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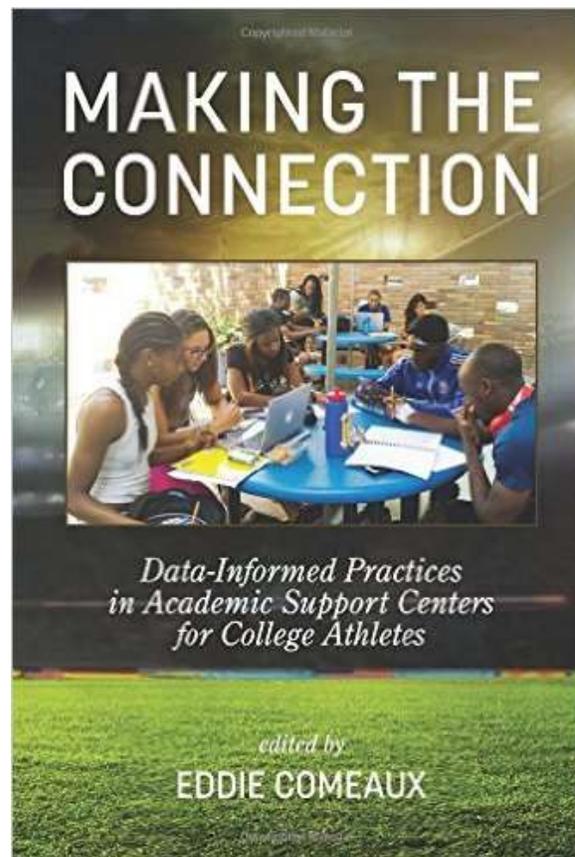
Comeaux, E. (Ed.). (2015). *Making the connection: Data-informed practices in academic support centers for college athletes*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

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I began to read *Making the Connection* on a historic evening for not one, but two teams in the NBA. The legendary Kobe Bryant took his final victory lap for the Los Angeles Lakers on one channel, while another network showcased Stephan Curry leading the Golden State Warriors in crushing the record for most wins in a single season long held in Michael Jordan's heyday with the Chicago Bulls. As I dizzied myself flipping between these games, I was acutely cognizant of how rare it is to attain this level of success as an athlete. The televised footage for both of these games depicted not only the action on the court, but also reactions from the audience. Many cheering children and adolescents were caught on camera, sporting gigantic signs in support Bryant and Curry. It is without question that some of these youngsters hold aspirations of one day following in the famed footsteps of their idols. While seemingly adorable at age 9, verbalizing the intention of



“going pro” often holds very different connotations at age 19.

Most professional athletes were once college athletes. Various available statistics depict the stark discrepancy between the number of collegiate athletes that intend to play professionally, and the small number of individuals who actually experience this level of success. I can distinctly recall NCAA promotional commercials featuring breezy testimonials from former student-athletes working in various fields, stating something to the effect of “most of us go pro in something other than sports”. But how does this process actually unfold at NCAA member institutions? As was noted right off the bat (pun intended) in the foreword for *Making the Connection*, all institutions of higher education maintain some sort of data on the percentages of college athletes who take part in activities intended to boost career exploration (e.g., internships and faculty research). In spite of the existence of such data, rarely is it packaged in a manner that is easily interpreted by researchers and practitioners seeking to enact policy and procedure modifications. This begs the question: what good is data that isn’t readily usable?

Dr. Eddie Comeaux, possesses the ideal blend of qualifications to serve as editor of this text. As graduate faculty in higher education, he is an expert researcher (with the publications to prove it!) in collegiate athletics, student affairs, and engagement. Of equivocal importance, he is poised to speak not only as a researcher, but as former college (and professional) athlete. The professional pedigrees of the contributing authors are no less impressive. Their overarching question across chapters is strikingly clear – *do student-athletes benefit from the college experience similarly to their non-athlete peers?* – so clear that at times it made me to wonder if academic researchers intentionally complicate simple questions to

the point of obscurity. The concise theoretical summaries provided early in the text served as a much-needed refresher for this reader and anyone else who is years removed from intro psych. All of the proverbial bases were covered, as the various authors reviewed current literature on everything from mental health concerns to challenges associated with learning disabilities, providing the reader with a wide-angled lens through which to view the collegiate athlete experience.

While this text offered a critical examination of specific programming developed for the academic and career development of college student-athletes, the location of such programming was given equivocal airtime (pun, of course, intended). Many data-driven arguments were offered for situating academic support services for college athletes outside of the athletics department:

“Locating the center within the athletic complex – a space that emphasizes the athletic role – may create challenges in terms of academic focus and possibly activate stereotype threat. Such a center may also send the message to these athletes about how they fit in as part of the campus social structure and serve to distance them from the general student body, not only physically, but also psychologically” (p. 129).

An overarching message supporting student-athlete integration into the larger campus culture bucked the traditional practice of the silo of the athletic department (housing the majority of student services within athletics, separate from similar services utilized by the general student population). The authors were congruent in championing *student first, athlete second*, noting that integration with the campus as a whole boosted student engagement,

facilitating student-athletes in developing a more well-rounded identity.

Athletic academic advisors were given credit where credit is due, heralded on several occasions throughout the text for their own expert juggling skills in tracking grades and individual/team eligibility, scheduling, and connecting athletes with academic support services both within athletics and on the campus at large. Academic support staff/centers were painted as the bridge or *hybrid space* between the dual, and often competing, roles for college athletes. While the Kobe Bryants and Steph Currys of the sports world may be able to afford concentrated identity development as a professional athlete, the reality for the majority of collegiate student-athletes is that they will one day hang up their jersey to compete in the field of graduate studies or employment, necessitating broader identity development in terms of academic and career-related interests, aptitudes, and strengths.

The current climate of higher education is one of a strengths-based platform championing overall wellness for students, and this text served as a reflection of these overtones. The anti-deficit approach introduced in the initial chapter served as a guiding framework for conceptualizing student-athletes as capable of learning, particularly when institutional policies and practices serve to enhance student strengths. The *Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (IS-WELL)* provided a contemporary framework for boosting success across the multiple roles filled by college student-athletes. This evidence-based, multidimensional model allows for the examination of the holistic functioning of collegiate athletes, with *total wellness* referring to optimal functioning across mental, physical, spiritual, and spiritual dimensions. Applied to the college population (and to athletes as a sub-population), this

model provides a framework for student affairs professionals to focus on strengths to overcome deficits. A wellness framework may come as a welcome perspective to the college student-athlete who has been trained to devote countless hours to remediation of weakness. As a licensed psychologist and counselor educator, I appreciated Comeaux's intentional inclusion of the oft neglected area of mental health within the sphere of collegiate athletics. Higher education as a whole seems to be embracing a wellness-oriented framework for the college experience, and *Making the Connection* was congruent with this approach.

As editor, Comeaux clearly took care to include chapters devoted to discussion on the unique needs and challenges of specific sub-groups of college student-athletes. For student-athletes diagnosed with a learning disability (LD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or post-concussion syndrome, empirically-supported interventions (e.g., *Goal Management Training*) were offered to level the playing field (pun once again intended) in the classroom. With regard to racial disparities in both sport and life after sport, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) and Primarily White Institutions (PWI's) were compared and contrasted. The authors praised HBCU's for facilitating higher grades and graduation rates, more frequent student-faculty interaction, and co-curricular involvement in outside research and internships for African-American student-athletes. These demonstrated benefits commonly resulted from data-driven programming such as *TRIO* and *Summer Bridge*, instilling a dual focus on school and sport. Best practices specific to HBCU's were offered, such as public recognition of the scholarly accomplishments of student-athletes. The importance of faculty recognition of challenging schedule and non-academic issues of student-athletes was emphasized. My

primary critique in this realm concerns the paucity of attention to first generation college student-athletes and their abrupt plunge into not only college athletics, but college in general, without a family member paving this road before them. Student-athletes belonging to racial and ethnic minorities may be more likely to be first generation college students, further building the case for inclusion of this group in such a contemporary text.

As a collaborative social sciences researcher bred to address the research-practice gap, I found the consistent emphasis on cooperation between higher education researchers and collegiate athletics practitioners to be...best practice. My interest in the career readiness of college students and student-athletes led me to take a particular interest in the qualitative study of senior student-athletes preparing for the transition to life after sport (Chapter 7). Interventions such as completing a career development course offered through the athletics department or attending a resume-building workshop were only some of the data-informed recommendations that emerged from this study. Although this text clearly focused on academic support services for athletes during their college years, I strongly believe that the attention to post-eligibility planning was well-placed, particularly given the climate of unemployment or underemployment of many millennial college graduates.

Perhaps my primary criticism is that this text is that it is marketed most exclusively toward graduate students and practitioners in student affairs and not to academic researchers. As faculty in higher education

with an interest in this topic, I found this book to be particularly relevant to my own research interests. Specifically, I learned a great deal about contemporary initiatives such as the *Scholar Baller* program: “The mission of *Scholar Baller* is to inspire young adults to excel in education as well as life by using their cultural interests in sports and entertainment” (p. 79). Similarly, a qualitative study of *Summer Bridge* programming for Division I football players offered concrete examples of instructors making space for pop culture references and cursing in discussions of course material, further emphasizing the importance of facilitating students in connecting their interests and experiences to classroom content. The models and strategies reviewed throughout this text were fresh, modern, and in sync with the cultural zeitgeist of millennials. If spurring research interest in athletics, particularly qualitative inquiry, was an objective of this text, the contributing authors were quite successful.

This thought-provoking text concludes with a brief overview of lingering questions about best practices in academic support centers. A call for additional research to address questions related to the evidenced-based advising models used in academic athletic advising centers, as well as best practices for career exploration and development initiatives were outlined at the close of this volume, sparking ideas for my own research in this area. Comeaux and the contributing authors hit a home run (last pun, I promise!) in their comprehensive review of empirically-based best practices in *Making the Connection*.

### About the Reviewer

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Bjornsen received her doctorate in Counseling Psychology from the University of Kansas, and completed her postdoctoral fellowship at Counseling & Psychological Services at the University of California at Berkeley. She is licensed to practice as a psychologist, and provides psychological assessment services in private practice in addition to her faculty appointment. Her areas of research include career development and occupational engagement in college students and student-athletes. She has published in *the Journal of Career Assessment*, and *the Career Development Quarterly*.



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