Navigating Identity and Opportunity: A Scoping Review of Career Development Support for Postsecondary Athletes from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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Post-secondary athletes from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds face barriers that may complicate career development and transition beyond sport. Although intercollegiate athletics can provide educational and social mobility opportunities, fewer than 2% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes advance to professional sports, requiring most athletes to pursue careers outside of athletics. This scoping review examined the literature on career development supports, institutional practices, and transition-related experiences among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds in the United States. Guided by the methodological frameworks of Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and Levac et al. (2010), a comprehensive search was conducted across 12 databases. Twelve studies met inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Seven themes were constructed: athletic identity, identity foreclosure, career maturity, institutional support and career programming, socioeconomic inequity, transition and post-sport identity, and cultural responsiveness. Findings identified several promising support approaches, including mentorship, athlete-specific advising, internship opportunities, and identity-informed career development practices. Collectively, the findings suggest that career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds is best understood as a multidimensional developmental process shaped by the interaction of athletic identity, socioeconomic opportunity, institutional support, mentoring relationships, career readiness, and culturally responsive practice. However, few formalized and rigorously evaluated interventions specifically designed for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds were identified. These findings highlight a significant gap between documented career development needs and the availability of evidence-informed interventions. Implications for social work practice, policy, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: athletic identity, career development, low socioeconomic status, postsecondary athletes, scoping review, United States

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Introduction

Postsecondary athletes from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds encounter systemic challenges when preparing for careers beyond competitive sport. Although participation in collegiate athletics may provide opportunities for educational attainment, social mobility, and community connection, fewer than 2% of NCAA student-athletes in many sports transition to professional athletics (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2023). Consequently, most post-secondary athletes ultimately pursue careers outside of athletics while navigating educational, financial, and identity-related barriers. The substantial time demands associated with collegiate sport may limit opportunities for career exploration, while a strong athletic identity can further complicate preparation for careers beyond sport (Brewer et al., 1993; Murdock et al., 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). Existing institutional support often inadequately addresses the intersection of athletic identity, socioeconomic disadvantage, and career development needs among athletes from historically under-resourced communities (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). For many postsecondary athletes, athletic participation represents more than extracurricular involvement; it becomes a central component of identity, belonging, and perceived opportunity (Brewer et al., 1993; Murdock et al., 2016). Athletic identity may foster motivation, discipline, and persistence while simultaneously constraining career exploration when athletic success is viewed as the primary pathway to economic mobility or social recognition (Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Murdock et al. (2016) found that student-athletes frequently experience difficulty balancing athletic commitments with career preparation activities, while Comeaux and Savage (2025) reported that Black college athletes often lacked sufficient support and guidance regarding careers beyond sport participation.

These challenges may be particularly pronounced for athletes from low SES backgrounds who often navigate postsecondary environments with limited social capital, mentorship opportunities, professional networks, internships, and career development resources beyond sport (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Curry et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). Black college athletes in Comeaux and Savage's (2025) study described feeling encouraged to prioritize athletic eligibility and sport performance over career exploration, internships, and high-impact educational opportunities. Similarly, previous research has documented that athletes often underutilize career services, counseling centers, and professional development resources because of time demands, athletic obligations, and limited institutional encouragement (Murdock et al., 2016).

Consequently, difficulties navigating career transitions may contribute to uncertainty, diminished social support, and social isolation during post-sport transition experiences (Comeaux & Savage, 2025). These challenges align with the Grand Challenge of eradicating social isolation, which emphasizes the importance of strengthening social connections, supportive relationships, and community engagement across the lifespan (Barth et al., 2022). Research examining former collegiate athletes has identified challenges related to career decision-making, identity adjustment, and preparation for life after sport (Murdock et al., 2016). Despite increasing awareness of athlete mental health and transition concerns, relatively limited attention has been devoted to career development programming specifically designed to support postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

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This study is informed primarily by Identity Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory. Identity Theory explains how individuals develop and maintain role-based identities that shape behavior, decision-making, and perceptions of opportunity (Burke & Stets, 2009). Within sport contexts, athletic identity has been associated with both the salience of the athlete role and difficulty exploring alternative career pathways beyond athletics (Brewer et al., 1993; Houle et al., 2010). Prior research suggests that highly salient athletic identities may contribute to identity foreclosure and limited career exploration among athletes navigating transition periods (Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

Social Cognitive Career Theory emphasizes the influence of self-efficacy, environmental supports, and contextual barriers on career development processes (Lent et al., 1994). Within athletic populations, this framework provides insight into how social support, access to opportunity, institutional resources, and perceived barriers influence career decision-making and confidence in pursuing pathways beyond sport (Shurts & Shoffner, 2004; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Recent findings further suggest that environmental barriers, limited mentorship, and restricted engagement opportunities may negatively influence athletes' career preparation and transition experiences (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016).

Although previous studies have examined athletic identity, athlete transition experiences, and career readiness, the literature remains fragmented regarding career development programming and support approaches designed to assist postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds (Murdock et al., 2016). Existing research varies substantially in program structure, institutional context, and attention to identity-related factors, making it difficult to identify consistent approaches that support equitable career development outcomes for this population (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

A scoping review was therefore appropriate to examine the breadth of available literature and identify patterns across existing career development programming and support services (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Accordingly, this scoping review addressed the following research question: What career development programs support postsecondary athletes from low socioeconomic status backgrounds?

The purpose of this review was to synthesize United States-based literature examining career development programs, interventions, and support services relevant to postsecondary athletes navigating transitions beyond sport. Findings from this review aim to inform future social work practice, institutional programming, and career development initiatives designed to expand equitable and sustainable post-sport career pathways for athletes from historically under-resourced communities.

Although athletic identity was not operationalized as a formal inclusion criterion, it was consistently identified across the included studies as a significant influence on career exploration, transition experiences, and perceptions of opportunity among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds (Murdock et al., 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). Consequently, athletic identity became an important interpretive lens during thematic synthesis and discussion of the findings rather than a criterion used for study selection.

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Methods

Research Design

This scoping review was guided by the following research question: *What career development programs support postsecondary athletes from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds?* The research question informed the development of the search strategy, inclusion criteria, and analytic framework. A scoping review methodology was selected because of the exploratory nature of the inquiry and the limited body of literature examining career development supports for this specific population. Scoping reviews are particularly appropriate for mapping the breadth of scholarship, identifying research gaps, and examining the characteristics of existing programs, services, and support approaches (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Given the diversity of institutional contexts, support structures, and career development approaches described in the literature, this methodology facilitated a comprehensive examination of the available evidence.

The review followed the five-stage methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which includes identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating, summarizing, and reporting results. Methodological refinements proposed by Levac et al. (2010) were incorporated to strengthen analytical rigor, transparency, and clarity throughout the review process. Specifically, these recommendations informed the explicit articulation of the research question, the iterative refinement of inclusion criteria, and the systematic documentation of analytic decisions within the structured literature matrix.

This methodological design reflects principles central to social work by examining structural barriers that may influence career development among athletes from low SES backgrounds. The review also considers how access to mentorship, social capital, and institutional supports may shape post-sport transitions and contribute to social isolation (Barth et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014). By synthesizing evidence related to career development supports, services, intervention approaches, and identity exploration, this review contributes to social work-informed efforts to expand sustainable post-sport career pathways for athletes from historically under-resourced communities.

The review aligns with the Grand Challenges for Social Work by addressing efforts to eradicate social isolation and ensure healthy development for all youth through supportive relationships, mentorship, identity exploration, and equitable access to career opportunities during evolving adulthood (Barth et al., 2022). Career development programming may strengthen social connectedness and support positive developmental outcomes among postsecondary athletes navigating transitions beyond sport (Barth et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Sears et al., 2024).

Population, Concept, and Context Framework

The inclusion criteria were developed using the Population, Concept, and Context (PCC) framework recommended by the Joanna Briggs Institute for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020) (see Table 1 in Appendix 1). The population consisted of postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds participating in organized athletics within the United States. Eligible populations

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included athletes competing within NCAA divisions, NAIA institutions, and community college athletic programs.

Socioeconomic status was inconsistently measured across the included literature; accordingly, studies were considered relevant when low SES was either explicitly reported or reasonably inferred through participant characteristics and contextual indicators described by study authors. Consistent indicators included scholarship dependence, first-generation college status, limited social capital and professional networks, attendance at under-resourced educational institutions, and populations described as historically underserved or marginalized (Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). This approach allowed a broader examination of career development supports relevant to athletes experiencing socioeconomic barriers while acknowledging variation in how SES was operationalized across studies.

The concept focused on career development supports intended to facilitate career exploration, planning, identity development, and preparation for life beyond sport. To maximize retrieval, the search strategy incorporated the term career access to capture literature describing programs, interventions, and support services that expand awareness of professional opportunities, mentorship, and career pathways available to postsecondary athletes. Athletic identity and identity foreclosure were included as search terms because of their documented relevance within the athlete career development literature (Brewer et al., 1993; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Murdock et al., 2016); however, athletic identity was not operationalized as a participant eligibility criterion.

The context was limited primarily to postsecondary educational environments in which organized athletics are embedded within institutional settings. These contexts included NCAA Division I (DI), Division II (DII), and Division III (DIII) institutions, NAIA programs, and two-year colleges. Postsecondary athletic environments are settings in which athletic identity development, academic experiences, and career planning frequently intersect (Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

Traditional postsecondary athletes within this review referred to individuals participating in collegiate athletic systems, including the NCAA, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and community college athletic programs. Non-traditional athletes referred to individuals participating in semi-professional, developmental, or alternative athletic pathways outside formal postsecondary educational institutions. The literature search identified limited research specifically examining career development programming among nontraditional athlete populations. Broader search terms related to semiprofessional, professional development, and elite athletic contexts were initially included to ensure comprehensive retrieval of potentially relevant literature. However, studies focused primarily on semiprofessional or professional athletes were excluded during screening because they represented populations with substantially different career development contexts, support systems, and transition experiences than those of postsecondary athletes.

The review focused specifically on athletes participating within educational environments where career exploration, identity development, and preparation for life beyond sport remain ongoing processes. This focus aligns with evidence indicating that fewer than 2% of collegiate athletes ultimately compete professionally, requiring most athletes to pursue career pathways beyond athletics following their sport participation (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2023). This approach ensured a comprehensive search while maintaining consistency with the review's focus on career development within postsecondary educational environments.

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Key Term Definitions

Key terms were defined to support conceptual consistency throughout the review process (see Table 2 in Appendix 3). Career development refers to the ongoing process of self-exploration, career planning, skill development, and preparation for professional roles beyond sport participation (Bell et al., 2018; Book et al., 2021; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Within postsecondary athletic contexts, career development often involves balancing athletic participation with long-term vocational planning while navigating varying levels of institutional support, mentorship, and career resources (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Sears et al., 2024).

Career pathways refer to structured educational, professional, and experiential opportunities that support progression toward sustainable employment and long-term career goals (Book et al., 2021). Within athletic populations, career pathways may include internships, graduate education, mentoring relationships, professional networking, career services, and experiential learning opportunities that support preparation for careers beyond athletics (Coffin et al., 2021; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Sears et al., 2024).

Postsecondary athletes were defined as individuals aged 18 years or older participating in organized athletics beyond high school within NCAA, NAIA, and community college settings (Bell et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022). Although broader search terms were initially employed to maximize retrieval of potentially relevant literature, studies involving semiprofessional and professional athletes were excluded during screening to maintain alignment with the review's focus on career development within postsecondary educational environments.

Athletic identity refers to the degree to which individuals identify with the athlete role and organize their self-concept around athletic participation (Brewer et al., 1993). Previous literature suggests that strong athletic identities may contribute to reduced exploration of alternative career roles and increased vulnerability to identity foreclosure during athletic transitions (Bell et al., 2018; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). However, athletic identity functioned as a recurring construct throughout the literature rather than a participant eligibility criterion.

Low SES refers to limited access to economic, educational, and social resources that support long-term opportunity and economic mobility. Within athletic populations, low SES has been associated with structural barriers affecting social capital, professional networks, educational opportunities, mentoring relationships, and career resources (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022).

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases to identify studies examining career development supports for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Databases included Academic Search Ultimate, APA PsycInfo, ERIC, Sociological Abstracts, SPORTDiscus, PubMed, and Google Scholar, as well as publicly available professional resources associated with the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS). No publication date restrictions were applied to capture both foundational and contemporary scholarship. The search was limited to peer-reviewed studies conducted within the United States.

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Search terms were developed from the conceptual framework and included combinations of keywords related to athletic identity, identity foreclosure, career development, career readiness, career pathways, low SES backgrounds, career access, and postsecondary athletes. Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR, and NOT) were used to combine search terms and refine search results.

To maximize retrieval of potentially relevant literature, broader search terms related to semiprofessional, noncollegiate, professional development, and elite athletic contexts were initially included. These terms were incorporated because athletes navigating postsecondary transitions may participate across a range of athletic environments, and the extent of relevant literature was unknown at the outset of the review. However, studies focused primarily on semiprofessional or professional athletes were excluded during screening because they represented populations with substantially different career development contexts, support systems, and transition experiences than those of postsecondary athletes.

The review focused specifically on athletes participating within educational environments where career exploration, identity development, and preparation for life beyond sport remain ongoing processes. This focus aligns with evidence indicating that fewer than 2% of collegiate athletes ultimately compete professionally, requiring most athletes to pursue career pathways beyond athletics following sport participation (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2023). This approach ensured a comprehensive search while maintaining conceptual consistency with the review's focus on career development within postsecondary educational environments.

Although athletic identity and identity foreclosure informed the conceptual framework and search strategy, athletic identity was not operationalized as a formal participant eligibility criterion. Rather, these concepts were examined as recurring constructs within the literature related to career development, transition experiences, identity development, and career exploration behaviors (Bell et al., 2018; Murdock et al., 2016; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

The search strategy was iteratively refined to improve relevance and comprehensiveness. Resources associated with ASWIS were reviewed to identify potentially relevant literature; however, no additional studies identified through these sources met the final inclusion criteria. Reference lists of all included studies were also examined to identify additional peer-reviewed articles relevant to career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Detailed search strings are presented in Table 3 in Appendix 4.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established before screening to support methodological consistency and transparency (see Table 4 in Appendix 5). Studies were included if they examined postsecondary athletes aged 18 years or older within the United States and described programs, services, interventions, or tools intended to support career development, career exploration, career planning, career pathways, employment preparation, transition planning, or career access. Eligible populations included athletes participating within NCAA, NAIA, and community college athletic settings. Consistent with scoping review methodology, eligible study designs included qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, conceptual, and literature review–based peer-reviewed research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). Articles focused exclusively on athletic performance, mental health, or academic outcomes without an explicit career development component were excluded, as were non-peer-reviewed

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sources (e.g., dissertations, theses, editorials, opinion pieces, books, conference proceedings, and gray literature). Only English-language publications were considered.

Study Selection

Study selection followed a multistep screening process consistent with the scoping review framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and refined by Levac et al. (2010). Titles and abstracts were initially reviewed to assess relevance to the research question and alignment with the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles meeting the preliminary screening criteria subsequently underwent full-text review to determine final eligibility. Screening, data extraction, and study management were conducted by the primary researcher using structured eligibility procedures aligned with the review framework.

The data matrix systematically documented the author(s) and year, study purpose, theoretical framework, research design, participant characteristics, indicators of low SES backgrounds, intervention or program characteristics, key findings, and relevance to the review question. This structured approach facilitated consistent comparison across studies and served as the foundation for thematic synthesis.

Search Process

A comprehensive search was conducted across 11 databases (see Table 5 in Appendix 6). The database search identified 63,159 records. After removal of 1,127 duplicate records, 62,032 records remained for title and abstract screening. These records were screened for relevance to the review question and eligibility criteria.

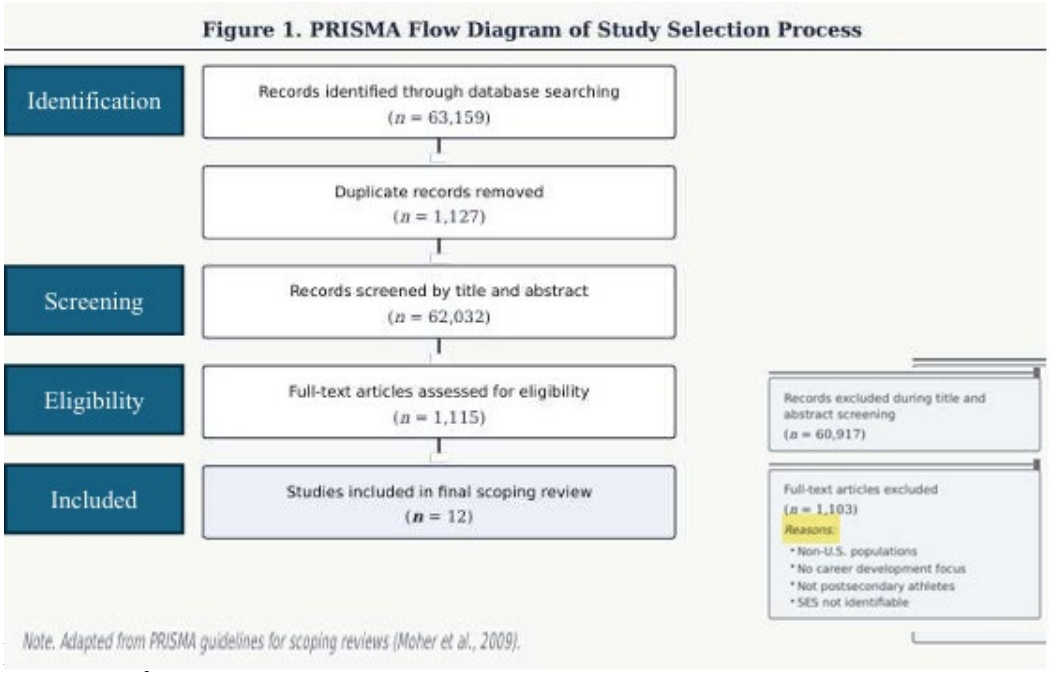
Following title and abstract screening, 1,115 articles remained for full-text review. Studies were excluded if they were conducted outside the United States, lacked a career development focus, did not include postsecondary athletes, or failed to address low SES backgrounds.

Reference lists of eligible studies, key journals, and sport social work resources were manually searched to identify additional relevant studies. These supplemental searches supported inclusion of both foundational and contemporary scholarship relevant to the review topic.

Following full-text review, 12 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the scoping review. Figure 1 presents a simplified PRISMA flow diagram providing a transparent overview of the screening and study selection process used to identify the final sample, consistent with PRISMA reporting guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). A more detailed PRISMA flow diagram, including the number of records excluded at each stage and reasons for exclusion, is provided in Appendix 2.

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Figure 1
Simplified PRISMA flowchart



Following study selection, data from each included study were systematically extracted into the structured digital literature matrix (see Table 5 in Appendix 6). Extracted variables included author and year, study title, theoretical framework, research aims, study design, participant demographics, athletic level, indicators of low SES backgrounds, athletic identity, career transition experiences, program characteristics, intervention descriptions, delivery methods, target population, implementation barriers, participant experiences, and key findings related to career development.

Data extraction and charting were conducted iteratively to facilitate comprehensive comparison across studies and ensure alignment with the review's research question. Printed articles were manually annotated and color-coded to support thematic mapping across athletic identity, low SES backgrounds, career development, institutional support, and transition-related dimensions.

The artificial intelligence-assisted research platform Elicit was used solely as an organizational and verification tool to assist with tracking citations, summarizing study characteristics, and cross-checking patterns identified within the literature matrix. Final decisions regarding study eligibility, data extraction, coding, thematic organization, and interpretation remained the sole responsibility of the primary researcher. No systematic review management software (e.g., Covidence) was used. Instead, all screening, data extraction, coding, and thematic organization were conducted manually by the primary researcher using a structured literature matrix and procedures consistent with the scoping review framework (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). Because the review was conducted by a single researcher, analytic decisions were documented systematically within the literature matrix to promote consistency and transparency throughout the review process.

Although athletic identity and identity foreclosure informed the conceptual framework and search strategy of this review, athletic identity was not used as a formal inclusion criterion

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and was not measured according to a standardized threshold across studies. Rather, athletic identity was examined as a recurring construct related to career exploration, transition experiences, and career development among postsecondary athletes (Bell et al., 2018; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Murdock et al., 2016).

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns across the included studies. Consistent with the exploratory purpose of scoping reviews, thematic synthesis allowed for systematic identification and organization of concepts across a heterogeneous body of literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Levac et al., 2010).

Analysis began with repeated reading of each included study and iterative review of the literature matrix to develop initial descriptive codes that captured data relevant to the research question. Codes were developed inductively through manual annotation and constant comparison across studies before being organized into broader conceptual categories. Similar categories were subsequently refined into overarching themes representing recurring patterns within the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Themes were reviewed iteratively to ensure they accurately reflected the evidence across studies, represented the most consistently reported concepts, and remained aligned with the review's central research question. Related codes were compared across studies and refined through iterative review until stable conceptual categories were developed. The final thematic structure was developed inductively from recurring patterns identified across the literature and is presented in the Results section.

Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

Although formal critical appraisal is not a standard requirement of scoping reviews, careful attention was given to the methodological rigor, conceptual clarity, and reporting transparency of each included study. Consistent with the scoping review frameworks proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and refined by Levac et al. (2010), the purpose of this review was to systematically map the breadth, characteristics, and patterns within the existing literature rather than formally appraise the quality of included studies.

Study characteristics, contextual factors, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and reported limitations were systematically documented within the literature matrix (see Table 5 in Appendix 6) to support interpretation, transparent synthesis, and comprehensive comparison across studies. These data were subsequently synthesized and summarized in Table 6 (Appendix 7). The iterative coding process, structured documentation procedures, and cross-verification of extracted study characteristics enhanced the consistency and trustworthiness of the review findings.

Results

Twelve studies met the final inclusion criteria and were included in this scoping review. Ten studies were identified through systematic database searches, and two additional studies were identified through supplemental reference tracking and manual searches of relevant literature sources (Book et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2018).

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The included studies represented diverse methodological approaches. Five studies employed qualitative methodologies (Book et al., 2021; Coffin et al., 2021; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Sears et al., 2024), four utilized quantitative survey designs (Bell et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020), one employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Curry et al., 2021), and two represented conceptual or theoretical analyses (Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004). These methodological approaches illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of scholarship examining career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds.

Sample sizes varied considerably across the included studies, ranging from qualitative investigations involving 10 participants (Book et al., 2021; Sears et al., 2024) and 14 former collegiate football athletes (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016) to quantitative surveys including 538 NCAA student-athletes (Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Quantitative studies also included samples of 44 NCAA Division II student-athletes (Bell et al., 2018), 110 NCAA Division I student-athletes (Murdock et al., 2016), and 143 NCAA Division I student-athletes representing 32 varsity sport programs (Davis et al., 2022).

Characteristics of Included Studies

The 12 included studies represented a diverse body of scholarship examining career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Although the studies varied considerably in methodology, participant characteristics, and theoretical orientation, the evidence base was concentrated within DI athletic settings.

Nine of the 12 included studies focused primarily on DI student-athletes (Coffin et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Murdock et al., 2016; Sears et al., 2024; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). One study examined DII student-athletes (Bell et al., 2018). One study examined African American former professional athletes who spent their formative years in underserved American communities (Book et al., 2021), and one presented a conceptual framework for career counseling with collegiate student-athletes (Shurts & Shoffner, 2004). All included studies were conducted within the United States, consistent with the review's eligibility criteria.

Participant characteristics varied substantially across the included studies with respect to age, race, ethnicity, athletic setting, career stage, and institutional context. Several studies focused specifically on Black student-athletes and historically underserved populations (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Kelly & Dixon, 2014), whereas others included racially diverse NCAA student-athlete populations (Bell et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Participant ages generally reflected traditional postsecondary students (17–26 years), although two studies examined adult professionals responsible for career development programming (Sears et al., 2024) and former professional athletes reflecting on their career transitions (Book et al., 2021).

Despite the review's focus on athletes from low SES backgrounds, relatively few studies explicitly measured socioeconomic status using standardized indicators. Instead, low SES backgrounds were most often inferred through first-generation college status, scholarship dependence, residence in underserved communities, attendance at under-resourced educational institutions, or authors' descriptions of structurally marginalized populations (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Only Curry et al. (2021) directly reported first-generation college

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student status as an indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage, whereas Wendling and Sagas (2020) documented first-generation college status descriptively without operationalizing it as a measure of socioeconomic status.

Programmatic and Institutional Trends

Across the included studies, career development supports most frequently included athlete-specific advising, mentoring initiatives, career services, internships, leadership development opportunities, graduate education planning, and institutionally coordinated professional development programming (Coffin et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Sears et al., 2024). These supports were typically implemented as institution-based services or targeted initiatives rather than comprehensive, standardized intervention models specifically designed for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds.

The evidence further demonstrated a strong concentration of research conducted within DI athletic settings, with comparatively little attention devoted to DII and DIII, NAIA, community colleges, or other postsecondary athletic environments.

Recurring Patterns Across the Literature

Inductive thematic analysis identified seven recurring patterns that characterized career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. In response to the research question, the literature revealed both specific career development programs and services and the broader contextual factors shaping athletes' access to and engagement with those supports. These recurring patterns reflected the concepts most consistently represented across the included literature and were developed through iterative comparison of coded findings across studies. Together, these recurring patterns illustrate how athletic identity, institutional support, socioeconomic context, and career development processes intersect to influence athletes' preparation for careers beyond sport.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity was consistently identified as a central influence on career exploration, career planning, and transition experiences among postsecondary athletes (Bell et al., 2018; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Although a strong athletic identity promoted commitment, discipline, and persistence, several studies found that high identification with the athlete role was associated with reduced engagement in career exploration, narrower perceptions of career opportunities, and lower confidence in pursuing nonathletic career pathways (Bell et al., 2018; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

Identity Foreclosure

Identity foreclosure represented a recurring challenge across the literature and frequently occurred when athletic participation became athletes' primary or exclusive source of identity (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004).

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Limited exposure to alternative career pathways, combined with external expectations regarding athletic success, often constrained career exploration and delayed identity development beyond sport. These challenges were particularly evident among athletes from historically underserved communities, where sport was frequently perceived as the primary avenue for educational and economic mobility (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021).

Career Maturity

Career maturity was consistently associated with athletes' preparedness to make informed career decisions beyond athletics (Davis et al., 2022; Murdock et al., 2016; Sears et al., 2024; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Athletes who reported greater exposure to career planning resources, mentoring relationships, and career exploration opportunities demonstrated stronger confidence in career decision-making and post-sport transitions (Comeaux & Savage, 2025). Conversely, limited institutional support and restricted exposure to professional opportunities appeared to delay career planning among athletes from low SES backgrounds (Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016).

Institutional Support and Career Programming

Institutional support consistently influenced athlete career development outcomes across the reviewed literature (Coffin et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024). Effective approaches included athlete-specific advising, mentoring initiatives, internships, career services, and multidisciplinary collaboration among athletic departments and university personnel. However, several studies suggested that existing services were frequently underutilized or insufficiently tailored to athletes' unique developmental and identity-related experiences (Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024).

Socioeconomic Inequity

Socioeconomic inequity was identified as a contextual factor influencing athletes' access to career development opportunities (Book et al., 2021; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). Financial constraints, limited professional networks, and unequal access to career-related resources were consistently identified as factors shaping athletes' career development experiences and perceptions of opportunity (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014). Despite the centrality of socioeconomic context to this review, relatively few studies explicitly operationalized low SES.

Transition and Post-Sport Identity

Transition beyond sport represented one of the most consistently discussed developmental periods across the included studies (Book et al., 2021; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Murdock et al., 2016). Athletes frequently described uncertainty regarding identity, career direction, and life after sport, particularly when career planning had been delayed during athletic participation. Mentoring relationships, structured transition planning, and identity-supportive interventions were identified as promising approaches for facilitating successful transitions beyond competitive athletics (Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Sears et al., 2024).

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Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness was integrated throughout several studies examining career development among historically underserved athlete populations (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). Collectively, these studies emphasized the importance of recognizing athletes' lived experiences, cultural identities, socioeconomic circumstances, and institutional contexts when designing career development services. Culturally responsive, strengths-based, and asset-oriented approaches were associated with greater relevance, engagement, and perceived effectiveness among diverse athlete populations.

Results Summary

Collectively, the reviewed literature demonstrates that career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds extends beyond employment preparation alone. Successful career development reflects the interaction of athletic identity, socioeconomic opportunity, institutional support, mentoring relationships, and culturally responsive programming. Although existing scholarship has expanded understanding of athlete career development, relatively few studies have examined these factors simultaneously or evaluated comprehensive interventions designed specifically for athletes from low SES backgrounds.

Discussion

This scoping review synthesized the available literature examining career development supports for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Across the 12 included studies, the findings consistently demonstrated that career development extends beyond employment preparation and is influenced by the interaction of athletic identity, socioeconomic opportunity, institutional support, mentoring relationships, and culturally responsive practice. Although the literature addressing athlete career development has expanded in recent years, relatively few studies examined the intersection of these factors within the same investigation. Rather than identifying a single evidence-based intervention, the findings suggest that successful career development should be understood as a multidimensional developmental process requiring coordinated support across educational, athletic, and community systems.

An additional finding identified through this review is the concentration of scholarship within DI institutions. Comparatively little research has examined career development experiences among athletes competing in DII and DIII, NAIA, community college, or other postsecondary athletic settings. Likewise, relatively few studies explicitly measured low SES using standardized indicators, despite frequently discussing barriers. These gaps indicate that the current evidence base remains uneven and suggest important opportunities for future research.

Athletic Identity as Both a Strength and a Developmental Challenge

Athletic identity was identified as one of the most consistently reported influences on career development across the included literature. Several studies found that strong identification with the athlete role contributed to reduced career exploration, narrower perceptions of

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nonathletic career opportunities, and lower engagement in career planning activities (Bell et al., 2018; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). At the same time, athletic identity was not inherently problematic. Rather, the literature suggested that athletic identity functions as a developmental asset when accompanied by opportunities for career exploration, mentoring, and identity expansion beyond sport.

Studies examining Black student-athletes and athletes from historically marginalized communities further demonstrated that athletic identity develops within broader social, educational, and cultural contexts (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021). Limited professional networks, exposure to diverse career pathways, and culturally relevant mentoring often constrained opportunities for identity exploration beyond athletics. Collectively, these findings suggest that career development interventions should not seek to diminish athletic identity but instead leverage the transferable strengths developed through sport while expanding opportunities for career exploration and identity development.

Structural Inequities Shape Career Opportunity

Across the included studies, career development was influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by structural and institutional conditions shaping athletes' professional development experiences. Financial constraints, limited social capital, reduced mentoring relationships, and inconsistent exposure to professional networks were repeatedly identified as barriers affecting athletes from historically marginalized and low SES backgrounds (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004).

Importantly, socioeconomic status was rarely operationalized through standardized measures. Instead, many studies inferred socioeconomic disadvantage through scholarship dependence, first-generation college status, institutional context, or populations historically experiencing educational inequities. Although this approach reflects the complexity of measuring SES within collegiate athletics, it also highlights the need for more consistent operationalization in future research. Greater precision in measuring SES would strengthen understanding of how structural inequities influence career and identity development, and long-term career outcomes among postsecondary athletes.

Institutional Support Remains Fragmented

Institutional support was identified as another recurring influence on career development; however, the literature suggests that existing services remain fragmented and inconsistently implemented. Several studies described promising practices, including athlete-specific advising, structured mentoring, leadership development, internships, and coordinated professional development programming (Coffin et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024). Clemson University's University Professional Internship and Co-op (UPIC) Program illustrates how intentional collaboration between athletic departments and campus career services can provide student-athletes with experiential learning, paid internships, and professional networking competencies before graduation (Coffin et al., 2021).

Despite these promising examples, relatively few studies evaluated comprehensive, replicable career development interventions or reported longitudinal outcomes following program participation (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024). Most investigations relied on cross-sectional, qualitative, or exploratory methodologies, limiting

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understanding of the long-term effectiveness of existing career development supports. Consequently, the literature provides stronger evidence regarding factors influencing long-term career trajectories than regarding which interventions most effectively improve long-term career outcomes.

Although the literature demonstrates growing attention to athlete career development, several important gaps remain. Few studies examined the intersection of low socioeconomic status, athletic identity, and career development within the same investigation. The evidence also remained concentrated within DI institutions, with limited scholarship examining athletes competing in DII and DIII, NAIA, community colleges, and other postsecondary athletic settings. In addition, relatively few studies evaluated comprehensive career development interventions using longitudinal or outcome-based designs, and inconsistent operationalization of socioeconomic status limited comparison across studies and understanding of how structural inequities influence career development and post-sport transitions. Collectively, these findings indicate that the current evidence base remains limited in both scope and methodological consistency, highlighting important opportunities for future research and the continued development of equitable, evidence-informed career development supports for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds.

Career Development as a Social Work Issue

The findings of this review reinforce the relevance of Identity Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory, Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 2000), and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) in understanding career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Identity Theory helps explain why athletic identity consistently influenced career exploration, identity foreclosure, and transition experiences across the included studies (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Likewise, Social Cognitive Career Theory provides a useful framework for interpreting how self-efficacy, environmental supports, mentoring relationships, and perceived barriers influence career decision-making and planning processes (Davis et al., 2022; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Together, these findings suggest that career development is shaped by the interaction of individual identity, self-efficacy, and broader environmental conditions.

While Identity Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory primarily explain individual career development processes, the review findings also highlight broader structural influences that are further illuminated by Empowerment Theory and Critical Race Theory. Empowerment Theory emphasizes individuals' capacity for self-determination while recognizing that access to structural supports influences athletes' ability to navigate career transitions (Zimmerman, 2000). Kelly and Dixon's (2014) constellation mentoring framework reflects an empowerment-oriented approach in which multiple mentoring relationships strengthen athletes' social capital, identity development, and career development. Similarly, Curry et al. (2021) found that Black football student-athletes reported lower career and college readiness capital than their peers, underscoring the importance of interventions that intentionally build the resources and supports necessary for successful career development.

Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) further illuminates how structural inequities shape career development among athletes from historically marginalized communities. Comeaux and Savage (2025) found that Black college athletes were frequently encouraged to prioritize athletic eligibility over career exploration and high-impact educational opportunities,

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reflecting institutional practices that may constrain long-term career development. Likewise, Book et al. (2021) demonstrated that athletes from underserved communities often viewed sport as the primary pathway to economic mobility, illustrating how racialized and socioeconomic inequities can narrow perceptions of opportunity. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of culturally responsive, equity-oriented career development approaches that address systemic barriers while expanding opportunities beyond sport.

Collectively, the findings position career development as a social work issue extending beyond workforce preparation alone. Career development among postsecondary athletes requires coordinated attention to identity development, social support, and institutional collaboration (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Sears et al., 2024). Consequently, sport social workers are uniquely positioned to facilitate comprehensive systems of support that promote career development, social inclusion, and long-term well-being among athletes transitioning beyond sport (Barth et al., 2022; Coffin et al., 2021; Kelly & Dixon, 2014).

Implications for Social Work and Institutional Practice

The findings of this review suggest that career development should be recognized as an integral component of holistic athlete well-being rather than a service reserved for the conclusion of athletic participation. Institutions may benefit from implementing coordinated, athlete-centered career development initiatives earlier in the collegiate experience by integrating career exploration, mentorship, leadership development, and experiential learning throughout athletes' academic and athletic careers (Coffin et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024). Strengthening partnerships among athletic departments, career centers, faculty, employers, alumni, and community organizations may increase professional networks and career opportunities that extend beyond sport while supporting athletes' identity development and long-term sustainable careers (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016).

Beyond informing campus programming, these findings position sport social workers as important interdisciplinary collaborators capable of addressing both psychosocial and structural barriers influencing athletes' career development. Sport social workers may facilitate constellation mentoring relationships (Kelly & Dixon, 2014), coordinate interdisciplinary career planning with athletic departments and campus career centers (Sears et al., 2024), support athlete-specific career programming (Coffin et al., 2021), and advocate for culturally responsive career development services that address structural barriers experienced by athletes from low SES backgrounds (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021). Through these roles, sport social workers can help bridge gaps between athletic participation and sustainable career development while reducing risks associated with identity foreclosure and social isolation (Barth et al., 2022).

The findings also highlight opportunities to collaboratively develop and evaluate theory-informed, culturally responsive career development initiatives that address the unique needs of postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds while expanding career exploration beyond sport (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Sears et al., 2024).

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Strengths and Limitations

This scoping review possesses several methodological strengths. First, the review followed the methodological frameworks proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and refined by Levac et al. (2010), providing a transparent and systematic approach to identifying, selecting, and synthesizing the available literature. The review was further guided by the Population, Concept, and Context (PCC) framework and reported using PRISMA guidelines for scoping reviews, strengthening methodological transparency throughout the review process.

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented across multiple academic databases, supplemented by reference list searches and sport social work–related resources to maximize identification of relevant literature. Screening, data extraction, and thematic analysis were conducted using a structured literature matrix supported by iterative manual coding. The artificial intelligence-assisted research platform Elicit was used to cross-verify identified thematic patterns and enhance organizational consistency during the synthesis process. Although all screening, coding, and thematic analysis were conducted by a single reviewer, iterative comparison between manual coding and Elicit-supported verification enhanced the transparency and consistency of the analytic process.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. First, this review was limited to peer-reviewed studies conducted within the United States and published in English, potentially excluding relevant international scholarship and unpublished literature. Second, socioeconomic status was inconsistently operationalized across the included studies. Consequently, low SES backgrounds were frequently inferred through participant characteristics, institutional context, scholarship status, first-generation college status, or descriptions of historically underserved populations rather than standardized socioeconomic measures. This variability limited direct comparison across studies and represents an important methodological limitation within the existing evidence base, underscoring the need for more consistent operationalization and reporting of socioeconomic status in future research examining athlete career development.

Additionally, the included studies represented diverse methodological approaches, institutional contexts, and outcome measures, limiting opportunities for direct comparison of intervention effectiveness. Most studies were exploratory, qualitative, or cross-sectional in design, with relatively few longitudinal investigations evaluating career development outcomes over time. Finally, because this review was conducted by a single reviewer, the potential for selection and interpretive bias cannot be entirely eliminated despite the structured review procedures employed.

Future Research

The findings of this review identify several priorities for future scholarship. First, researchers should develop and evaluate theory-informed, identity-centered career development interventions specifically designed for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Although several promising approaches, including mentoring, athlete-specific advising, internships, experiential learning, and career development programming, were identified across the literature, few interventions have been rigorously evaluated using longitudinal or outcome-based research designs (Coffin et al., 2021; Sears et al., 2024).

Future studies should also incorporate standardized measures of socioeconomic status to improve consistency across investigations and strengthen understanding of how socioeconomic

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inequities influence career development, identity formation, and post-sport transitions. Greater attention should be given to athletes competing within DII and DIII, NAIA, community college, and other post-secondary athletic settings, as the existing literature remains heavily concentrated within DI institutions.

Additional research is needed to examine the role of families, mentors, coaches, alumni, employers, and community organizations in supporting athletes' career development across the lifespan. Longitudinal studies following athletes from college through post-sport employment would provide valuable insight into how career and identity development, and institutional support, influence long-term vocational outcomes.

Finally, greater attention should be directed toward evaluating sport social work–informed interventions that integrate career development, identity exploration, mentoring, workforce preparation, and community partnerships within coordinated systems of support. Expanding this evidence will strengthen institutional capacity to promote equitable career opportunities, reduce social isolation, and improve long-term well-being among postsecondary athletes transitioning beyond sport (Barth et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This scoping review synthesized the available literature examining career development supports for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Across the 12 included studies, the evidence consistently characterized career development as a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of athletic identity, socioeconomic opportunity, institutional support, mentoring relationships, and culturally responsive practice. Although the literature identified promising approaches, including athlete-specific advising, mentoring initiatives, experiential learning opportunities, and career programming, few studies evaluated comprehensive, evidence-informed interventions specifically designed to address the unique needs of postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds.

An important contribution to this review is the identification of a significant gap in the existing literature regarding career development interventions specifically designed for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. While individual studies examined athletic identity, career development, institutional support, or socioeconomic influences independently, relatively few investigated how these factors collectively shape career development experiences. Likewise, the concentration of research within DI settings highlights the need for greater attention to athletes competing in DII and DIII, NAIA, community college, and other postsecondary athletic environments.

From a sport social work perspective, these findings underscore the importance of collaborative, identity-informed, and culturally responsive approaches that extend beyond traditional career services. Career development should be recognized not only as workforce preparation but also as a process of identity development, social connection, and empowerment. Sport social workers are uniquely positioned to collaborate with athletic departments, career centers, educators, employers, alumni, and community organizations to strengthen career development while addressing the structural barriers that disproportionately affect athletes from low SES backgrounds.

Future research should prioritize the development, implementation, and evaluation of theory-informed, identity-centered career development interventions designed specifically for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Longitudinal evaluations examining how

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these interventions influence career and identity development, workforce preparation, and post-sport transition outcomes would further strengthen the evidence base. Expanding this body of scholarship will enhance institutional capacity to support athletes' successful transitions beyond sport while advancing equitable career opportunities, long-term well-being, and sustainable career pathways for future generations of post-secondary athletes.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Table 1: Population, Concept, and Context Framework

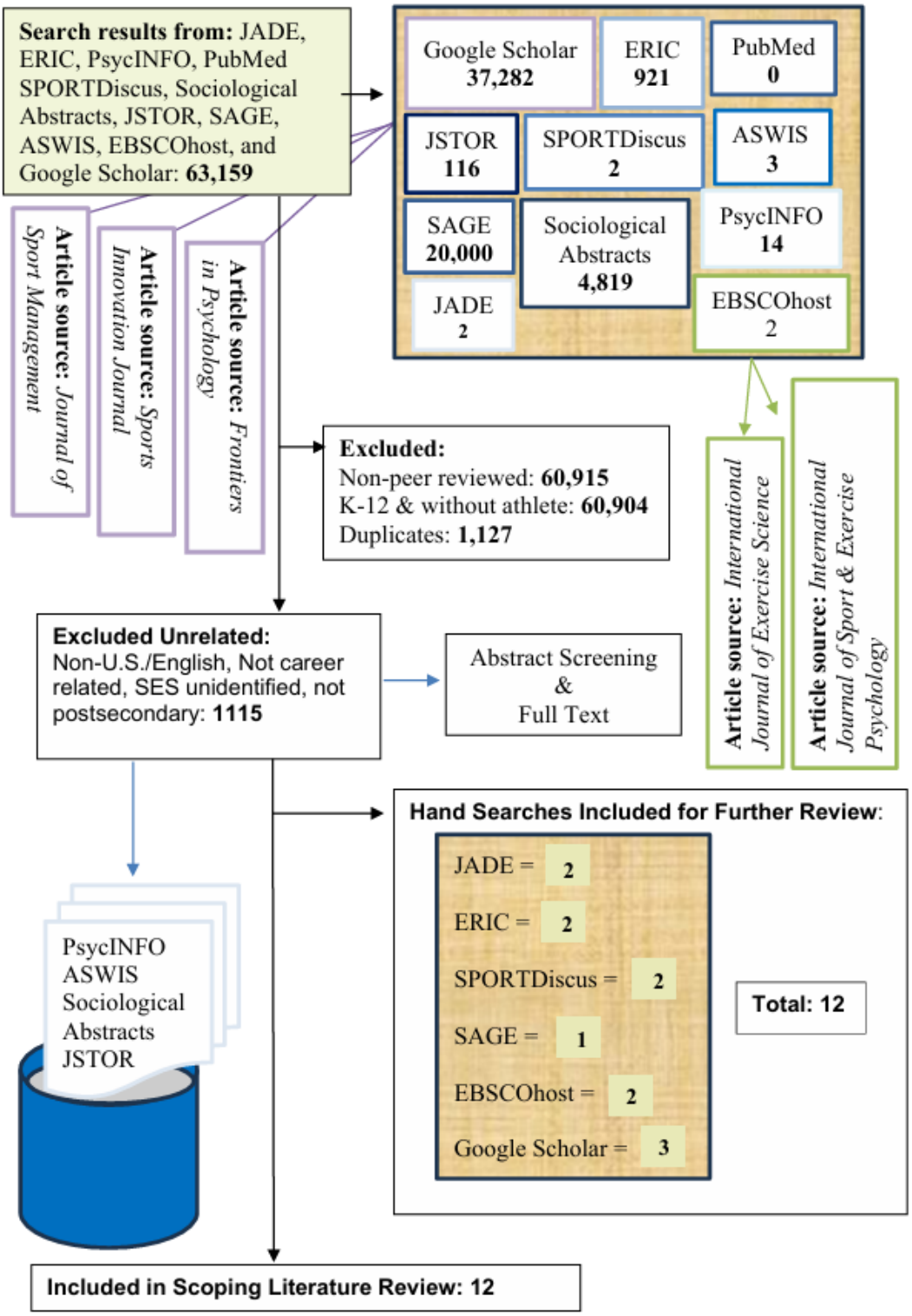
Population	Postsecondary athletes with low SES aged 18 or older, including traditional and nontraditional athletes, community college athletes, and NAIA participants in the United States
Concept	Career development interventions and programs that promote career access, employment preparation, and alternative career pathway exploration beyond athletics
Context	U.S. postsecondary athletic settings, including NCAA Division I–III institutions, NAIA schools, community colleges, and other postsecondary athletics.

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Appendix 2

Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart



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Appendix 3
Table: *Definitions of Key Terms*

Term	Definition
Career development	Career development refers to the ongoing process through which individuals engage in self-exploration, career planning, and preparation for post athletic roles (Bell et al., 2018; Book et al., 2021; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). For low SES postsecondary athletes with strong athletic identities, career development requires navigating the dual demands of athletic participation and long-term vocational planning, often without access to institutional or professional support (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025).
Career pathway	Career pathways are the structured routes of education, training, and employment experiences that enable progression toward sustainable, meaningful careers (Book et al., 2021). For athletes, awareness of these pathways must begin early and include exposure to opportunities beyond sports participation to mitigate the risk of identity foreclosure (Wendling & Sagas, 2020; Curry et al., 2021).
Postsecondary athlete	Postsecondary athletes are defined as individuals aged 18 or older who participate or have participated in organized athletics beyond high school. This includes those competing in structured collegiate environments such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and community colleges (Bell et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022). It also encompasses athletes in non-collegiate contexts such as semi-professional or professional leagues, as well as individuals who entered the workforce directly while maintaining athletic engagement. This broad definition recognizes the diverse pathways athletes take and the varying career development challenges they encounter.
Low SES	Low SES encompasses limited access to economic, educational, and social resources and includes barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups such as first-generation college students and BIPOC athletes (Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022). It is not defined solely by income but by a broader lack of access to social capital and support structures needed to pursue nonathletic careers.
Athletic identity	Athletic identity refers to the degree to which an individual identifies with their role as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). A strong or exclusive athletic identity can restrict exploration of alternative roles and contribute to identity foreclosure, particularly when accompanied by limited career development support (Bell et al., 2018; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

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Appendix 4

Table 3: Detailed Search Strategy

Primary Search String	"interventions" OR "programs" OR "services" AND "athletic identity" OR "identity foreclosure" AND "career access" OR "career development" OR "career readiness" OR "career maturity" OR "career pathways" AND "low-income" OR "low SES" OR "low socioeconomic status" OR "underrepresented" AND "athlete" OR "student-athlete" OR "college athlete" OR "postsecondary athlete"
Secondary Search String	"low-income athletes" OR "low-SES athletes" OR "underrepresented student-athletes" AND "career access" OR "career readiness" OR "career transition" OR "career support" OR "career development" AND "postsecondary athletics" OR "college athletes" OR "collegiate sports" AND "interventions" OR "programs" OR "services" NOT "high school" OR "K-12" OR "affluent"
Additional Search String	"pro league" OR "development league" OR "semi professional" OR "elite athlete" OR "non college athlete" OR "workforce" OR "alternative pathway" AND "initiatives" OR "mentorships" OR "support" AND "career transitions" OR "career planning" OR "career readiness" OR "career support" AND "marginalized" OR "socioeconomically disadvantaged" OR "overrepresented" OR "economically disadvantaged" AND "young adult athletes"

Appendix 5

Table 4: *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Low-SES athletes aged 18 or older, including collegiate and noncollegiate athletes (e.g., semipro, pro) in the United States	High school athletes, international athletes, or general youth populations without a focus on postsecondary athletes
Geography	Conducted in the United States	Conducted outside the United States
Focus	Describes interventions, programs, or services that support career pathways, career development, or employment preparation	Focused only on athletic performance, mental health, or academic support without a career access component
Study type	Peer-reviewed full text (empirical, conceptual, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies)	Dissertations, theses, editorials, commentaries, opinion pieces, books, or conference proceedings
Language	English	Non-English publications
Publication date	No filter	No filter

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Appendix 6

Table 5: Database Matrix

Google Scholar	37,282	3	low socioeconomic status athletes; career development; athletic identity	Postsecondary athletes; mixed SES	Career development, athletic identity, and career transitions	Identified foundational and contemporary literature relevant to athletic identity and career development
SAGE	20,000	1	career services; identity foreclosure	NCAA and NAIA student-athletes	Institutional career development supports	Included literature addressing career services and identity development
Sociological Abstracts	4,819	0	underrepresented student-athletes; career transitions	Historically underserved populations	Structural barriers and social inequality	Contributed sociological perspectives but no studies met inclusion criteria
ERIC	921	2	career development; postsecondary athletics	Student-athletes in educational settings	Educational interventions and career development	Identified studies examining educational and career support services
JSTOR	116	0	career development; collegiate athletes	Mixed athletic populations	Historical and theoretical perspectives	Provided background literature; no studies met inclusion criteria
PsycINFO	14	0	athletic identity; career counseling	Student-athletes	Identity development and counseling	Contributed psychological literature; no studies met inclusion criteria
SPORTDiscus	2	2	career development; sport psychology	Collegiate student-athletes	Sport-specific career development supports	Identified sport-focused career development literature
JADE	2	2	student-athlete development	NAIA student-athletes	Student-athlete development and career support	Identified specialized literature relevant to athlete development
Alliance of Social Workers in Sports	3	0	multiple search combinations	N/A	Sport social work resources	No peer-reviewed studies met inclusion criteria

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Academic Search Ultimate	0	0	career development; student-athletes; postsecondary athletics	Postsecondary student-athletes	Career development and educational support services	Broad interdisciplinary coverage of education and social science literature; retrieved studies did not meet the review's postsecondary eligibility criteria.
PubMed	0	0	multiple search combinations	N/A	Supplemental literature identification	No peer-reviewed studies met inclusion criteria
Hand Search (Reference Lists)	N/A	2	reference list screening	Eligible studies	Supplemental identification of relevant literature	Identified Bell et al. (2018) and Book et al. (2021) through manual reference tracking

Appendix 7

Table 6: Characteristics of Included Studies (N = 12)

Study	Design	Population / Sample	Theoretical Framework	Primary Career Development Focus	Major Contribution
Bell et al. (2018)	Quantitative	44 NCAA Division II student-athletes	Not explicitly stated	Relationship between athletic identity, career exploration, and engagement	Demonstrated a strong association between athletic identity and career exploration/engagement among NCAA Division II student-athletes, suggesting that athletic identity may influence preparation for careers beyond sport.
Book et al. (2021)	Qualitative	10 African American former professional male athletes who played at least one year professionally and spent their formative years in	Career Transition Framework	Career pathways following professional sport	Demonstrated that early life adversity, limited educational opportunities, and identity foreclosure influenced long-term career development, while mentoring and community support facilitated successful transitions.

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		underserved U.S. communities			
Coffin et al. (2021)	Qualitative	Student-athletes participating in Clemson's University Professional Internship and Co-op (UPIC) Program sponsored by the Center for Career and Professional Development (CCPD)	Not explicitly stated	Evaluation of Clemson University's UPIC for career development	Examined Clemson University's University Professional Internship and Co-op (UPIC) Program as an institutional career development initiative that provided paid internships, professional networking, experiential learning, and career readiness opportunities for student-athletes.
Comeaux & Savage (2025)	Qualitative	Black collegiate student-athletes	Critical examination of career preparation among Black college athletes/ Critical Race Theory; Social Capital	Career preparation and transition experiences	Identified structural inequities affecting career preparation and emphasized culturally responsive institutional support, mentorship, and equitable access to career opportunities beyond athletics.
Curry et al. (2021)	Mixed methods (sequential explanatory)	53 NCAA Division I football student-athletes (37 Black; 16 White; ages 17–26)	Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory	Academic and career preparation among Black football student-athletes	Identified lower career and college readiness capital among Black athletes, emphasizing inequitable access to social capital, academic preparation, and career resources.
Davis et al. (2022)	Quantitative	143 NCAA Division I student-athletes representing 32 varsity sports	Systems Theory Framework of Career Development	Utilization of career services	Found that career services positively influenced career readiness but were frequently underutilized despite demonstrated benefits.
Haslerig & Navarro (2016)	Qualitative phenomenology	14 former NCAA Division I football student-athletes (primarily ages 21–23)	Savickas' Career Construction Theory	Graduate education and career construction	Found that graduate education represented an important stage in career construction and identity development, although athletic eligibility often influenced educational decision-making.

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Kelly & Dixon (2014)	Conceptual	NCAA Division I African American male student-athletes	Transition Theory; Constellation Mentoring	Mentoring during collegiate transition	Proposed constellation mentoring as a culturally responsive strategy to improve academic success, identity development, social integration, and career preparation among African American male student-athletes.
Murdock et al. (2016)	Quantitative	110 NCAA Division I student-athletes	Career Identity Framework utilizing the Life After Sport Scale (LASS)	Career identity and career programming	Found limited association between attendance at career programming and career-athlete identity, while highlighting persistent concerns regarding career maturity and preparation for life after sport.
Sears et al. (2024)	Qualitative	10 NCAA Division I senior administrators responsible for student-athlete career development	Holistic Care and Interprofessional Teams	Best practices for career development services	Identified collaboration, diverse programming, athletic department buy-in, innovation, and effective communication as essential characteristics of successful student-athlete career development programs.
Shurts & Shoffner (2004)	Conceptual	Collegiate student-athletes; case study	Learning Theory of Career Counseling (LTCC)	Career counseling	Proposed that career counselors can reduce identity foreclosure and improve career decision-making by expanding student-athletes' interests, values, skills, and career exploration experiences.
Wendling & Sagas (2020)	Quantitative	538 NCAA Division I student-athletes (ages 18–23); 430 White, 38 African American, 32 Hispanic, 22 Asian, 11 Other, 5 preferred not to respond; 86 first-generation college students	Social Cognitive Career Theory—Career Self-Management Model	Career planning for life after sport	Demonstrated that career decision self-efficacy, career goals, environmental supports, and perceived barriers significantly influenced career planning for life after sport.

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