



## Featured Article: Comparing Professional Pathways A Meta-Analysis of Careers of College Athletics Support Staff and Student Affairs Administrators

The purpose of this study was to explore career experiences of professional staff members situated in college athletics and student affairs environments. Findings emphasize comparisons across academic and early career experiences, current job expectations and activities, and motivations for selected professional-related pathways.

Professional opportunities for intercollegiate athletic support roles, especially across Division I institutions, have increased across the last thirty years (Howard-Hamilton & Watt, 2001). Many reasons are driving this growth, including NCAA policy enforcement, desire for recruitment and competition advantages, and need to provide comprehensive care for student-athlete well being. Student affairs professionals have a longstanding role of providing student services on the traditional, four-year campus. On the surface, the functional areas managed by athletics and student affairs professionals may appear similar (e.g., academic advising, dietician, career development). However, the college student populations served by these positions can be vastly different. The analysis originates from a project completed by members of a University of South Carolina (USC) College of Education graduate course studying the relationship between higher education and intercollegiate athletics. Individual interviews were completed with professional staff across various institution types and position levels during spring 2015. Written interview summaries were reviewed and coded for theming purposes. An overview of significant findings are shared below.

### Overview of positions interviewed\*

<b>Position Type</b>	<b>Athletics-based</b>	<b>Student Affairs-based</b>
Executive Leader of Large Organization	Director of Athletics	Vice President of Student Affairs
Alumni Relations	Senior Associate Athletics Director of Development and Alumni Club	Parents Program Coordinator/Development of Alumni Relations
Enrollment Management	Assistant Director of Student Services	Director of University Admissions
Media Relations Professionals	Associate Sports Information Director	Associate Director for Public Relations
College Recruiters	Men's Soccer, Assistant Coach	Admissions Counselor
	Director of Player Personnel	Director of Visitor Center
Academic Advising	Associate Director of Academics	Coordinator of Cross College Advising

	Academic Advisor in Athletics	Coordinator of Cross College Advising
	Academic Advisor in Athletics	Director of Student Services
	Assistant Director of Learning Enhancement Programs	Academic Coach
	Associate Director of Academics	Community Director in Residence Life

### **Academic Background**

A review of the participants showed 100% graduated with an undergraduate degree and 86% obtained an advanced degree (including one Ed.D. earned by a student affairs executive position). Many athletics-based participants noted professional-based experiences held equal, if not more weight, than an advanced degree. Conversely, student affairs-based participants perceived the advanced degree, especially one focused on a specialization in higher education, as an important credential to advance in the profession.

### **Professional Training**

Athletics staff noted experiential training included one or multiple unpaid or paid internships prior to landing a first traditional professional position. The majority of athletics-based participants noted multiple internships were required and was deemed a common expectation towards career advancement. Conversely, student affairs professionals stated that training occurred through a significant undergraduate experience as a peer leader, or through the assistantships employed across the graduate school experience. The early exposure to specific content areas provided through these venues created more formalized professional opportunities later in their careers.

### **Unique Motivations**

A striking difference between the athletics-based and the student affairs-based positions involved the concept of loyalty. Athletics staff reported a perceived responsibility, or allegiance, to coaching or professional staff members in a noted higher-caliber position. More specifically, if a high-ranking coach or professional staff member changed jobs and moved to a new institution, the athletics-staff members were more likely to follow if an associated professional opportunity was available. It was noted that individual staff members influenced the career path much more so than any other factor. Conversely, student affairs professionals were more likely to demonstrate loyalty to a college or university. For some, this meant an allegiance to an alma mater. For others, this concept meant staying bound to institutions where the work and colleagues were perceived as significant, as were the professional opportunities to advance their career through longevity at one college or university.

### **Daily Activities**

Student Affairs professionals were more likely to cite predictable hours across the familiar 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. weekday timeframe. Athletics staff shared more flexibility existed across expected work hours, yet also noted increased hours were required, including weekend days and evenings. Athletics staff also noted student-athlete availability hinged greatly on daytime class and athletic practice priorities. Therefore, academic meetings were more likely to happen during evening and weekend hours.

### **Noted Similarities**

Passion for working with students in the collegiate environment was a common theme across both professional areas. While not every position directly worked with the student population of interest, all professionals noted the ability to work in the college environment and support students' personal development was key to their career decisions.

### **Noted Differences**

One unexpected finding relates to the institution type preferred by the participants. Many student affairs professionals noted a desire to work at a highly recognized institution. This appeared to provide some professional cache moving forward in student affairs. Conversely, for athletics staff, the main priority focused on finding opportunities in the athletics profession. The assumption was made that advancement would be visible once fully establishing themselves in the field.

### **Summary**

This exploratory study provided insight into the academic and professional backgrounds, unique motivations, and job expectations for comparable positions supporting unique college student populations (general student body vs. student athletes). Many notable differences were described, as well as some unexpected findings. In particular, this analysis can be beneficial for individuals interested in pursuing a student support service position in either an athletics or general campus setting.

### **References:**

Howard-Hamilton, M.F. & Watt, S.K. (Eds.). (2001). Student services for athletes. *New Directions for Student Services*, 93(1).

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