

ABSTRACT

- It can be argued that leadership and athletics go hand in hand. However, there is still little research done on Leadership Development Programs within Division III collegiate athletics.
- In this study, leadership development and the motives behind participating in an athlete-specific leadership development program were examined at the State University of New York College at Geneseo.
- Employing a mixed-methods research design, questionnaire data and three focus groups captured personal experiences from the members of the Student-Athlete Mentor Program.
- The research questions are broken into two major themes: (1) Are mentors developing leadership skills through the program? (2) What motives do mentors have behind joining a Leadership Development Program?
- Findings revealed three factors attributed to leadership development and joining the program: (a) influence from upperclassmen, (b) desire to improve their own leadership, and (c) desire to help others.

INTRODUCTION

- The concept of Leadership Development Programs (LDP) to create and support successful leaders has been a growing phenomenon in collegiate athletics. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) takes pride in its statement to “educate and empower Student-Athletes, coaches and athletics administrators through transformative experiences that develop strong, effective leaders, cultivate an inclusive community and enhance the college sports landscape” (NCAA Leadership-Development, n.d).
- Some research has been conducted to understand the leadership skills of athletes vs. non-athletes (Huntrods, 2015). However, little research explicitly examines Division III student-athlete mentoring programs. Outside the athletic context, a few studies have found a positive correlation between being a mentor in a mentorship program and leadership development (Haber et al., 2017).
- The goal of this study is to understand and contribute to the research on athletic leadership development programs.

METHODS

- All participants (N= 9) were required to be a member of the Student-Athlete Mentor Program (SAM; See Figure 1).
- Demographic data showed most participants identified as female and their ages ranged from 19-21.
- An online questionnaire collected demographic data and retrospectively evaluated students’ leadership skills. The skills evaluated were (1) *interpersonal communication skills*, (2) *time management skills*, (3) *motivation in athletics*, (4) *motivation in academics*, (5) *confidence leading others*, (6) *independence skills*, (7) *self-awareness*, (8) *problem-solving skills*, and (9) *enthusiasm helping others*. Participants were asked to rate their peers and themselves on these same skills in the present day.
- After the questionnaire, participants were placed into three groups based on their years of experience in the LDP. Semi-structured interview questions sought to capture students’ experiences and motivations for building leadership skills.

Figure 1.

Frequency data on athletic team representation in the study.

| Athletic Team | Frequency |
|-------------------|-----------|
| Basketball | 2 |
| Lacrosse | 2 |
| Softball | 1 |
| Swimming & Diving | 4 |

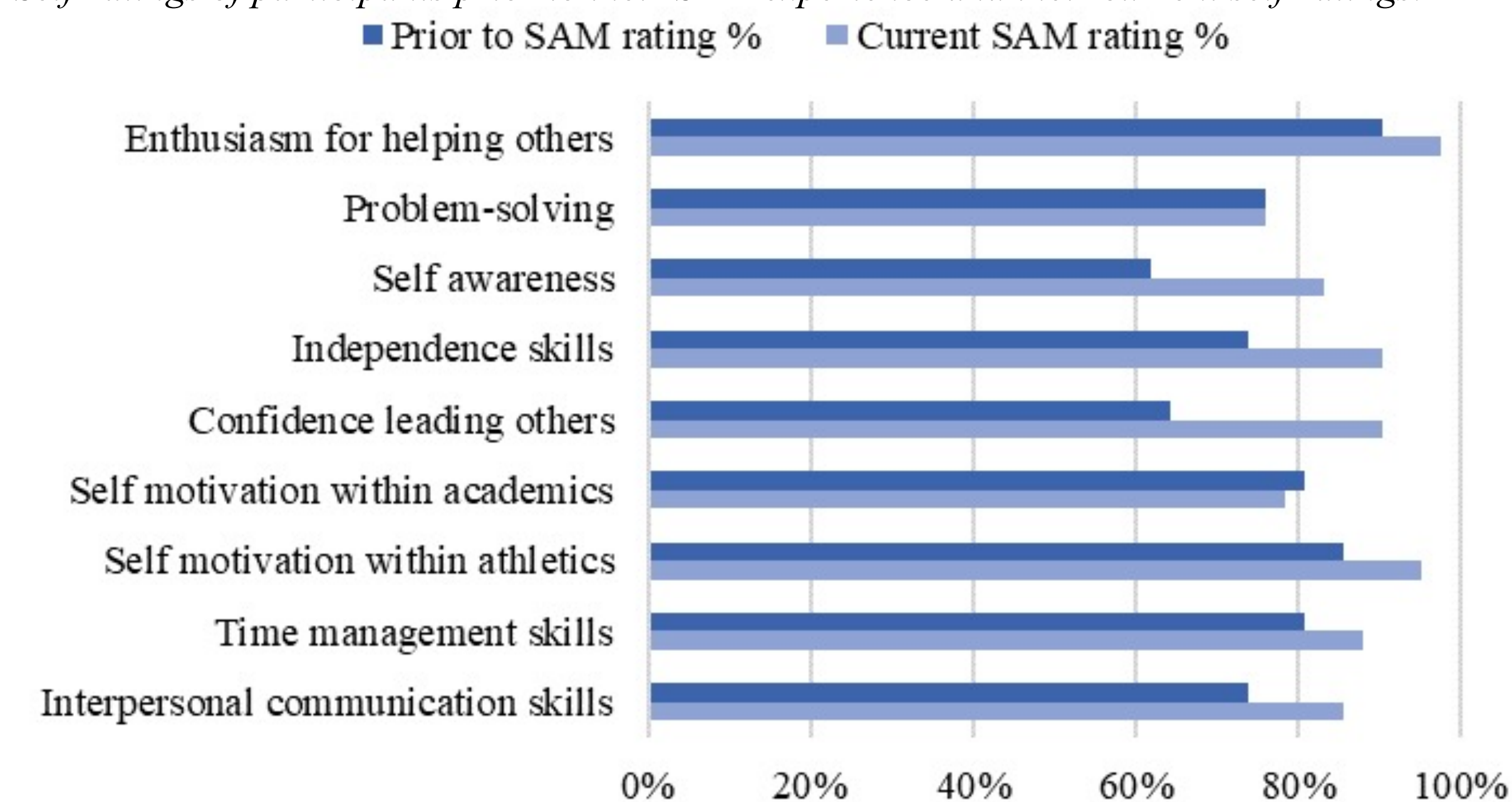
RESULTS

Are Student-Athlete Mentors developing leadership skills throughout their time in the SAM program?

In addressing this research question, two themes emerged from the data: (a) growth areas and (b) areas of comparison. The data collected from these themes were most prevalent in participants who experienced more than one semester in the program. There were three areas where there was significant improvements (a) confidence in leading others, (b) self-awareness, and (c) independence skills. The growth percentages after the athletes have experienced the program are shown below. Note that the only skill that did not see growth was problem-solving. Also, motivation within academics was the only skill that saw a decrease in ratings (see Figure 2)

Figure 2.

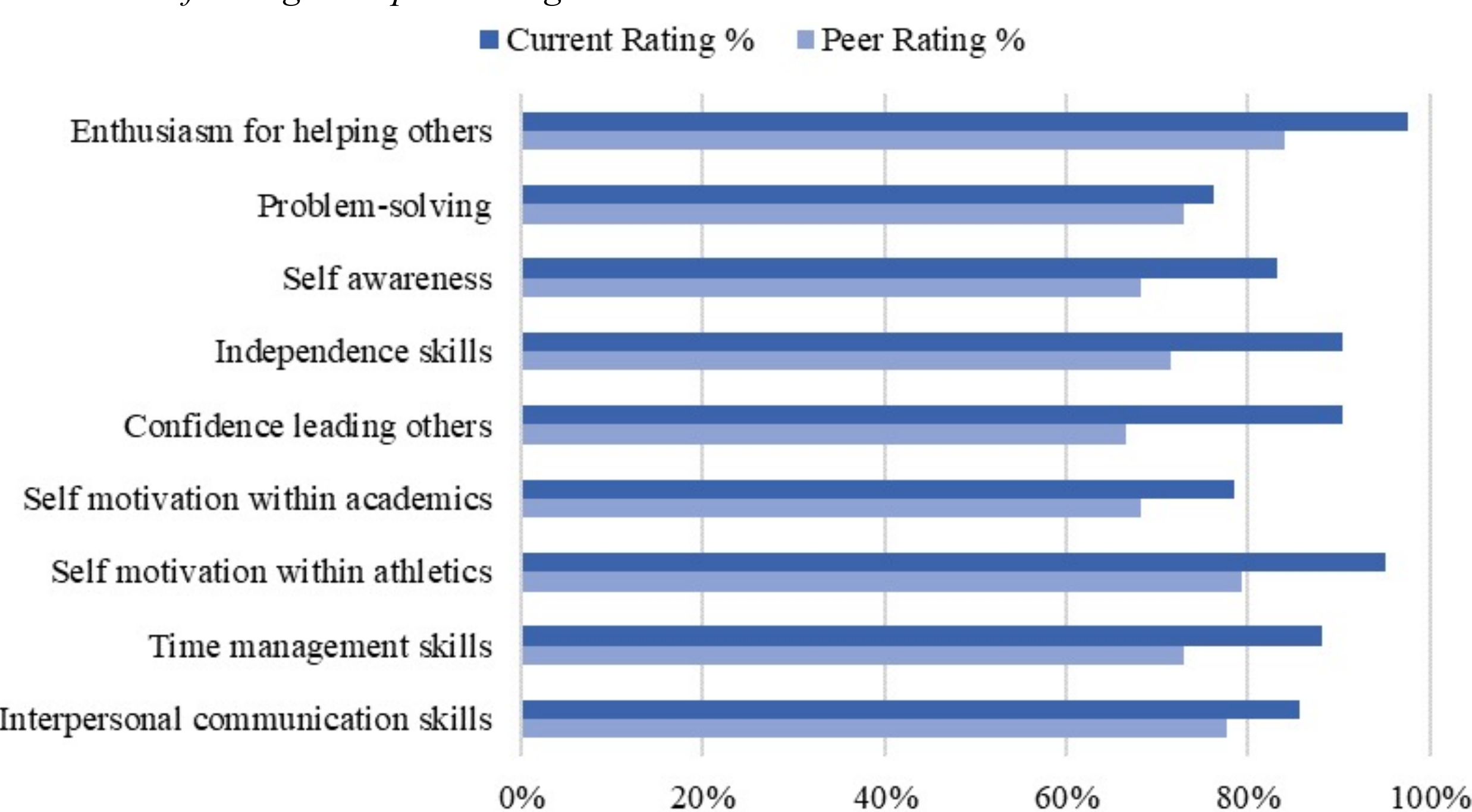
Self-ratings of participants prior to their SAM experience and their current self-ratings.



Another key finding related to this first research question revealed that when asked to rate other athletes that are not involved in the LDP, there were considerably lower ratings than they had for themselves after experiencing an LDP. The most notable differences were in independence skills and confidence in leading others (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Current self-ratings and peer ratings.



What are the motives for joining the Student-Athlete Mentor program?

In this portion of the research, focus groups were formed to take a more concise look at the motivations behind joining the SAM program. The results demonstrate 3 main reasons: (a) influence from upperclassmen on their respective teams, (b) desire to improve their own leadership, and (c) desire to help others.

Influence from upperclassmen. Participant 185 responded to a question asking about other leadership in other athletes’ life with this statement, “upperclassmen know how important it is to be a good leader to their fellow teammates” (Questionnaire, Section 4 Q. 3). There was also the inspiration for them to build their leadership with the help of SAMs so they can be like the upperclassman they aspired to be, “They were someone you looked at and think I want to be like that kind of person and trying to follow in his footsteps” (Participant 101, Focus Group 1, Q. 2).

RESULTS (cont.)

Desire to improve their own leadership. The question “why did you become a SAM?” led to this theme. Participant 120 said “I want to help guide and set an example for what it is like to be a student athlete for incoming first years that may struggle with the high school to college transition while helping myself develop new and help improve previous leadership skills” (Questionnaire, Section 2 Q.7).

Desire to help others. Participant 185 said “I felt that I had a smooth and successful transition into college, so I wanted to share my experience and advice with other first years. I love to help other people, so to be in the position to mentor Student-Athletes was intriguing to me” (Questionnaire, Section 2 Q.7).

DISCUSSION

- The SAMs participating in this study would say that they have improved in all but one area of leadership. The only index that decreased was motivation within academics, which may be attributed to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the flip from face-to-face to online learning.
- This research also found that SAMs that are currently in the program are motivated to join the LDP because they have a desire to help others, improve their own leadership, and follow in the footsteps of upperclassmen. Because the SAM program has a mentoring aspect, the athletes involved are able to help others with the use of their personal experience, the knowledge they have learned from the class, and their enthusiasm to want to help others.
- The findings suggest that Student-Athletes involved in the SAM program do improve their leadership skills. The results also provide a guide for why Student-Athletes want to join a program that promotes leadership and peer-peer support. Not only do these findings support the implications of the Student-Athlete Mentor Program, but it also supports the notion that there should be more leadership development opportunities, similar to SAMs, in other collegiate athletic programs.
- A central and critical limitation of this study was the small sample size. Although the rich qualitative data was helpful in beginning to explore this not well-understood phenomenon, a larger, representative quantitative study would serve as an important extension effort of this research.
- This can be useful for future programs to encourage them to do assessments with their own members to understand what they want and will gain from the experience.

REFERENCES

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