Literature review
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From the locker room to the classroom: Student-Athletes' motivations and barriers to entering the teaching profession

Abstract

Due to sport obligations, student-athletes face time constraints that prohibit this population from taking part in career construction efforts. To this, student-athletes often have a high athlete identity and low career maturity, leaving this population ill-prepared to adapt to a life beyond sport. To accommodate for their athletic obligations, many student-athletes are enrolled in majors that lack academic rigor. Sport participation teaches many transferable skills that mirror those seen in the teaching profession. Currently, there is a nationwide teacher shortage, and students need teachers from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, the purpose of this pilot study is to understand motivations and barriers to student-athletes' entering teaching professions. Informed by Expectancy-value theory, student-athletes (n=56) completed the factors influencing teaching choice (FIT-Choice) scale. The data revealed 10 significant factors (ability, intrinsic career value, job security, time for family, make social contribution, work with children, prior teaching and learning experiences, social influences, good salary, social dissuasion). Results of this study provide insight into student-athletes' perceptions of entering the teaching profession and can improve programmatic and teacher recruitment efforts.

Keywords: career development, expectancy-value theory, FIT-Choice scale student-athletes, teacher recruitment

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Introduction

The teacher shortage has become a pressing issue in the United States, with rural and low-income areas particularly affected as districts struggle to attract and retain qualified educators.[1,2] This shortage has resulted in larger class sizes, reduced course offerings, and diminished educational quality, highlighting the need to identify and develop new pipelines into the teaching profession. Expanding the educator workforce requires consideration of populations that possess relevant skills but may not traditionally be recruited into teaching.

College student-athletes represent one such population. Student-athletes face numerous pressures, expectations, and time demands that can limit opportunities for academic engagement and career preparation.[3,4] The rigorous schedules associated with training, competition, and travel often conflict with experiences necessary for career development, leaving many student-athletes ill-prepared to navigate a life beyond sport.[5] However, participation in sport cultivates transferable skills such as leadership, communication, discipline, and resilience, which are strongly aligned with effective teaching practices.[6–9]

According to Brown et al.[10] "a relatively untapped source of prospective K–12 educators may come from the ranks of university student-athletes" (p. 168). Despite this potential, existing research has largely focused on teacher-coaches rather than student-athletes more broadly, limiting understanding of how this population perceives and engages with teaching as a career.[11] As a result, the motivations and barriers that may inform targeted teacher recruitment efforts for student-athletes remain unclear. The purpose of this study is to examine the motivations and barriers influencing student-athletes' interest in the teaching profession. By exploring student-athletes' perceptions of teaching, this study provides insight into an underexplored population and identifies opportunities to strengthen recruitment efforts and expand pathways into the profession.

Brief literature review

Student-athletes are a unique population navigating complex academic, athletic, and career development demands. Due to the time-intensive nature of collegiate sport participation, student-athletes often have limited opportunities to engage in intentional career exploration and preparation.[3,4,12] These constraints can shape how student-athletes approach career decision-making, particularly as they transition out of sport and into professional roles beyond athletics.[5]

Despite these constraints, student-athletes develop transferable skills that align with a variety of professional contexts. Through sport participation, they cultivate leadership, communication, resilience, and teamwork, all of which are applicable to careers that require interpersonal engagement and adaptability.[5–9] These competencies are particularly relevant for teaching, where fostering student motivation, persistence, and engagement is central to effective practice.[13,14] However, student-athletes may not consistently recognize how these skills translate into careers such as teaching, limiting their exploration of education-related pathways.

Structural and institutional factors further shape how student-athletes engage with career development. Student-athletes often select academic majors based on athletic demands, including scheduling flexibility and compatibility with training and competition, rather than long-term career alignment.[10,15] This can restrict access to teacher education pathways, particularly when programs require sequenced coursework and field-based experiences that are difficult to navigate alongside athletic commitments.[7,16] These dynamics highlight how academic structures, rather than individual limitations, may influence career opportunities for student-athletes.[17,18]

In addition to structural constraints, identity development plays a critical role in career decision-making. Student-athletes often maintain a strong athletic identity, which can delay engagement in

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career exploration.[5,10,19] This delay may limit opportunities to explore alternative career pathways, including teaching, during the collegiate experience. As a result, student-athletes may express interest in careers outside of sport but lack the exposure or confidence needed to pursue them.

Research has also identified potential pathways connecting student-athletes to education-related careers. Interest in coaching has been positively associated with interest in broader educational roles, suggesting that coaching may serve as a gateway into the teaching profession.[10] However, student-athletes may not always recognize the overlap between coaching and teaching, particularly in content areas beyond physical education. This disconnect highlights the importance of more intentional efforts to connect student-athletes' experiences in sport to careers in education.

Despite this potential, existing research remains limited in its scope. Much of the literature has focused on teacher-coaches rather than examining student-athletes more broadly, leaving gaps in understanding how this population perceives teaching as a career.[10,11] As a result, the motivations and barriers that shape student-athletes' interest in teaching remain underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential for identifying strategies to expand pathways into the teaching profession.

Expectancy-Value Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals make career-related decisions. The theory suggests that career choices are influenced by individuals' beliefs about their ability to succeed and the value they place on a given field, including intrinsic interest, utility, and social contribution.[20,21] In this context, student-athletes may be more likely to consider teaching if they perceive themselves as capable educators and view the profession as meaningful and worthwhile.

Applying this framework to student-athletes highlights the importance of both individual perceptions and contextual influences. Limited exposure to teaching, competing time demands, and strong athletic identities may shape how student-athletes develop expectancy and value beliefs related to teaching. Concurrently, social influences and prior experiences may play a critical role in reinforcing or discouraging interest in the profession. Understanding how these factors interact is essential for examining student-athletes' motivations and barriers to entering teaching.

Methodology

The survey consisted of demographic questions and a modified version of the factors influencing teaching choice (FIT-Choice) scale.[22] The FIT-Choice scale is a 13-factor scale, consisting of 37 items, intended to assess why individuals choose to enter the teaching profession. The participants rated their level of agreement for each item on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely).

Factors in the scale demonstrate strong internal consistency (α = 0.90 - 0.97). The validated instrument captures a wide range of factors influencing career choice, from intrinsic motivations to social values. FIT-Choice[22] assesses motivations including a personal interest in teaching, a desire to work with children, or a passion for contributing to societal development (intrinsic and altruistic motivations). Additionally, it considers more practical and personal utility factors, such as job security, making a social contribution, and work-life balance.[22] Although the FIT-Choice scale was originally developed for individuals enrolled in teacher preparation programs, it was used in this study to assess perceptions of teaching among student-athletes who may not have formally engaged with the profession. This approach allows for the examination of early-stage career perceptions and interest in teaching.

Participants

Participants were recruited through purposeful and convenience sampling.[23] This approach was appropriate given the challenges associated with accessing student-athlete populations, which often require coordination with institutional and athletic department networks. Purposeful sampling ensured that participants were current collegiate student-athletes, while convenience sampling allowed for efficient recruitment within an accessible population during the data collection period. In total, 56 college student-athletes completed the FIT-Choice Scale. More specifically, 84% were between the ages of 18-24 including 25 males, 30 females, and one non-binary. The participants identified as White (54%) or Black (23%), and were predominantly from NCAA Division I colleges or universities (91%).

Data analysis

A correlation analysis was conducted to determine statistically significant relationships among variables that may influence an individual's choice to pursue a teaching career. These variables included ability, intrinsic career value, job security, time for family, social contribution, working with children, prior teaching and learning experiences, social influence, good salary, and social dissuasion. A descriptive statistical analysis was produced in the form of means and standard deviations for each variable as well as a frequency distribution analysis on three questions not included on the FIT-Choice scale.

Results

Several key relationships emerged that help explain student-athletes' interest in the teaching profession. However, four of them hold particular importance as it relates to influencing the choice of a teaching career (see Table 1 for the complete correlation matrix). First, there was a statistically significant correlation between ability and intrinsic career value, $r(54) = .44$, $p < .001$ suggesting that individuals who believe they have the ability to teach are more likely to be interested in teaching. Second, there was a statistically significant correlation between intrinsic career value and working with children, $r(54) = .61$, $p < .001$ suggesting that individuals who enjoy working with children are also more likely to have an interest in teaching. Third, there was a statistically significant correlation between intrinsic career value and social influence, $r(54) = .79$, $p < .001$ suggesting that individuals are more likely to have an interest in teaching when family and friends believe they would make a good teacher. Lastly, there was a statistically significant relationship between prior teaching and learning experiences and working with children, $r(54) = .55$, $p < .001$ suggesting that having positive prior teaching and learning experiences may influence a person's interest in working with children.

In addition to the correlation analysis, means and standard deviations were calculated for each variable. Given that most of the variables were measured with three items on a five-point Likert scale, scores ranged from 3-15. Exceptions were for "working with children" that contained four items (4-20 points) and "good salary" with two items (2-10 points). The mean for intrinsic career value ($M = 8.89$, $SD = 3.29$) was notably higher than the mean for perceived teaching ability ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 2.18$), suggesting that while student-athletes express interest in teaching, they may be less confident in their ability to succeed in the profession. Mean scores for prior teaching and learning experiences ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 2.56$) and working

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with children (M = 10.35, SD = 4.52) were also relatively low, indicating limited exposure to teaching-related experiences. Positive prior teaching and learning experiences and a desire to work with children and adolescents could be important factors for increasing or decreasing interest in teaching. Lastly, the mean score for time for family was also low (M = 5.57, SD = 1.83), suggesting that many believe that teaching is a time demanding career. Additional means and standard deviations can be viewed in Table 2.

Table 1 Correlations among variables related to choosing a teacher career

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Ability	-	.44**	.43**	.36**	.39**	.43**	0.24	.48**	0.1	-0.06
2. Intrinsic Career	.44**	-	.47**	0.25	0.17	.61**	.27*	.79**	.34**	0.23
3. Job Security	.43**	.47**	-	.52**	.39**	.54**	0.16	.47**	.43**	.27*
4. Time for Family	.36**	0.25	.52**	-	.34*	.43**	.43**	.27*	0.17	0
5. Social Contribution	.39**	0.17	.39**	.34**	-	.31*	.33**	0.11	-0.16	-0.02
6. Working With Children	.43**	.61**	.54**	.43**	.31*	-	.55**	.64**	0.26	0.25
7. Prior Teach and Learn	0.24	.27*	0.16	.44**	.33**	.55**	-	.33**	-0.07	0.18
8. Social Influence	.48**	.79**	.47**	.27*	0.11	.64**	.32**	-	.37**	0.21
9. Good Salary	0.1	.34*	.43**	0.17	-0.16	0.26	-0.07	.37**	-	0.24
10. Social Dissuasion	-0.06	0.23	.27*	0	-0.02	0.25	0.18	0.13	0.07	-

Note: **Correlation is significant at the .01 level. *Correlation is significant at the .05 level.

Table 2 Means and standard deviations for FIT-choice scale variables

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
1. Ability	3	10	5.67	2.18
2. Intrinsic Career	3	15	8.89	3.29
3. Job Security	3	15	7.89	3.06
4. Time for Family	3	10	5.57	1.83
5. Social Contribution	3	10	4.78	2.02
6. Working With Children	4	20	10.35	4.52
7. Prior Teach and Learn	3	15	5.19	2.56
8. Social Influence	3	15	8.92	3.66
9. Good Salary	2	10	7.92	2.41
10. Social Dissuasion	3	13	7.21	2.42

Lastly, Table 3 shows the frequency distributions for the responses to three additional items not included on the FIT-Choice scale. The questions included 1) participating in collegiate athletics affects my ability to major in an education degree, 2) education is a difficult major, and 3) education is a major that requires a lot of time and effort. Responses to the first question varied with 37.5% strongly agreeing or somewhat agreeing that participating in college athletics affects their ability to earn an education degree. Conversely, 28.6% somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed that participating in college athletics affects their ability to earn an education disagree. Additionally, 33.9% neither agreed nor disagreed that participating in college athletics affects their ability to earn an education degree. For question two, 28.6% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that education is a difficult major whereas 21.4% somewhat disagreed or strongly disagree that education is a difficult degree. A remaining 50% neither agreed nor disagreed. Lastly, for question three, 55.3% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that education is a major that requires a lot of time and effort. In contrast, only 12.5% somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed that education is a major that requires a lot of time and effort. An additional 32.1% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Table 3 Frequency distribution of responses to additional items not included on the FIT-choice scale

Question	Strong agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	n
1. Participating in college athletics affects…	25% (14)	12.5% (7)	33.9% (19)	17.9% (10)	10.7% (6)	56
2. Education is a difficult major.	10.7% (6)	17.9% (10)	50% (28)	10.7% (6)	10.7% (6)	56
3. Education is a major that requires a lot of time…	23.2% (13)	32.1% (18)	32.1% (18)	10.7% (6)	1.8% (1)	56

Discussion

This study sought to understand the motivations and barriers influencing student-athletes' interest in entering the teaching profession. Overall, the findings suggest that student-athletes are interested in teaching, but that interest is shaped by a combination of perceived ability, intrinsic value, social influences, and prior experiences. Structural and experiential factors, including limited exposure to teaching and competing time demands, appear to influence how student-athletes view teaching as a realistic and attainable career option.

Within the FIT-Choice framework, several key factors help explain how student-athletes conceptualize teaching as a career. Perceived teaching ability reflects individuals' beliefs about their competence to be effective educators, whereas intrinsic career value captures

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personal interest and enjoyment associated with teaching.[22] Student-athletes who reported higher perceptions of their teaching ability were more likely to express interest in the profession, reinforcing the role of expectancy beliefs in shaping career-related choices.[21] Intrinsic career value was also strongly associated with motivations such as working with children and making a social contribution, which are conceptualized as social utility values within the FIT-Choice framework.[22] These findings suggest that interest in teaching is driven not only by personal enjoyment, but also by a desire to engage in meaningful, impact-driven work.

Additional significant factors reflect personal utility values, including job security and time for family, which represent more pragmatic considerations related to career choice.[22] This indicates that student-athletes evaluate teaching through both intrinsic and extrinsic lenses, balancing personal fulfillment with long-term stability and lifestyle considerations. Social influences and prior teaching and learning experiences, conceptualized as antecedent socialization factors, were also significant, highlighting the role of external messaging and exposure in shaping how student-athletes perceive teaching as a viable career option.

These findings are consistent with prior literature suggesting that student-athletes possess skills that align with teaching; yet, they may not fully recognize how those skills translate into professional pathways.[6–8] Although student-athletes develop leadership, communication, and resilience through sport, these competencies are not always framed in ways that connect to careers such as teaching.[5,9] As a result, there may be a disconnect between skill development and career identification, even when interest is present. These findings are consistent with research highlighting the broader applicability of student-athletes' competencies beyond sport-specific careers.[6,7]

The relatively lower perceptions of ability and limited prior teaching experiences further highlight this gap. While student-athletes expressed interest in teaching, they did not consistently perceive themselves as prepared for or connected to the profession, which aligns with research on athlete identity and career maturity.[5] This also reflects broader findings that time demands and limited career exploration opportunities can constrain student-athletes' ability to engage in intentional career planning.[3,4,12] Importantly, these findings suggest that participation in athletics itself was not perceived as a primary barrier to entering the teaching profession, but rather that structural and experiential limitations shape how student-athletes engage with career pathways. Academic structures may also influence this process, as prior research has demonstrated patterns of major clustering and enrollment in more flexible academic programs driven by athletic demands rather than long-term career alignment.[17,18] These structural dynamics may limit exposure to fields such as teacher education, particularly when programs require sequenced coursework and field-based experiences that are difficult to navigate alongside athletic commitments.[10]

Responses to the additional items provide further context for understanding how student-athletes perceive pathways into teaching. Participation in collegiate athletics was not uniformly perceived as a barrier to pursuing an education degree, with responses distributed across agreement, disagreement, and neutrality. This pattern reinforces the broader finding that athletics itself does not prevent entry into the teaching profession but rather interacts with other structural and experiential factors that shape career decision-making.

Perceptions of the education major introduce additional nuance. While participants were divided on whether education is a difficult major, a majority indicated that it requires a substantial investment of time and effort. This suggests that perceived workload, rather than difficulty alone, may influence how student-athletes evaluate the feasibility of pursuing teaching alongside athletic commitments.

The role of social influence is particularly noteworthy and extends existing literature. Expectancy-Value Theory emphasizes the role of socializers, such as family, peers, and mentors, in shaping both expectancy beliefs and subjective task values.[21] While prior research has largely focused on student-athletes' interest in coaching or sport-related careers,[10,11] these findings suggest that encouragement from others may play a critical role in expanding career consideration beyond sport and into fields such as education.

The findings in the present study complicate existing assumptions about career decision-making among student-athletes. Although there was clear interest in teaching, perceptions related to workload and time demands remained a concern, as reflected in factors such as time for family. This aligns with the "cost" component of Expectancy-Value Theory, which suggests that individuals weigh potential barriers and trade-offs when making career decisions.[21] This aligns with prior work suggesting that structural constraints, rather than individual limitations, shape student-athletes' academic and career trajectories.[17,18]

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support and extend Expectancy-Value Theory. Consistent with the framework, student-athletes' interest in teaching was shaped by both expectancy beliefs and subjective task values, including intrinsic and social utility motivations.[21] This study highlights how these beliefs are influenced by the unique structural conditions of collegiate athletics, including limited exposure to career pathways and competing time demands. As a result, expectancy and value beliefs may be present but underdeveloped, limiting the translation of interest into action.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The length of the survey may have contributed to participant fatigue, which could have influenced response quality or completion rates. The sample size was relatively small, which is not uncommon when working with student-athlete populations given the challenges associated with access and recruitment.

The study was also limited by the scope of demographic and academic data collected. Participants were not asked to report their academic major, which may have provided important context for understanding interest in teaching and access to education-related pathways. Including academic background variables in future work would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how major selection intersects with career decision-making.

The use of the FIT-Choice scale presents additional limitations within this context. Although the instrument is well-validated, it was originally designed for individuals already enrolled in teacher preparation programs.[22] Some items may not fully capture the perspectives of student-athletes who have not yet considered or engaged with teaching as a career option.

Future research

This study provides several directions for future research that can further advance understanding of student-athletes as a potential pipeline into the teaching profession. One important area involves examining how athletic academic advisors influence student-athletes' perceptions of teaching and how their messaging shapes career decision-making.[24] Given the role of social influence identified in

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this study, understanding how advising structures reinforce or limit exposure to teaching pathways is critical.[21]

Additional research is needed to further examine how student-athletes' skills, dispositions, and identities align with the attributes of highly effective teachers. Prior work has highlighted the transferability of skills developed through sport participation, including leadership, communication, and resilience.[6,7] Empirical work that directly connects these competencies to teaching effectiveness would strengthen the argument for student-athletes as a meaningful contributor to the educator workforce.

Future studies should also explore the lived experiences of former student-athletes who have entered the teaching profession. Interviewing former student-athletes working in educational settings would provide deeper insight into how their athletic backgrounds shaped their career transitions, classroom practices, and professional identities. Such work would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how student-athletes navigate pathways into teaching and sustain careers in education over time.

Implications

The findings of this study offer several implications for practice, particularly in the areas of advising and career development for student-athletes. Given that student-athletes expressed interest in teaching but reported lower perceptions of ability and limited prior exposure, institutions should develop more intentional, evidence-based advising strategies that connect athletic experiences to teaching competencies. Advisors, coaches, and faculty can play a critical role in helping student-athletes recognize how skills such as leadership, communication, and resilience translate directly into classroom practice[7] while also providing early exposure to education pathways through student-athlete initial transition programs and the academic major selection process.

These findings also have broader implications for addressing the national teacher shortage through innovative recruitment strategies. Student-athletes represent a large and underutilized population that possesses many of the characteristics associated with effective teaching, yet often lack clear pathways into the profession.[10,11] Developing targeted initiatives, such as structured early-career programming or embedded field-based experiences within existing academic and athletic support systems, can provide student-athletes with opportunities to engage with teaching, build confidence, and explore education as a viable and meaningful career option.

Importantly, teaching aligns with many of the identity-based needs of student-athletes as they transition out of sport. Student-athletes often maintain a strong athletic identity and seek continued purpose, structure, community involvement, and opportunities to remain connected to sport, such as through coaching or mentorship.[5] Teaching offers a natural extension of these elements, providing a career pathway that allows student-athletes to leverage their experiences while continuing to make a meaningful impact on others.

The potential impact of this work is substantial given the size of the student-athlete population. With more than 554,000 student-athletes competing across NCAA institutions[25] even modest shifts in career pathways could contribute meaningfully to the teacher workforce. For illustrative purposes, if just 10% of student-athletes pursued teaching careers, this would result in more than 50,000 additional educators entering the profession. Given that the average teacher influences approximately 3,000 students over the course of their career,[26] such a shift could impact the educational experiences of more than 150 million students.

Conclusion

This study examined the motivations and barriers influencing student-athletes' interest in the teaching profession through the lens of Expectancy-Value Theory.[21] Findings suggest that while student-athletes demonstrate interest in teaching, that interest is shaped by perceptions of ability, intrinsic value, social influence, and limited exposure to teaching-related experiences. Importantly, participation in athletics was not perceived as a primary barrier to entering the teaching profession; rather, structural and experiential factors appear to shape how student-athletes engage with career pathways. These findings highlight the need for more intentional pathways that connect student-athletes to careers in education while also extending applications of Expectancy-Value Theory to a unique and underexplored population. By better understanding how student-athletes perceive teaching, this study provides insight into opportunities for more targeted recruitment and programmatic efforts within teacher education.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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