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## University Student-Athletes' Experiences of Facilitators and Barriers to Contribution: A Narrative Account

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## University Student-Athletes' Experiences of Facilitators and Barriers to Contribution: A Narrative Account

### Abstract

University student-athletes' contributions in the form of volunteering, community engagement, and civic engagement have been the subject of recent research; however, no studies have specifically examined the factors that facilitate or serve as barriers to contribution in this population. As such, the purpose of this study is to explore the facilitators and barriers relating to university student-athletes' contributions. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight university student-athletes (two males, six females) between 18 and 21 years of age ( $M = 19.25$ ) from two Canadian universities. The analysis led to the identification of two qualitatively distinct profiles regarding how facilitators and barriers to contributions were experienced: (a) the first-year student-athletes and (b) the sustained contributors. Although the participants in each profile identified teammates, coaches, and athletics department staff as facilitators to contribution, they differed in their interpretation of how these individuals facilitated contributions. First-year student-athletes were more reliant than sustained contributors on having facilitators create contribution opportunities. The profiles also differed in regards to how time constraints were overcome. First-year student-athletes utilized less complex, individual time-management strategies, while sustained contributors collaboratively made use of more advanced time-management strategies to optimize their time.

### Keywords

Contribution, Emerging Adulthood, Time-Management, Composite Narrative

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The desired goal of most youth sport programs is to develop in participants the technical/tactical skills necessary to be proficient in sport but also the life skills essential to thrive beyond sport (Camiré, Werthner, & Trudel, 2009). As such, sport can be used as a vehicle to help youth thrive on the road to adulthood, preparing them to take on meaningful roles in society. Part of taking on meaningful role involves making contributions to one's surrounding contexts by being of service to others (Lerner et al., 2005). Positive youth development (PYD) represents a perspective used within research where the developmental focus is based on the improvement of youth's assets (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). These assets include cognitive (e.g., problem solving), behavioral (e.g., emotional control), and social (e.g., communication) skills (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011) as well as broader psychological dispositions such as an optimistic view of the future (Gould & Carson, 2008). The development of assets occurs through mutually beneficial interactions between youth and their surrounding contexts (e.g., home, school, community programs) (Larson, 2006; Lerner et al., 2011).

Past research has demonstrated how appropriately structured sport experiences may lead to the development of the assets necessary for successful adult life (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Lee & Martinek, 2013). In a case study of a high school ice hockey program

intentionally structured to teach athletes life skills and values, Camiré, Trudel, and Bernard (2013) reported how athletes developed communication and goal-setting skills as well as values such as respect, discipline, and perseverance through their sport experience. Even in less intentionally structured environments, athletes can learn important life skills through sport that are useful in adult life. In a case study of an urban high school soccer team, Holt, Tink, Mandigo, and Fox (2008) found that even though the coach did not make use of intentional strategies, athletes reported learning initiative, respect, and leadership. In another study, Holt, Tamminen, Tink, and Black (2009) interviewed 40 young adults regarding their sport experiences during adolescence. Findings demonstrated how independent of intentionality, the learning of life skills and values was explained in large part by the quality of the social interactions youth experienced with peers, parents, and coaches.

Although the development of youth in sport has been the focus of much research in recent years, it must be stressed that the majority of the studies in this area have been conducted with adolescent populations (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Strachan, Côté, & Deakin, 2011). The term youth extends beyond adolescence as UNESCO defines youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNESCO, n.d.), a range that thus includes adolescence and emerging adulthood. The stage of development known as emerging adulthood was first proposed by Arnett (2000) and spans from approximately 18 to 25 years of age. Arnett (2000) proposed emerging adulthood as a developmental stage largely due to delays relating to the normative markers of adulthood (i.e., age at first marriage, age at birth of first child) and increases in postsecondary enrollment rates. Recent figures demonstrate how the delays between adolescence and full adulthood have grown significantly over the past few decades. In Canada, statistics indicate that from the 1950s to 2008, the average age of first marriage and birth of first child have shifted from the early and mid 20s to the late 20s and early 30s (Statistics Canada, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2013a; Statistics Canada, 2013b). One reason for this delay may be partially explained by increased enrolment in postsecondary education and thus a delay in entering the workforce and establishing families. In Canada, enrolment rates have increased by 0.7%, 3.1%, and 5.0% per annum from 2000 to 2007 for college programs, university undergraduate programs, and university graduate programs respectively (Statistics Canada, 2009). Not only are more emerging adults choosing to pursue higher education, but they are doing so for longer periods of time, as evidenced by the significant increase in university graduate program enrolment. Thus, during emerging adulthood, the postponement of the duties that come with marriage and children do provide opportunities for individuals to take part in civic and social groups (Hawkins, Letcher, Sanson, Smart, & Toumbourou, 2009), oftentimes based at postsecondary institutions.

Although the undertaking of postsecondary education appears to be a time conducive to exposing emerging adults to contributions (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008), a limited amount of studies have examined the contributions of university students. Francis (2011) found that the level of volunteering for university students was highly dependent on the volunteering behaviors of surrounding reference groups such as peers, siblings, and parents. Using both surveys and focus groups, Simha, Topuzova, and Albert (2011) explained how university undergraduate students often volunteer through initial exposure to service learning centers that provide opportunities to connect with community organizations.

One important group of potential contributors among university students are varsity student-athletes. Student-athletes are public representatives of their universities (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001) and as such, they make efforts to exhibit prosocial behaviors on and off the field of play. However, few studies have examined the contribution behaviors of university student-athletes, with the limited research conducted in this area primarily focusing on comparisons with non-athletes. One study found that university student-athletes tended to be less involved in social activism and charitable activity than their non-athlete peers during

their university careers (Gayles, Rockenbach, & Davis, 2012). In contrast, a study by Hoffman, Kihl, and Browning (2015) found university student-athletes to be 2.2 times more likely to have volunteered in the past 12 months than their non-athlete peers when controlling for institution, race, sex, parental education, and self-reported GPA. Such divergent findings indicate a need for research examining more closely the facilitators and barriers that help explain patterns in university student-athlete contributions. On this notion, Lally and Kerr (2005) have previously reported how student-athletes often find it difficult to become involved on campus and in the community because of the time constraints imposed by their athletic training. Similarly, Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) reported how student-athletes described missing out on opportunities to participate in community organizations due to their athletic commitments. Together, these findings suggest that university student-athletes may be faced with particular circumstances that differ from those of non-athletes. However, to date, no studies have specifically examined the circumstances experienced by university student-athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the facilitators and barriers relating to university student-athletes' contributions.

### **Role of the Researchers**

The present study was led by the first author as part of his Master's thesis and overseen by the second author who acted as thesis supervisor. The research fits within the two authors' general research interests in examining how PYD can be facilitated in the context of sport and contributes to the knowledge base by addressing the relative absence of PYD research focused on the notion of contribution. The first author conceptualized the project, conducted data collection, led data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. The second author helped with project design, assisted data analysis, and edited multiple revisions of the manuscript.

### **Method**

#### **Context**

Each year, over 11,000 student-athletes compete in university sport in Canada across 12 sports (CIS, 2014a). Competitions are governed by Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) and occur in four regional associations. Under CIS regulations, student-athletes are eligible to compete for five years, provided they meet eligibility criteria as full-time students. In addition to overseeing university sports in Canada, CIS communicates broad developmental goals to "lead, promote and celebrate excellence in sport and academics" and "inspire Canada's next generation of leaders through excellence in sport and academics" (CIS, 2014b, p. 1).

#### **Participants**

For the current study, two male and six female CIS athletes between 18 and 21 years of age ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.25$  years) were recruited from two Canadian universities. Six participants were from a small rural university with approximately 4,000 full-time students and two participants were from a large urban university with over 40,000 full-time students. Participants ranged from first-year to fourth-year student-athletes and competed in rugby ( $n = 3$ ), soccer ( $n = 3$ ), basketball ( $n = 1$ ), and ice hockey ( $n = 1$ ).

## Procedure

Prior to conducting the present study, approval was obtained from the ethics review boards at the two universities where the participants were recruited. The first author conducted a pilot interview with a former university student-athlete to refine the questions in the interview guide. To be eligible to participate in this study, participants had to be on the official roster of a varsity team, be registered as full-time students, and compete in CIS at the time of the study. The participants in the current study were recruited by having indicated their willingness to be contacted for an interview at the end of an online questionnaire used for another study part of the first author's Master's thesis. The first author contacted interested participants using the email address they had provided. An audio-recorded individual semi-structured interview was scheduled with each participant and took place at a time and place most convenient for them. Before conducting the interview, each participant was informed of his/her rights to withdrawal, confidentiality, and anonymity. Written consent was obtained before undertaking the interviews, which lasted between 57 and 80 minutes ( $M = 70$  minutes).

## Interview Guide

The interview guide consisted of six sections: (a) past and present sport experiences, (b) how and why university student-athletes contribute, (c) facilitators to contribution for university student-athletes, (d) barriers to contribution for university student-athletes, (e) difference between student-athletes and non-athletes, and (f) future contribution intentions. Data for this study primarily came from the third, fourth, and fifth sections. An example question pertaining to facilitators was "Are there people or things that make it easier for you to contribute?" The same question, with "harder" substituted for "easier" was used to explore barriers to contribution. A sample question from the fifth section was "Do you think that your experience as a student-athlete has given you more or less opportunities to contribute than non-athletes?" Throughout the interview, probing questions (e.g., Could you elaborate on that point? Can you give an example?) were used to encourage participants to provide more information and refine their statements.

## Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by a trained research assistant resulting in 164 A4 pages of size 12, single-spaced text. Each participant was sent his/her transcript via email for review. Of the eight participants, only one returned her transcript with a few clarifications and some corrections to grammatical errors. Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo Version 10 by the lead researcher who followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process. To begin, he read the transcripts thoroughly to increase his familiarity with the data. Next, the lead researcher performed initial coding in which meaning units were arranged into codes (e.g., captain led activity). Following initial coding, similar codes were grouped to create higher-level themes (e.g., teammates as facilitators). Through discussions with the second author, themes were reviewed and reorganized, if needed, to ensure internal homogeneity (i.e., codes within a theme are similar) and external heterogeneity (i.e., codes forming one theme are sufficiently different from those forming other themes). Next, the two authors carefully examined each theme and precisely named them according to what each referred to. At this point, both authors discussed what they believed were the most prominent findings, noting meaningful differences among participants based on their characteristics. Further investigation of these differences resulted in the identification of two groups of participants who differed in

their lived experiences of contributions. Thus, the decision was made to create two participant profiles and to present the findings using a composite narrative approach.

### **Composite Narratives**

Each profile is presented as a composite narrative, representing the emerging trends identified in the lived experiences of the participants. Narratives have been used in sport research (e.g., Rathwell, Callary, & Young, 2015; Winchester, Culver, & Camiré, 2011) and can effectively relate lived experiences by using stories that more naturally connect to readers on an emotional level (Denison & Reinhart, 2000; Sparkes, 2002). Furthermore, Denison and Reinhart contended that narratives are legitimate tools for researchers that “have the power to illustrate, illuminate, inspire, and mobilize readers to think and act critically and reflexively” (Denison & Reinhart, 2000, p. 4). The composite narratives in the present study were constructed from the common features identified in the collective experiences of the participants in each profile. Therefore, as composite narratives, the stories do not depict any one participant’s exact experience but rather form a plausible series of events that characterize the facilitators and barriers to contribution one can expect to encounter in each profile. Each narrative draws on the most meaningful elements of the analysis from each cluster of participants’ experiences with facilitators and barriers to contribution as university student-athletes. The lead researcher initially composed the narratives and frequently met with the second author to discuss the content and ensure it reflected the themes identified through analysis.

### **Findings**

In the first narrative, Sarah’s experiences are derived from a cluster of four, first-year student-athletes and their experiences with barriers and facilitators to contribution. In the second narrative, Julia’s experiences represent the collective story of a cluster of four, upper-year athletes who have demonstrated a history of sustained contributions throughout university.

#### **Sarah: The First-Year Student-Athlete**

On a warm May afternoon, Sarah sluggishly walked up the steps of her home’s front door after another tough practice. Hard practices were nothing new to Sarah, the grade 12 captain of her high school rugby team, but with playoffs coming in a couple of weeks, Sarah wanted to work extra hard and set an example for the younger girls on her team. As she walked through the door and dropped her backpack, Sarah’s mother called from the next room, “Oh! Sarah, there you are. Can you come to the kitchen?”

Sarah thought to herself, “But I just want to take a shower and relax for a few minutes,” as she trudged toward the kitchen. As she entered the room, Sarah looked at her parents sitting at the table and said, “I’m sorry I’m late, I know I said I’d be home at four, but—” “You’re not in trouble, Sarah,” her father said, cutting her off with a smile. “You have mail from Coach Dave on the counter and it looks important.” Coach Dave was the head rugby coach at Sarah’s first choice university. She had met Coach Dave the year before when her high school team won the regional championship. He had been impressed with her play and had told her she showed a lot of potential to play at the university level.

As she carefully opened the envelope, Sarah could see how her parents were anxiously watching because they knew how much she wanted to play for Coach Dave. “So, what does it say?” asked her father after Sarah started reading the letter. “They’re inviting me to training camp!” Sarah exclaimed and after a pause to finish reading the letter, she added, “And I’ve

been offered an entrance scholarship and athletic bursary!” “Congratulations sweetie, I’m so proud of you!” her mother exclaimed. “Go take your shower and then we’re taking you out for dinner to celebrate,” added her father. “Your choice of where we go, of course.”

Sarah was proud as she had worked very hard to put herself in a position to get an offer from a university. However, after a few days of enjoying praise and congratulations from family and friends, Sarah and her father sat down at the kitchen table to take a closer look at the letter. With a concerned look on his face, Sarah’s father said, “Sarah, it says here that you’ll have to maintain an 80% average to keep your scholarship for the next year. You’ll have to be careful not to overextend yourself with too many activities.” Sarah replied, “I know dad. I’m not really going to do anything like getting a job. I just want to play rugby.” In her own mind, she thought, “I’ve regularly been getting 90% grades in high school; keeping an 80% average in university shouldn’t be that difficult”.

The next day, Sarah and her high school rugby team ended up winning the regional championship for the second year in a row. Coach Dave sent her a short congratulatory email, telling her he was looking forward to having her at training camp at the end of the summer. Once Sarah’s final high school exams were completed, she dedicated herself to training during the whole summer to be ready to impress Coach Dave and earn a roster spot in September.

Before she knew it, it was late August and Sarah was saying goodbye to her parents and friends and embarking on this new adventure of being a university student-athlete. A few days after arriving on campus, Coach Dave had the girls fully involved in training camp, running the team hard with two intense practices a day. It wasn’t all hard work though as Sarah immediately started to make friends with her new teammates, connecting especially well with another rookie named Claire. A few days into the grueling schedule of training camp, Sarah and her teammates sat in an auditorium waiting for the student-athlete orientation activities to start. Sarah, sitting next to Claire, said, “Boy, I’m glad classes are starting soon. I don’t know how much longer I can handle two practices a day.” Just then, the athletic director stepped on stage and addressed the crowd.

If I can have your attention please, we have a few people here today who will talk to you about some important information concerning athletic eligibility and support services available to you. But first, I want to take the opportunity to welcome you to our athletic family. We pride ourselves on helping each of you develop into complete individuals; athletically, academically, and socially. A big part of that occurs by being involved in the community, which supports so much of what we do and we encourage all of you to give back in any way you can. We are happy to have you representing the university on the field of play, but remember that even off the field, you are wearing an invisible jersey and we look to you to set an example.

The athletic director’s comments caught Sarah’s attention quite strongly as she had never really put much thought into how her responsibilities as a student-athlete extend beyond the field and the classroom. A few weeks into the fall semester, Sarah was walking to class with Claire who said,

Sarah, do you remember what the athletic director said about being involved in the community? I’ve been thinking about it and I keep hearing the older girls on the team talking about volunteering a couple hours a week with kids with developmental disabilities at a local school.



Sarah replied:

Yeah, I've been thinking about it too and I think that's the sort of thing he meant. I've already gotten a bunch of emails from people in the athletics department telling us about community programs looking for volunteers. I'd like to do something like that but I don't think I have the time with all the training for rugby, on top of classes. Also, do you remember last week at the end of practice when Coach Dave asked if we could help out with the high school rugby clinic he's running in a couple weeks? I sort of feel like we should be helping out with that.

As they were about to sit down in class, Claire turned to Sarah,

Oh yeah, you're right, that's something I think we sort of have to do. Oh, and don't forget our captain, Stacy, asked if we could help her out with her class project. You know, the one where she has to organize a community fundraiser for the cancer society?

Just as the professor started his lecture, Sarah leaned over and whispered,

I know, she's organizing a charity hockey game between the volunteer fire department and a bunch of varsity student-athletes. She knows that I refereed hockey back in high school so she is really adamant about wanting me to ref the game.

As the fall semester progressed, Sarah started getting more comfortable balancing her classes with her rugby training. However, as midterms approached, the balancing act started to crumble. Back in high school, she easily remembered all her assignment due dates and her practice times. However, with her current volume of work, Sarah could not do that anymore. She tried writing her due dates down on loose sheets of paper, but she lost a few of them and ended up submitting some assignments late. One Thursday night, while studying with Claire for a biology midterm, Sarah hit rock bottom. Claire noticed a piece of paper in the corner of the room with a bunch of dates written down. "What's that?" she asked. Sarah grabbed the paper and looked at it, "Oh no! I forgot about the essay for English that is due on Monday!" Later that evening, Sarah thought to herself:

Maybe Dad was right, maybe I took on too much. I don't have enough time to write all these assignments. We have a rugby game on Saturday and I'm supposed to ref the charity hockey game for Stacy on Sunday. How am I ever going to have time to write that English essay by Monday?

Sarah decided that her only option was to ask Stacy if she could find someone else to ref the game but she felt really scared letting her know she was no longer available. Despite being apprehensive about her decision, Sarah knew there was no other option as school comes first and she could not miss Saturday's game. Even hours after emailing Stacy explaining her situation, Sarah still felt awful for having to break a commitment and needed to vent so she called her older sister, Jessie, who surprised her by saying she was coming to campus for a visit during the upcoming Thanksgiving weekend.

Jessie arrived the next weekend and walked into Sarah's dorm room. "Look what I bought for you!" as she unrolled a huge calendar.

It's laminated so you can write on it with markers and just wipe it off for the next month. I thought this would help you since you're such a visual person and have been having a hard time keeping up with your obligations. Here, let's put it up on your door so you can see it from your desk.

After only a few days, Sarah started writing all her assignments, labs, workouts, and social plans on it. It helped her stay on top of deadlines by letting her visualize how close her due dates were. She even found time to help Coach Dave by taking a couple potential recruits on a tour of campus.

Sarah's new laminated calendar filled up quickly as playoffs neared. Coach Dave was working the team extra hard and his practices often lasted much longer than scheduled. Sarah's classwork piled up as due dates for projects and term papers got closer. However, with the help of her calendar, some productive late nights in the library, and some lessons on effective studying from her older teammates, Sarah somehow managed to stay on top of everything. She thought,

I'm finally starting to get the hang of this university thing. I may not be as involved around the community as some of the older girls, but at least I'm not falling behind with my school work anymore. Their classes are a lot harder than mine; I really don't know how they volunteer as much as they do and keep up with everything else.

As classes for the fall semester were coming to an end, Sarah and Claire met up with Suzie, a fourth year player on the rugby team, who had become a mentor and helped the two rookies by giving them tips on how to prepare for final exams. After a few hours of intense studying, they decided to take a break and headed to the cafeteria. As they walked, Suzie asked, "I was wondering if you two would like to join me and volunteer with Play Pals next semester? I'm in charge of the Tuesday and Thursday programming and I need a couple volunteers to help out on those mornings." Claire immediately said yes but Sarah thought to herself:

Suzie has been so helpful this semester. I don't want to let her down. My courses will be a bit harder next semester, but I'll have less rugby training and will not be travelling for games on weekends. I guess I won't be as busy next semester. I hope I'll be able to organize my schedule better than I did this semester so I can make everything work.

### **Julia: The Sustained Contributor**

Julia was very excited as she exited her apartment, heading to the municipal offices where she was to be recognized as the volunteer of the year at the September town hall meeting. Julia was a fourth year student-athlete serving as captain of the women's soccer team. Ever since her arrival on campus as a rookie, she had embraced the community and had gotten involved with several organizations. After the award ceremony, a journalist from the local newspaper came up to her and said, "Julia, you've just received quite the honor. As a dean's list scholar and captain of the soccer team, how do you find the time to be so involved in the community?"

Julia replied, "I don't sleep!" with a little laugh. She continued, saying, "That's probably not so great... It certainly isn't easy with school, soccer, and all the amazing programs I'm involved in, but it helps to have such an amazing support system around me at the university." As much as she was joking about her "not sleeping" comment, Julia knew there was some truth

to it. She reflected on the many times over the last few years when she had stayed up late to finish assignments just so she could volunteer the next morning. She continued, "If you want to have a positive impact on your community, sometimes you have to make some sacrifices."

The journalist asked, "And what are some of the sacrifices you've made over the years?" Julia responded,

Well, for one, I don't go out as often as some of my friends. Even in the off-season. I can't be out late partying on a Thursday night when I'm volunteering with pre-school kids the next morning. What kind of example would I be setting then? I've been working with them for two years now and I need to be a good role model. I also often have to turn down things like spontaneous movie nights or pick-up Frisbee games, because I know I only have certain blocks of time to get my schoolwork done. School and soccer come first. After that, I try to make my community contributions a priority. There's just a strong culture of contribution here at this school and I try to do my part.

The journalist politely thanked Julia for her time and she was happy the interview was over as talking to the media has always made her feel a little nervous.

As Julia was walking back to her apartment to get ready to volunteer at the community theater, she bumped into two of her friends, Dylan and Victoria. "Hey Julia!" shouted Dylan, "We're going to see that new Superman movie at seven o'clock. Come with us. We're about to leave but we can wait a few minutes for you to get ready." Julia was a huge fan of Superman movies and quickly had an inclination to contact the community theater coordinator to tell him she was sick. The thought had barely crossed her mind before she had already pushed it away, given how she loathed backing out of commitments. Julia also appreciated the irony of this dilemma, immediately after discussing with the journalist how she prioritizes her tasks. She replied, "Sorry guys, the community theater has a show tonight and I said I'd help out." "No problem. See you later Julia," said Victoria as she and Dylan headed toward the parking lot.

Later the following week, Julia was in the library leading a study session with the first-year players on her team. Julia remembered how tough it was during her first year to get used to being a student-athlete and felt she had a duty to give her rookie teammates useful tips on how to balance school and sport while still finding time to be involved in the community. Julia started with a few words of encouragement, explaining to the players how they could find time to slowly integrate volunteering into their schedule, "It isn't as bad as it seems. You just have to start small by volunteering for one-time events. It won't be as hard to fit a one-time thing into your schedule as it is to fit weekly commitments." Julia continued by providing strategies to help them manage their time, "I write reminders to myself on sticky notes and put them on my wall to make a timeline. Soccer stuff goes on green notes, pink is volunteering, and I have different colors for all my classes." "It looks pretty weird, but it works!" said Jenny, Julia's roommate and teammate, as she smiled and walked toward the group. Julia replied jokingly, "Yes it is a bit weird but it works for me and that's what matters. That's the most important thing; find something that works for you and stick to it. It also helps to have an awesome roommate!" Samantha, a first-year player with a confused look on her face, asked Julia, "I don't even have half the things on my schedule that you have and I'm still struggling to make it all work. What is it exactly that you do?" Julia explained, "Well, for example, on Mondays, I have a two hour break between classes and practice. I use that time to work on assignments and Jenny makes us dinner before we go to practice. We do the same thing on Wednesday's, only I cook instead. Being each other's support system helps us both get our academic work done, giving us extra time to volunteer."

A few weeks later, Julia got a concrete reminder of how her extended support system at the university has enabled her to give back to the community. At the end of a practice, the coaches gathered the team around the center of the field. Usually, Coach Jim had something important to say when he did this, but today it was Liz, one of the assistant coaches who addressed the team:

I'm on the organizing committee for a community fun-run to raise money to help cure cancer and we need field marshals to direct the runners around the course. As most of you know, it's a cause that's close to my heart. Nearly ten years ago, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Fortunately, I was able to beat it. I would greatly appreciate if any of you could help out. I'll be posting a sign-up sheet on the dressing room door.

As the coaches walked off the field toward their office in the athletic complex, Julia poked Samantha on her side while she was stretching, "You see, this is your chance to get involved." Samantha asked, "Are you going to help out too?" Julia replied, "Of course, Jenny and I have been field marshals for four years now. Liz has done so much for us; it's nice to give back to a cause that means a lot to her."

After signing up to be a field marshal, Julia turned the corner to leave the athletic complex, nearly running into the athletic director. "Oh hi Mr. Carter, sorry, I didn't see you there. Why are you still at the office so late?" asked Julia. "Just finishing off some paperwork that piled up over the past week" Mr. Carter responded. "But I'm glad I bumped into you Julia. How are the visits to the elementary schools going with the anti-bullying program?" Julia said with a smile:

It's so much fun and the kids love it. It's like as if they're meeting their heroes. It's a really cool feeling for us to be looked up to like that. I actually ran into a teacher a few days ago and she said she has noticed how the kids are playing together more and that there have been fewer bullying complaints since our visits.

Mr. Carter replied:

That's great. We've been hearing the same sort of thing in the office. We created this program because we thought it would help the kids but I'm glad to hear that you are finding it valuable also. Now that your season is ending, I was wondering if any of the rookies on your team might want to get involved with the program next semester. I'll have my assistant send out an email to all the student-athletes, but I figured I'd ask you for recommendations.

Julia said:

I'm not sure off the top of my head, but I'll definitely run it by the girls and encourage them to join. If we can get more girls on the team to come out for this, it's a great way for us to come together as a team and help out the community at the same time.

As he started walking away, Mr. Carter said, "Thanks Julia, I don't want to keep you too long. Good luck with your game tomorrow night!"

## Discussion

The present study explored through a narrative account the facilitators and barriers to university student-athletes' contributions. The analysis led to the identification of two distinct profiles of participants who experienced facilitators and barriers to contribution differently. Key findings relating to each profile are discussed, followed by common features experienced by both first-year student-athletes and sustained contributors.

### First-Year Student-Athletes

The first-year student-athletes identified senior teammates and/or teammates in formal leadership roles (i.e., captains) as particularly important facilitators because they created opportunities to contribute through awareness (e.g., informing of charitable organizations on campus and in the community) and direct invitations (e.g., asking first-year student-athletes to contribute with them). Coaches and athletic department staff members also facilitated first-year student-athletes' contributions by regularly emailing opportunities for student-athletes to contribute in local organizations. Together, teammates, coaches, and athletic department staff members represented important individuals who through awareness and direct invitations, provided first-year student-athletes an important point of contact to initiate their contribution behaviors. First-year student-athletes relied on others to contribute because they were most often new to the community and were not cognizant of available contribution opportunities. Given their academic and athletic demands, first-year student-athletes reported feeling overwhelmed and simply waited to be asked to contribute rather than taking initiative. This finding is consistent with past research indicating how being asked to volunteer is a strong determinant of volunteering as 71% of individuals who were asked to volunteer did so, while only 25% of those who were not asked to volunteer ended up volunteering (Sundeen, Raskoff, & Garcia, 2007).

First-year student-athletes were initiated to contributing by senior teammates and coaches but often reported overcommitting themselves with contribution activities because they felt they could not turn down opportunities when asked, for fear of disappointing. Thus, likely unintentionally, senior teammates and coaches pressured first-year student-athletes to contribute, which in turn, lead to them feeling overwhelmed and struggling to meet their academic demands. To cope and regain a sense of control, first-year student-athletes reported having to learn new time-management skills or strategies (e.g., Sarah using a laminated calendar to keep track of her due dates) or break contribution commitments (e.g., Sarah having to break her commitment to referee her teammate's charity game) in order to meet the demands of being a university student-athlete. The transition from high school to university has been described as an important and challenging event for university student-athletes (MacNamara & Collins, 2010). The increased intensity and frequency of athletic training, combined with the demands of academic work, form perceived barriers to contribution for first-year student-athletes. As such, first-year student-athletes would benefit from receiving comprehensive time-management training when entering university, before their multiple demands cause them to fall behind academically. Time-management skills have been associated with better academic performance among university students (George, Dixon, Stansal, Lund Gelb, & Pheri, 2008) and one way to provide this to first-year student-athletes is for athletic departments to require time-management seminars to be integrated into student-athlete orientation activities. These seminars may be led by staff from student services or by senior teammates during training camps, with the support of coaches. The advantage of having time-management seminars led by senior teammates is that real world hands-on strategies could be provided and the activity could serve the dual role of serving as a team-building activity.

## **Sustained Contributors**

Although sustained contributors also reported teammates, coaches, and athletic department staff members as facilitators to their contributions, they had established many more connections throughout the campus and community, resulting in a lesser need to be made aware of new contribution opportunities to the same extent as first-year student-athletes. As such, rather than being creators of contributions, teammates were viewed more as enablers to contributions by supporting time-management strategies, such as Julia and Jenny sharing meal preparation responsibilities to optimize each other's time. By pooling resources with teammates in such manners, sustained contributors were able to better meet the demands of athletic training and academic work, while keeping up with their contribution obligations within the community. Nevertheless, despite their best efforts, there were still times, usually around midterms, finals, or playoffs, during which sustained contributors reported time constraints serving as barriers to contribution. These sporadic periods of increased barriers to contributing may help explain trends observed in past research whereby university students generally engage in periodic volunteering to a greater extent than volunteering on a regular schedule (Smith et al., 2010).

Another difference from first-year student-athletes was that sustained contributors viewed their contributions as a high priority, at the same level as athletic training and academics. Labeling contributions as a priority, as opposed to side activity, placed greater importance on contributions to the point where sustained contributors willingly made sacrifices in their social lives (e.g., missing spontaneous plans with peers) in order to contribute. Behaviors such as these suggest sustained contributors may have internalized their contribution behaviors within their sense of self, exemplified in the narrative by Julia's commitment to acting as a role model for the pre-school kids she interacts with during her volunteer work. This internalization process is reflective of more advanced development as emerging adults, as previous research has stated that successfully developing emerging adults should be engaging with social and civic groups in meaningful ways (Hawkins et al., 2009). Additionally, this finding is consistent with the 5Cs model in which contributions are described as progressions from youth to engaged adulthood by displaying a transcendence of self-importance in favor of communal needs (Lerner et al., 2003).

## **Common Features**

Both first-year student-athletes and sustained contributors viewed their coaches as important facilitators to their contributions in similar ways. The finding that coaches influenced student-athletes' behaviors is hardly surprising as studies (e.g., Smoll & Smith, 2006) have previously demonstrated how coaches represent key social figures in the lives of athletes. In both narratives, we showed how coaches facilitated contributions by providing direct opportunities to contribute in their own initiatives (e.g., inviting athletes to help out at their sports camps) and by communicating opportunities to contribute within the community (e.g., raising funds for cancer research). When coaches provide their athletes with opportunities to contribute, they facilitate development as these opportunities allow athletes to learn organizational skills and life skills that will serve them in life beyond sport (Camiré, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011).

One particular factor deemed to be important for both profiles was the mentoring process nurtured between first-year student-athletes and sustained contributors. Within these mentoring relationships, first-year student-athletes were the mentees and primary beneficiaries as they received guidance from their more experienced teammates (Hoffman & Loughead, 2015a). For sustained contributors, this mentoring process served as a contribution in itself as

they were able to help their younger teammates develop more efficient study strategies and offer hands-on time-management techniques to meet the demands of being a university student-athlete. First-year student-athletes reported developing a greater sense of belonging when older teammates interacted with them in these ways but mentors also gained several benefits from the mentoring relationship. This finding is consistent with the mentoring literature (Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Marchese, 2006), where mentors reported that these relationships helped create a cohesive unit and were personally rewarding and satisfying. Similarly, Hoffman and Loughead (2015b) found that athlete-to-athlete mentoring had a positive influence on the mentee's satisfaction with their work ethic in sport. As such, coaches should make a point of encouraging senior student-athletes on their teams to nurture relationships with their younger teammates that include mentoring functions extending beyond the realm of athletics.

The findings of this study are not without limitations. Although two profiles of contribution were identified in the analysis and presented in the findings, it is important to note that the composite narratives created do not represent all university student-athletes and other profiles likely exist (e.g., non- or limited-contributors, life-long contributors, etc.). This may, in part, be indicative of a self-section bias whereby individuals who do not self-identify as contributors (i.e., non- or limited- contributors) are unlikely to volunteer to participate in a study on contribution. Moving forward, researchers should broaden their investigation of contribution to recruit university sport participants who may or may not identify as contributors. Furthermore, the current study focused on varsity level sport and the findings may not be representative of all athletes within the university context, as students competing at the club or intramural level likely face different facilitators and barriers in regards to training, competition, and academic performance. As a result, future research is needed to examine sport participation and contribution behaviors in club and intramural contexts, as these may present athletes with different facilitators and barriers to contribution.

### Conclusion

The present study explored the facilitators and barriers to university student-athletes' contributions and represents the first study of its kind in a university sport context. Findings indicated how first-year student-athletes and sustained contributors identified the same primary facilitators and barriers; however, how these facilitators and barriers influenced the two groups' ability to contribute were different. Finally, it was shown that through the use of effective time-management strategies, university student-athletes can overcome their barriers to contribution.

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