

“You belong. You're athletic. You're important.”: EmPOWERing Female Student-Athletes

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Abstract

“Although nearly half of all NCAA student-athletes are women (McGuire, 2023), this population often does not receive the same resources as their male counterparts (Davenport et al., 2023). Further, the experiences of women are different than that of men, especially in athletics spaces (e.g., Coakley, 2016). Founded in 2022, POWER is a leadership development program reserved for female student-athletes at Clemson University. POWER primarily focuses on identity, professional presence, self-leadership, and community. In addition to embracing and honing leadership skills, POWER also offers female student-athletes an experiential trip to visit Fortune 500 companies and network with female leaders in various industries. The inaugural cohort included 15 female student-athletes representing seven different sports. Currently, POWER has 20 total participants from nine different sports (Clemson University, 2023).

There are many ways to initiate leadership development programs; however, existing literature suggests that a more relational and identity-based leadership approaches are necessary (e.g., Sugiyama et al., 2016). Identity-based leadership approaches are more prevalent in women’s leadership development programs. Women’s leadership development programs continue to offer significant value to supporting women leaders in their advancement (Sugiyama et al., 2016). Hopkins and O’Neil (2015) expressed the need for gender constructed leadership programs.

Given that female student-athletes are often ignored in the literature (Davenport et al., 2023) and the importance of program assessment (Stokowski et al., 2019), the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Clemson female student-athletes who participated in the POWER program. Using a case study qualitative design (Merriam, 1998) and semi-structured interview method (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), through purposeful sampling eight student-athletes in the POWER program and two POWER advisors participated in this study. The data analysis revealed three major themes: confidence, connection, and professional development.

With limited time to participate in activities unrelated to their sport, it is important that the leadership development programming is relevant and intentional. Previous research has found that “students learn leadership by doing it, and programs that provide opportunities for student leadership practice create ripples of positive outcomes for students and society” (Eich, 2008, p. 182). This evidence supports the results found within our study of the POWER leadership

academy. The participants felt more confident and connected with their peers after completing the curriculum and the experiential trip. Furthermore, POWER allowed for relationships to be built within the cohort as well as through networking, as seen in the connection theme.

Female leaders are often criticized for being too ambitious or confident (Hopkins & O'Neil, 2015). The mission of POWER is to empower young female athletes confront stigmas of women. Each interviewee revealed that they became more confident as a leader as a result of participating in POWER. Furthermore, the experiential trip allowed for the female student-athletes to see women in leadership roles. Ferguson (2023) described the impact of leadership groups that provided an outlet for students from marginalized groups to meet and discuss their personal situations. Gaining transferable leadership skills is an important part of a well-developed curriculum for leadership development (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Ultimately, the participants expressed their growth in leadership and how participating in POWER impacted them academically and athletically. To this, perhaps female student-athletes programming should be implemented at other colleges and universities.”