There is abundant research focusing on student athletes and their academic experience, but particular focus on high impact practices is sparse. In fact, there is a paucity of research specifically on undergraduate research among student athletes. Knowing that student-athletes are an underrepresented subgroup that face unique challenges, such as heavy time commitments to their sport and misconceptions that undergraduate research is not designed for them, we invited scholars to take a deeper look at this topic. The goal was to better understand the undergraduate research experience of student-athletes and faculty mentors that have participated in the shared experience. An additional goal was to highlight best practices to engage student-athletes and encourage participation in undergraduate research. Scholars from varied backgrounds have responded to the call.

This issue contains eight articles that not only provide narratives of the student-athlete experience, but more importantly introduces an untapped line of ground-breaking research that is yet to be fully understood – student-athletes’ engagement in meaningful high impact practices, such as undergraduate research.

Rubin, Lombardi, Felice and Donato apply narrative inquiry to capture the experience of three Division I student-athletes. Three themes that were prominent in each of the student-athletes’ undergraduate research participation were presented. Valuable mentorship and encouragement from faculty or staff throughout the research experience was instrumental. These former athletes capitalized on the knowledge and skills gained as a student-athlete and applied them while focusing on research. Finally, all three identified tangible and intangible benefits from participation in undergraduate research.

Kinkead and Haney provide an introspective dialogue of an “improbable partnership and collaboration” between a Division I football player and a Distinguished Professor of English. In addition to a poignant reflection from the student-athlete, this paper simultaneously offers insight on lessons learned from the faculty mentor, specifically addressing some of the misconceptions often associated with student-athlete participation in undergraduate research.

Other research articles presented in the special issue elaborate further on the role of faculty mentoring. DeVita, Gano, Sterrett, and Combs present a two-year collaboration designed to provide three student-athletes with an in-depth engagement in a research project. After analyzing student-athlete reflections, the authors credit the implementation of a scaffolded mentoring program built around a research project that was important to the student-athletes. The positive experience was mentored by highly engaged faculty that accommodated student-athletes’ demanding schedules and believed in the students as collaborative researchers.
In their paper, Stokowski and colleagues explore undergraduate mentoring programs (UMPs) and compare faculty involvement in UMPs at universities that offer Division I athletics. The authors stress the importance of role modeling for the student-athlete in mentoring programs, such as undergraduate research. The perception of role modeling varies depending on institution type (i.e., Power Five versus non-Power Five). Given that faculty at Power Five schools are less likely to see themselves as role models to student-athletes, participation in undergraduate research may be more challenging.

Hall, Palomaki, Ketcham, and Weaver offer recommendations for using undergraduate research as a catalyst for the success of student-athletes, such as being strategic and intentional about scheduling high-impact practices around the athletes’ schedules, and offering socioemotional support in the midst of demanding pressures. The authors challenge mentors to consider and understand the myriad of challenges that today’s student-athletes face and then utilize these best practices to foster success.

Saucier and colleagues explore the perceptions and experiences of former student-athletes who engaged in undergraduate research as psychology majors and juggled numerous responsibilities as Division III student athletes. They offer insights to faculty members on how to be proactive when integrating undergraduate research components into coursework and also focusing on the student-athlete as a “whole person.” The importance of coaches supporting this work through understanding and flexibility is key as well.

Examining underrepresented student-athletes in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics through a critical collaborative autoethnography provides the reader with a sense of their unique challenges. Long and Gooch provide first-hand insights regarding the mentoring of an engineering student-athlete through engaging in undergraduate engineering education research. The authors share their personal narratives and lessons learned.

Ferguson and colleagues focus on Division I student-athletes and offer that undergraduate research opportunities can serve as a “mediator” for successful inclusion into the academy and can shape student-athletes’ identities. Noting the positive contribution that student-athletes provide campuses, the authors challenge athletic departments to embrace and support the complete student-athlete experience, and to be intentional about engaging student-athletes in undergraduate research opportunities.

These studies add much-needed depth to the literature regarding the importance of mentoring student-athletes through undergraduate research efforts. This work requires reflection and intentionality, and the authors provide a series of steps that institutions can consider in fostering these rich, high-impact experiences on their campuses. These experiences can serve to strengthen the individuals involved as well as the work of the greater learning community. The voices and insights from faculty, coaches, administrators, and—importantly—the student-athletes, provide support for the powerful potential inherent in these experiences.

Sincerely,

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