuss the events with the team personally:

"I honestly think I remember exactly when it was introduced to me. It was when [assistant athletic director for student-athlete development] had come out on the

field after a practice. She talked about the program and also gave shoutouts to teammates who had attended events and announced their progress. She talked about the ones getting their suits this year, and I instantly knew I wanted to do that." (SA2)

Another participant noted the constant communication from not only the department of Student-Athlete Development, but also within their coaching and support staff. They felt this personal communication made it more enticing to attend and they always knew when the events were occurring.

"Coach [name] wants us to do it as well, so it comes from the head coach down. He wants to make sure we're doing this because he knows we can't play football forever. They really make it a priority and then on top of that we get plenty of emails about it…. The people on our end of the football team at least, were giving us updates on the events that were coming up to make sure we have it on our radar and our coaches send out a text…. Some of the guys even though they still didn't go, they always had the opportunity to go and they were aware of it so they made it very easy for our schedule." (SA5)

A different student-athlete discussed similar experiences where the in-person communication led them to be more alert for the less personalized digital communication where they needed to register for the events:

"I think them coming to our practices was really awesome because obviously we'll have to be attentive and all of us are present there. The emails are helpful too, but having the staff out at practice telling us that we're going to get an email makes sure that we're already alerted. We get so many emails from Virginia Tech

as a whole that sometimes it just goes over our heads but them coming to our practice, explaining the situation and knowing the name to look out for makes it harder to miss them." (SA4)

The following participant also felt that being approached face-to-face after practice with the whole team gave upperclassmen an opportunity to share their own experiences with the program which really resonated with them:

"And then when she told it to us, we had upperclassmen who did it there and they were encouraging it and saying how much they enjoyed it and that we should take advantage of the opportunity. Just hearing that your other teammates speak so highly of it definitely made me feel engaged and I made note of the events right away." (SA1)

Having quality communication is an important aspect in getting student-athletes to actually attend the events and be able to benefit from all the work that gets put into the production of each event. These student-athletes seem to feel that while digital communication is helpful and definitely necessary, it is the in-person, personal conversations that really impact their attendance. There are usually only one or two events per semester, so if someone misses the one they are supposed to attend, it is going to be a while before they can make it up. Having face-to-face conversations with staff members and teammates makes them become more of a priority. The little added aspect of shouting out the student-athletes for their performance also goes a long way. Praising this effort teaches a love of learning and makes the process fun rather than just the end goal (O'Brien, 2018).

Theme 4: Preparing for Life After Sport

During the interviews, many student-athletes made connections between skills they learned at these events and life experiences where they were already able to apply them. Some of them did not even realize until they were reflecting on what they had learned, and they got excited to share that they were growing and developing already. Even though many of these skills are intended to be utilized in their future careers, many of them were able to talk about times in school where they were able to apply what they learned and get some extra preparation or practice.

Many of the student-athletes discussed the confidence they gained through networking and speaking to professionals at the events. For example, the following participant gained experience having professional conversations in a less stressful environment, and carried that into other aspects of their career development:

"When I went to Business Horizons, I felt more confident and was able to have better conversations with professionals after gaining that experience at Career Jumpstart. Even though some of the conversations are short, I was able to get the most out of it… I've also already been able to apply my experience speaking to professionals and promoting myself to conversations I've had with my professors. Some professors aren't entirely understanding of student-athletes and our schedules, so I've learned how to work through that in a more professional way rather than a student to teacher way." (SA7)

Another student-athlete felt that same sense of confidence after networking at the third event. This event gives tips and tricks for talking with professionals and promoting

yourself while also giving the opportunity to practice these skills. This student-athlete used the comfortability that they got there to feel better heading into their real interviews:

"I definitely think that after the third step where we went to Career Jumpstart, that made me feel a lot more comfortable reaching out to people and talking to professionals. I've definitely applied that confidence to interviews I've done for internships. I just felt a lot more prepared and comfortable to talk to a recruiter." (SA10)

The student-athletes were able to get valuable feedback on their resume at the Resume Remix event, and one shared how that eventually led to them getting a job, and they now have a better idea of what corrections to make on their resume moving forward:

"I was able to use my resume that was fixed up at Resume Remix to get a summer job at a housing title company here in Blacksburg. I remember I had started each sentence in my bio with 'there' and they showed me that it's probably not a great start to have four 'there's within four sentences so I was able to fix that up and apply for the job and I got it. That's such a small thing, but I do think it matters, and it really made a difference as I was able to get that job and will hopefully have the same one this year. Little things like that can help you along the way and can help you both right now and even once you're done here."

While the events are meant to prepare student-athletes for their careers after college, these participants are already finding ways to implement what they've learned into their experiences while still in school. As discussed in the literature review, an important aspect of career development is experiential learning and being able to practice skills as they go. These participants have clearly been able to practice these skills during

the events as well as in situations outside of the events, which has really benefited them. Part of why they are able to do this is also because of a recent change in format of the program, allowing them to attend the events earlier. For example, Career Jumpstart and Beyond VT are the third and fourth events and the ones with the most networking involved. Some of these student-athletes would not have been able to practice these skills before graduating had they not been able to attend these events early. This seems to be a positive change and has only been a catalyst for career development.

Theme 5: Inconsistency with Experience

Each of the four events are focused on a particular aspect of the career development process. The events are different in terms of layout, duration, and amount of interaction with others. The first event is completed solo and virtually, the second virtually but with one professional, and the final two events are both in person with large groups of student-athletes as well as professionals. The most discussed events throughout the interviews were definitely Career Jumpstart and Beyond VT, with a great deal of mention of Resume Remix as well. The one event that seemed to stand out, in a bad way, was Career 101. It was common that the participant forgot about the first event completely and had to be reminded of what they did there. This event is very different from the others in that rather than interacting with other student-athletes or professionals, it is an online survey to be completed solo. Resume Remix is also an online event; however, it is conversational and includes a professional who is providing tips on the student-athletes resume, also giving them the opportunity to ask questions and build connections.

While this event can be helpful for participants who have no idea what direction they want to go in for their major or career path, many of the participants in this particular group already knew what they wanted. For these student-athletes, this event did not provide much benefit:

"I think maybe the very first event, the career interests one, could have been better. I didn't really get much out of that. But also, I was pretty set on my interests coming into college, so I didn't really need anything to guide me in certain directions." (SA8)

As previously stated, Career 101 is the only event that does not include interactions with anyone else. A few student-athletes noted that this event could have been more memorable or beneficial if there was more interaction involved:

"I think that the first event could be a little bit more interactive. That would be especially helpful as a freshman, you want to get to know the other people around you and more people that work in Student-Athlete Development." (SA7)

Career 101 is an event with the goal of matching the participants with a major or career path that fits their interests and strengths. The following student-athlete suggested their experience could be more consistent by bringing in professionals to talk with to get a better understanding of different career fields:

"Career 101 was just a survey, but maybe they could bring in some people that have that major or that are working in that field today so that you have someone to talk to." (SA5)

Another felt like they were just checking a box by attending the first event, and not truly getting much out of it:

"The first one I did freshman year, looking back now, it didn't change who I am or my ability to get a job. If I'm being honest, I kind of forget about the jobs they even suggested now… I hate to say it but it just felt like checking a box for me and being one step closer to getting the suit." (SA1)

This is feedback that I felt is important to include in the report to be able to improve the program. This event can be helpful for student-athletes who have no idea what major or career path they are interested in, but this group of participants seemed to know what they were doing from the start. Many student-athletes had mentioned areas of other skills they could benefit from learning about if they were included in the program so I see this gap in consistency of experience as an opportunity. The event can either be improved upon with its current foundation to make it more impactful in career development, or they can take it in a new direction and use it as an opportunity for a new event with different skills taught.

Unique Suggestions

As the interviews came to a close, many of the participants identified some improvements that they felt could be made to the program to benefit future Virginia Tech student-athletes who participate. Some of them also came to these conclusions throughout earlier parts of the interviews where they were reflecting on their own experiences and saw opportunities for improvement.

As discussed in the literature review, the landscape of the workplace is constantly changing. One of these new aspects of career development is utilizing the platform LinkedIn. One student-athlete discussed how they think some sort of informational event on the platform would be beneficial for people:

"I had some LinkedIn questions; sometimes I get lost on where I should post and how I should network on there. It's such a big platform and can be a tool if used correctly, but I don't know exactly how to utilize it. I think having a bit more information on that and how to build your connections would be really helpful and applicable." (SA7)

Another participant reflected on an aspect of their personal career development that they think could be improved upon. They discussed the importance of interviews when it comes to landing a job or internship and how they still do not feel entirely prepared for them:

"I think it would be helpful to have more information on interview processes. We talk a lot about elevator pitches, which is nice; but I think once you get the interview, it would be helpful to know how to actually go through with it and be prepared with a lineup of questions that you could be asked or that you should be asking. Some sort of mock interview as an opportunity to practice with tips throughout would be beneficial." (SA4)

The following student-athlete harped on how much they value connections with Virginia Tech alumni, and discussed how they would have appreciated having someone to mentor them along the way:

"I'm not sure how this would work, but I think a mentor system or being able to pair up with an alumni freshman year would be great. Once a year or so they can check in and connect to them and be able to mentor you throughout the program." (SA10)

Many of the participants noted how beneficial this program has been for them, and that they wished some of their teammates would have taken advantage of it as well. They discussed various excuses they had heard from teammates that chose not to participate, such as laziness or not understanding the opportunity. In an attempt to get more student-athletes involved in this program, one participant suggested a competition between teams, as competition is something that most student-athletes enjoy participating in:

> "I think one idea to increase participation could be to make it a competition between the teams. For example, if a certain number of student-athletes from your team comes, or it could be by classes like if all the freshmen complete first one, or even a percentage from each team, then maybe at the end they get a prize or award or something along those lines." (SA7)

While all of the participants seemed to feel satisfied with their experiences and excited that they came out of it with new skills, many of them saw an opportunity for the program to be even better. This program has been making slight changes over the years to stay up to date with the needs of student-athletes, so it felt important to include some suggestions that come directly from them. The participants clearly value this program and trust in its ability to develop career skills, and want their future teammates and other student-athletes to get all that they can out of it.

Summary

The participants seemed to really enjoy their experiences with Career Game Plan but were also able to identify ways it could improve for future student-athletes. Building meaningful connections was a common topic of conversation during each of the

interviews as they each described how much they value those relationships and experiences. They appreciate these connections so much that many of them vocalized their desire to see more majors and career fields represented by the professionals. We also learned that these student-athletes see the opportunity in programs such as Career Game Plan, and it may be useful for Student-Athlete Development to highlight all of these different opportunities to increase participation. On top of the connections made within the program, many of the participants also discussed the importance of personal relationships when it comes to communication. Having personal communication from various staff members or teammates has left a much larger impact than virtual communication. Another theme discussed is the way many participants are already implementing new skills they learned through the program into their lives before graduating. This type of preparation and ability to practice what they have learned now is going to help them be more successful in their lives after sport. Despite being seemingly happy with their experiences at Career Game Plan, many participants noted an inconsistency with their overall experience, specifically relating to the first event. It seemed that the experience of the event along with the lasting impact of it were much different than those of the later events. Many of the student-athletes want to see this program improve, which is why they offered many unique suggestions that came to mind as they reflected on their experiences.

Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusions

After analyzing the literature in combination with the data collected from the interviews, there are some recommendations I have for both future research on this topic as well as for the Career Game Plan program. These are points I think should be considered by respective parties based on what I have learned throughout this process.

Recommendations for Future Research

An evaluation of a program such as Career Game Plan can be conducted in many different ways. In the future, I think there are changes that could be made to this study or similar ones to account for a larger portion of the participants or a wider variety of perspectives. Anyone performing a similar research study should aim to add a more diverse population of participants in terms of teams represented, level of completion, and number of participants. This will aid in more accurate data across the athletic department. A more diverse population will also better represent the wide range of needs, which is an important aspect of career guidance programs (Richard, 2005). The downside to this is that each team is not equally represented in terms of the number of participants at these events, and it is always fluctuating. This study had a specific request to receive feedback from participants who were set to complete the program in spring of 2024. In future research, including participants who are at various points in their completion could be useful to gain an understanding of what they are still hoping to get out of the program before they graduate. The literature above notes how many students benefit from practicing their skills along the way (Gupta, 2022). Talking to student-athletes who are at various points of completion might also help to understand if they have had any opportunities to have this type of experiential learning. Another set of

participants that future researchers could benefit from are those who have completed the program, graduated, and are currently in the workforce. These participants could provide insight on what aspects of the program they felt prepared them for the position they are in today, as well as what areas of career development they could have benefited from a bit more before making that transition. We discussed how the landscape of the workplace is constantly changing (Hughey & Hughey, 1999). Having participants that are currently in the workforce could also help provide insight into what that current landscape looks like and what skills are needed to be successful.

In addition to this, the department of Student-Athlete Development at Virginia Tech could implement surveys after each event to have a more consistent feedback loop. Rather than doing a larger research project with interviews like this one, they can utilize digital tools and quick surveys to evaluate how each event went right after it concludes. This would not give as much in depth insight to the program as a whole, but it would give them the opportunity to improve each event on an individual level. This would also allow the participants to comment on events that are fresh in their mind. A focus group could also be utilized for this type of feedback and will allow for a more conversational type of evaluation with student-athletes bouncing ideas off each other. Another option for feedback would be to hear from the professionals that are being brought in to help with these events. They are the ones in the workforce and know what employers are looking for in candidates, so they might be able to provide insight into the content that should be included in these events.

Recommendations for Program

When gathering data from the interviews, it was clear that each participant valued the connections they build with professionals and Virginia Tech alumni the most out of anything else they do in this program. The one downfall to this is that some of the participants felt that there were some majors or career fields that were not represented by the professionals. As quoted in the findings, one student-athlete said, "I was more hopeful that I would meet more people within my specific career interests or major… I was kind of disappointed that there weren't people that I could actually utilize that were in my career field." My recommendation is to expand on this by having more career fields and majors represented with both Career Jumpstart and Beyond VT, the two events with the most networking involved. Along with this, I think the more of these professionals being former Virginia Tech student-athletes, the better. Many of the participants valued these connections for more than just the networking aspect, "talking to the Virginia Tech alums was so beneficial because they're so easily relatable… hearing how they went through similar challenges and everything, and still got to where they are today and have successful careers was really helpful." Certainly there might be a need to search outside of this pool to make sure that more fields are represented though. This would allow each student-athlete the opportunity to get more out of their conversations whether it be career advice or opportunities, confidence in speaking with professionals, comfortability from hearing relatable advice, or whatever else they may seek to learn.

Another recommendation I have for Student-Athlete Development is to make it a priority to get any staff member in front of each team before each of the events to speak to them about what is upcoming. This type of communication seemed to leave a lasting

impact on some of the participants, "I honestly think I remember exactly when it was introduced to me. It was when [assistant athletic director for student-athlete development] had come out on the field after a practice… I instantly knew I wanted to do that." Many of the participants noted that this impacted their attendance of the event, and it also allowed for the coaching staff of each team to hear about it and get involved in encouraging them to attend. Even the head coach of football has made it a priority to get his student-athletes there, "Coach [name] wants us to do it as well, so it comes from the head coach down. He wants to make sure we're doing this because he knows we can't play football forever." Speaking to each team as a whole also gives upperclassmen who have previously attended events the opportunity to speak on their experiences. This has resonated with some of the participants as they hear their leaders encourage them to focus on this aspect of their development, "…just hearing that your other teammates speak so highly of it definitely made me feel engaged and I made note of the events right away." In addition to this, if staff members cannot get to the team all together, having coaches or teammates speak about the event and provide personal communication would be impactful. This type of communication will only enhance the digital communication that is constantly being sent out to the student-athletes, "we get so many emails from Virginia Tech as a whole that sometimes it just goes over our heads but them coming to our practice, explaining the situation and knowing the name to look out for makes it harder to miss them." Many participants noted that they were more alert and on the lookout for upcoming emails, that tend to otherwise get lost, due to these face-to-face conversations.

A final recommendation that I have is for Student-Athlete Development to take a look at the layout and content of the events. I think there is room for improvement in the

consistency of each event, specifically a way to improve the first event that seems to be lacking in comparison to the others, "the first one I did freshman year, looking back now, it didn't change who I am or my ability to get a job… I hate to say it, but it just felt like checking a box for me and being one step closer to getting the suit." This event can be kept as it definitely has the opportunity to benefit certain student-athletes who are unsure of what major or career path they want, but I think changes can be made to enhance the experience by making it more personable and interactive, just like the other events are. This event is also almost always completed by freshmen who are new to the school, which might be why this participant offered the following opinion, "I think that the first event could be a little bit more interactive. That would be especially helpful as a freshman, you want to get to know the other people around you and more people that work in Student-Athlete Development." I also think that since the working environment is constantly changing, the content of these events needs to stay relevant. Some of the participants made interesting suggestions of career development areas they wanted to learn more about. This included new content such as LinkedIn information and mock interviews. It may be hard to expand the program as a whole and add new events, but there could be a way to incorporate some of these aspects into the current content of the events, or even host additional optional events to attend if there is enough interest. I do think a more consistent feedback loop and open line of communication would help Student-Athlete Development to constantly improve the content and keep what they are teaching relevant.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to better understand the perceptions that student-athletes have of the Career Game Plan program, hear about their experiences, and gain insight into ways it can be improved to further benefit future student-athletes. These individuals were chosen to participate because they were the group that had most recently gone through the entire program and could provide their perspective on each event in its most recent version. Key elements of the program in the layout, content, and processes were uncovered, and both positive and negative experiences were discussed. This type of interview experience was new to me, especially asking questions about a program I had already completed. I am typically on the other side of interviews, being asked about my own experiences; so it was interesting to hear the varying perspectives, especially since the program has changed slightly since I completed it just two years ago. The value of interviewing, even though not in person, showed through the detail I was able to get out of the participants on their experiences. They are young adults who do not always go into too much detail on their responses, so it was important that I was able to ask some probing questions to get them to complete their thoughts at times.

Utilizing the Kirkpatrick Model, I was able to identify areas that the program is excelling in, as well as areas that can be improved. The program is doing well in levels 1 and 2, the reaction and learning stages. Participants are overall happy with their experience throughout the program and are learning the skills that Student-Athlete Development is intending for them to learn. One thing to note here is that some participants feel there is even more for them to learn than what is being offered (LinkedIn, mock interviews, etc.). Along with this, an area to improve upon is

satisfaction of the first event and the consistency of the program as a whole. The

program has also made recent changes that allow for them to excel the most in level 3,

behavior. Allowing the participants to complete the events at earlier stages in their

academic journey has given them more opportunities to practice and apply what they

learned. Many of the student-athletes discussed specific situations where they were able

to utilize skills that they learned from the events. The final level, results, may be hard to

measure through this specific study. The student-athletes described an overall enjoyable

experience where they were able to grow and get what they wanted out of the program.

If the goal of the program is to simply teach these skills effectively, then they are

succeeding. Additional research could be conducted on the number of student-athletes

that have landed jobs either through the program or as a result of completing it to better

understand this category.

　　While being a student-athlete can be very time consuming and requires a lot of

sacrifice, it also comes with benefits. One of them is being part of a community of

student-athletes. All of the participants discussed the importance of this community that

stretches from Virginia Tech alumni, to their current teammates, to future student-athletes

to come. They value hearing from past student-athletes and feel comfort in knowing they

have found success. Conversations with current teammates resonate with them as they

value their guidance. They are excited for the future student-athletes who have so much

opportunity ahead, and they want to help improve their experiences. Many of these

student-athletes also understand that while their sport is a massive focus right now, there

is more to life that they need to explore and be prepared for. Being a student-athlete at

Virginia Tech grants them this opportunity to attend programs, such as Career Game Plan,

and develop their skills outside of athletics. The work that Student-Athlete Development has put into this program has already proven to prepare many student-athletes for their post-graduate journeys and will continue to help develop participants for success. Athletic abilities may not last forever, but the connections made, experiences had, and skills learned will certainly leave a lasting impression through all phases of life.

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Appendices
Appendix A: Career Game Plan Brochure

STUDENT-ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

OUR COMMITMENT: help student-athletes discover and identify their strengths, skills, and passions in preparation for career success

CAREER GAMEPLAN

The Career Game Plan is a four-part professional development series that provides Virginia Tech student-athletes with a format to gain insight into their career goals and opportunities. Each event offers another stepping stone on the path to the professional world.

1 CAREER 101

The first step in the series, Career 101, helps student-athletes identify career paths and fields that align with their course of study, skills, and interests.

2 RESUME REMIX

In the second program, student-athletes get their resumes reviewed by career development professionals, giving unique insight into how to market themselves and their experience at VT.

3 CAREER JUMPSTART

A career fair-style event, Career Jumpstart connects student-athletes with professionals from various industries to help launch their post-graduate opportunities.

4 BEYOND VT

In the final step of the Career Game Plan, student-athletes network with Hokie Alumni to learn about transitioning to professional life and how to leverage their skills throughout their careers.

Students who complete all four steps receive a COMPLIMENTARY business suit from the Office of Student-Athlete Development!

Appendix B: One-on-one Interview (via Zoom) Recruitment Email

The following is an example email reflecting the intended language for recruiting participants to participate in a one-on-one interview.

Subject Line: Evaluation of Career Game Plan at Virginia Tech

<First Name>

You are receiving this email because you are set to complete the Career Game Plan program this spring of 2024. My name is Paige Tyson, and I am a graduate student conducting research at Virginia Tech.

I am inviting you to participate in a one-on-one interview, via Zoom, to evaluate the Career Game Plan program. During this time, we invite your participation to gain insights into your learning and career development experience from the program. A summary of each event included in the program is attached to help you recall what you have attended over the past few years. The conversation will focus on your general experience and learning during and after your participation in the program.

The one-on-one interview is planned to take place throughout the month of April, 2024, and will last approximately 30 minutes per session. The study has been reviewed by the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (protocol # 24-339), and I have attached a related information sheet. If you have questions or concerns, you may share them in advance or when we meet.

If interested in participating in this interview, please schedule a date and time using this Calendly link: https://calendly.com/ptyson-6mvl. It takes less than a minute to schedule, and a Zoom invitation will be shared with you afterward. Thank you for your consideration of this opportunity.

Sincerely,
Paige Tyson

Appendix C: Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Student Researcher: Paige Tyson
Principal Investigator: Dr. Eric Kaufman
IRB# 24-339: Evaluation of the Career Game Plan Program at Virginia Tech

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I am conducting this research as part of my course work.

- **WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete a one-on-one interview. As part of the study, you will share your perceptions of the Career Game Plan program at Virginia Tech. We are interested in hearing about your direct experiences as well as any direct outcomes or impacts from your participation in the program. The interview will be conducted and recorded via Zoom.

The study should take approximately 30 minutes of your time.

We do not anticipate any risks from completing this study.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be recorded via Zoom and then transcribed. The researchers will code

the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). The recordings will be stored on secure password-protected platforms, where only the team has access. The researchers will maintain a list that includes a key to the code. The master key and the recordings will be stored for 5 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

If identifiers are removed from your private information or samples that are collected during this research, that information or those samples could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without your additional informed consent.

- **WHO CAN I TALK TO?**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Eric Kaufman at 540-231-6258 or ekaufman@vt.edu. You may also contact Paige Tyson at 610-413-3220 or ptyson@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Please print out a copy of this information sheet for your records.

Appendix D: Program Recap Sheet

MAJOR MATCHMAKER[1]

- Student-athletes typically attend this event first, to gain a better understanding of their interests and how those interests might align with a possible major or career.

RESUME REMIX

- Learn how to highlight skills and strengths on a resume.
- Meet with professionals to give tips on current resume or provide help to build one.

CAREER JUMPSTART

- Student-Athlete career fair and NIL fair.
- Opportunity to connect with professionals in a variety of career fields.
- Industry info session.
- Enhancing networking skills.
- Former VT student-athlete panel.

BEYOND VT

- Reflect on what's beyond athletics at VT.
- Develop tools to assist in transition.
- Learn how to leverage transferable skills to reach post-graduate goals.
- Student-athlete wellness panel.
- Former VT student-athlete panel.
- Network with former student-athletes.

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[1] Major Matchmaker has since been renamed to Career 101, however this is the title that was included in the email

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: Evaluation of the Career Game Plan Program at Virginia Tech

This interview protocol provides a structure to guide the conversation. Sub-bullets are suggestions for probing into a topic and are intended to be asked only as needed.

Research Question: How do student-athletes at Virginia Tech who participate in the Career Game Plan program perceive their experiences?

Pre-Session Activities

Before recording and beginning the discussion, review the information sheet that was provided in the email. They may keep a copy for their own records.

Opening and Framing Conversation

The facilitator welcomes the participant and summarizes the purpose of the one-on-one interview.
- State the goal of the interview: to understand the participants experience and perceptions of the Career Game Plan program as it relates to the goal of career development. Looking for feedback to possibly improve the program in the future.
- Describe expectations related to confidentiality and duration of the session (around 30 minutes).
- Inform the interviewee that they have the option to remove their name or personal identification from the transcript.
- Invite any clarifying questions.
- Run through each of the events that the participant has attended as part of the Career Game Plan to refresh their memory.

Reaction/Learning (Perception of the layout of the program, what they may have learned, how their experience has impacted them)

- To start, do you recall what motivated you to begin participating in the program?
  - Did you begin freshman year (as recommended) or have a different path?
  - What were you hoping to learn through this experience?
- How did your experience with the program compare to your expectations?
  - Ask for specific examples of why the program met or did not meet expectations.

      ○ Were there clear expectations communicated about the program in the beginning?
- Now that you are about to complete the program, would you recommend other student-athletes to participate? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that this program is beneficial to student-athletes?
  - Are you getting enough out of it for all of the time and effort put into it from the Student-Athlete Development Department?

Behavior (Have they been able to implement new skills toward their career development)

- Have you had any career experience where you were able to apply new skills that you learned from the program?
  - Did any of these career experiences stem from the program itself?
- How has your network changed, if at all?
  - Did you create any meaningful connections with professionals?
- Do you feel prepared to enter the professional world as the transition to life after sport is approaching?
  - If so, what aspects have helped this feeling of preparation?
  - If not, what areas do you not feel prepared in?
- Have you experienced any challenging situations that required application of your experiences from the program?

Reflection/Results (final thoughts and reflections on the program looking back)

- Which of the four events do you think was the most impactful in your career development and why?
  - What do you think is the most applicable skill you've learned?
- Were there any events that you felt weren't useful or educational?
- If you've spoken to teammates or other student-athletes about the program, why do you think others choose not to participate at all or finish the program?
  - Did you experience any conflicts between events and your athletic/academic schedule?
  - Thoughts on the duration of events?
  - How were events communicated to you and was this communication effective? (Did you always know when they were occurring?)
- Is there any area of career skills that you would like to have learned more about?
  - Is there one that you thought you were going to learn about but didn't?
- Do you have any recommendations for the program in the future?
  - In terms of content, layout, etc.
  - Could the department of Student-Athlete Development do anything else to increase participation or make it more enticing for student-athletes?

Summary

● Is there anything else you would like to share, or something that you expected I would ask about but haven't that would help us to better understand your perception of the Career Game Plan program and its usefulness?
● Now I would like to summarize the main points you presented. (*present summary here)*
　○ Does this capture what we have discussed?
　○ Would you like to add or emphasize any points before we close?
● Thank the participant for their time and feedback. Remind them that their invitation email includes contact information if they have any follow up questions or comments.