

## Summary of Athlete First Listening Sessions

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report gathers information regarding the unmet needs of Black and Latine male student-athletes. We conducted two focus group interviews in the Fall of 2022, with the first group comprising 11 football players and two basketball players, and the second with 30 soccer players. Our preliminary findings show that while several of the students aspire to play professional sports, they also were realistic about how difficult it is to make it. It was difficult for some to express a career path based on their goals and interests. We put forth recommendations that may be relevant to the specific student athletes who participated in our listening sessions. The first is to bring more career services to The Athletic Zone, specifically, bringing more information on career paths and how college can lead to desirable careers. We also recommend bringing athletic alumni for mixers and information sessions so students can see the breadth of available career paths. Lastly, we suggest holding resume-building workshops during study hall so students can learn how to translate their skills and coursework into a resume that gets them a job.

### INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

As a part of PCC's continued commitment to equitable outcomes for students of historically oppressed populations and its 2022-25 Student Equity Plan (SEP), college staff sought to understand the perspectives of Black and Latine male students about transferring to universities. Building on the relationship between the Athletic Zone and Transfer Center, Associate Dean Tameka Alexander initiated a collaborative study with support from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. Since Black and Latine males also participate as athletes, student-centered and actionable inquiry, as emphasized in PCC's most recent equity plan and the RP group's African American Transfer Tipping Point project, is crucial to understanding their unique transfer experiences, strengths, and potential unmet needs. Centering students is also key in informing our methods of assisting Black and Latine males in their educational and career goals.

### METHODS & SAMPLE

An initial meeting with the Athletic Zone Center Coordinator (The Zone), Chris Hollis, and the Zone counselors provided information about the demographics of each team sport. Black and Latine male student athlete recruitment was then conducted by The Zone coordinator. Two separate focus group sessions were conducted by research analysts from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness during the Fall 2022 semester. Each session lasted approximately 70 minutes. The first focus group centered primarily on football players (eleven students) with two basketball players. The second focus group was exclusively soccer players (thirty students). Both focus groups comprised on male student-athletes and included Black, White and Latine students. In total, forty-one students participated in the focus groups.

## INITIAL FINDINGS

The initial findings are divided into three sections: themes among football and basketball athletes, themes among soccer players and common themes shared between both groups.

### FOOTBALL/BASKETBALL PLAYERS

One of the most influential motivators for these athletes was fear of being stuck in dead-end (and traditionally blue-collar) jobs. Students expressed concerns about being of a certain age (over 40) and working in a position that pays them little.

The primary goal of most of these students is to be recruited by Division One (D1) schools. Because of the competitive nature of football and the desire to play professionally, many students almost exclusively focused on being recruited to a D1 university.

A key finding among football players is that they appear to rely more on the recruitment process than the transfer process. Their primary goal is to be recruited to play at a D1 school and earn an athletic scholarship. In fact, most were not familiar with the transfer process. Many students stated that before they are even considering transferring to a university, they first want to be recruited to play for a D1 school. The majority expressed that if they were not recruited by a D1 school for an athletic scholarship, then they were not interested in transferring to a D1 school and then trying out for the football team as a “walk-on”. There is a stigma present among student athletes at D1s against “walk-ons”. While it is possible for “walk-ons” to make the team and achieve a high level of status, these students are usually the exception to the rule. In addition to the physicality and skill level of the athletes, students expressed that because the competition is fierce, grades were ultimately the tipping point for being recruited and earning scholarships. The students stated that so many athletes are of similar caliber that having higher grades was crucial to standing out to recruiters.

Findings for basketball players closely resembled that of the football players in terms of earning a scholarship at a D1 school, attaining stellar grades and relying on the recruitment process instead of the transfer center. Yet, basketball players indicated more opportunities to play professionally than football players such as playing internationally.

Both football and basketball players expressed alternative options if they could not play professionally. Some mentioned entrepreneurial endeavors. All mentioned that they were realistic about their aspirations.

### SOCER PLAYERS

In contrast to football and basketball players, more soccer players considered their academic and career plans as clear and viable options should soccer not work out for them. Many of the soccer students understood the realities of being recruited and knew that they needed to have a plan for success should they not play soccer professionally. Since Football is much more mainstream in the U.S., compared to soccer there are fewer opportunities for scholarships, recruitment, and overall success in any major league soccer team. Because opportunities are scarce, the soccer players were more likely to have a plan B and other options in the event they are not recruited. Students noted the international opportunities that come with soccer and mentioned the intense competition being recruited overseas.

The competition for recruitment spots in soccer cannot be understated. In contrast to football and basketball, soccer players were more likely to be familiar with the transfer process. Being realistic about the scarcity of opportunity motivates the students to continue in their education and prep themselves for a career outside of sports. Some students also discussed the existence of an “ideal type” regarding physical build; soccer recruiters tend to look for potential athletes who fit a list of

criteria including height, weight, muscle composition, and other physical traits deemed beneficial to playing soccer. These students emphasized that having an “ideal type” body outranks talent and skill as recruiters are able to mold and train individuals who most closely fit the “ideal type.”

### COMMON THEMES

The most common theme among both groups is that they were realistic about their aspirations to play professionally. In this country, football and basketball provide more opportunities for students to compete professionally than soccer, thus soccer players expressed more alternatives to playing professionally.

Another common theme is their appreciation for the Athletic Zone and the academic support services provided by PCC.

Several students mentioned that the Zone was helpful and regretted not utilizing the services sooner. Very few mentioned that they used other support services outside of what the Athletic Zone offers them.

### **Impact of sports on student athletes**

A common theme among both groups of students is the immeasurable impact that sports has had on their lives. Most of the football players emphasized that sports were a catalyst for college.

*“I would not be here [in college] if it wasn’t for football.” Football player*

Sports motivated most of these male athletes to enroll and continue maintaining their GPA. Among the soccer players, the impacts included making new social connections through the practice of a lifelong passion to pursuing a dream career as a professional athlete.

*“I started playing with my dad when I was 4 or 5. Then I played Sunday league.” Soccer player*

### **Social media usage**

Also common among both groups of student athletes was the use of social media for recruiting. Students shared how crucial using social media is for reaching out to recruiters and displaying one’s skills and abilities through their game footage. Twitter and YouTube were the most common platforms for marketing one’s skills.

### **Humility and self-advocacy among student athletes**

Many of the students understood the odds are against them and showed a clear sense of self-advocacy with the support of their coaches. While athletes do rely on their coaches for information and guidance, they understand that they must advocate for themselves if they want to succeed in college and ultimately, be recruited and transfer.

*“Even when you’re recruited you’re one in a hundred guys.” Football player*

*“I am an expert but there’s always room to improve.” Football player*

*“To succeed you need: good grades, strong work ethic, record your games, get in touch with coaches, use the Zone, talk with counselors, and know the [academic] requirements.” Soccer player*

One of the most important resources available to athletes is The Zone. Students made it clear that having The Zone as a resource is invaluable and key to their success in their athletics and in their courses.

## **Benefits of additional career guidance and options**

While several of the students aspire to play professional sports, they also were realistic about how difficult it is to make it. Within the limited boundaries of their career and real work experience and knowledge, it was difficult for some students to express a career path based on their goals and interests.

## **Resiliency**

Time is a precious resource for student athletes. Several student athletes described having commitments ranging from sports practice, class, family, and work. And despite COVID several have recommitted to a professional athletic career even though university recruitment has been delayed an additional year. Additionally, transportation access can be an issue. Some athletes also reported that they are having to rely on public transportation and living varying and significant distances from campus.

*"I used to take the bus for 2 hours one-way."* Soccer player

Public transportation takes up a significant portion of students already limited and fully booked time.

## **Identity**

Identity was also a common theme among student athletes. Many soccer players stated that they have been playing since they were around 4 or 5 years old. Sports and being an athlete were key to how students viewed themselves and how they organized their time and life. With athletics being such a significant portion of their identity, the students also noted that connections were key for success in sports and class. Connections were important in two ways: making connections that help them get noticed by recruiters (social capital) and by forming community with their teammates and spending time together on the field and at The Zone.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Bring more career services to The Athletic Zone; more information on career paths and how college can lead to desirable careers is crucial. Students need to know and understand how their college experience could connect them to careers.. Career services is essential for motivating students to transfer to a university so they can move on to their careers should professional sports not work out for them.
2. Athletics should consider bringing on athletic alumni for mixers and information sessions. Students tend to respond to peers who have been through similar experiences. Students will also benefit from seeing a student athlete who does not play sports professionally and what that pathway looks like. Students need to know and believe that not making the major leagues and working in a career they enjoy is still success even if it is not as romanticized as playing sports professionally. Keeping these events accessible will depend on timing (off-season dates or study hall hours).
3. Students need to learn how to translate their skills and their coursework into a resume that gets them a job. Many athletes understand teamwork and team organization. Teaching them how to translate that into actionable items on a resume, job application, or interview is key and helping them succeed in their job search and appreciating the value of college.
4. Provide work-based learning opportunities for student athletes by connecting them to mentors, job shadows and/or internships. Perhaps the Freeman Center and Athletic Zone could design a career fair for athletes with companies

- and/or small business owners that could provide career opportunities for student athletes.
5. Continue bringing support services to the Zone and strategize when to implement programs for students so it does not interfere with sports.

## LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INQUIRY

The major limitation of this research is that it is preliminary and only a small part of further inquiry into this population of students. The sample of students is also quite limited as only two sports were effectively represented, and all students were male. Further research should include a mix of other sports and students of all gender identities. This research is also qualitative and focused on meaning and experiences of a limited sample of respondents. After meeting with future student groups, a survey sent out to the entire population of student athletes would allow for quantitative analysis and more generalization to the population. Further research will also likely be informed by findings from the RP group's African American Transfer Tipping Point project.

## AUTHORS

Dan Huynh, Research and Planning Analyst

Darnell Calderon, Research and Planning Analyst

Tanysha Laney, Research and Planning Analyst

Roberto Gomez, Senior Research and Planning Analyst

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