

# **TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA FOOTBALL PLAYER EXPERIENCE**

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Capstone Project

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### **Dedications, Acknowledgments, and Gratitude**

“There follows after me today a youth whose feet must pass this way.  
This chasm that has been as naught to me, to that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;  
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim; Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!”  
– Will Allen Dromgoole

The inspiration for this project, and in many ways this doctoral pursuit, was always rooted in my own experience. After watching so many teammates struggle and wander, sorting through who they were becoming without sport, this endeavor was personal.

Too much of athlete identity research is done after the fact. Findings arrive too little, too late. The transition into life as a former player is incredibly difficult and uniquely experienced. Like Icarus, our wings allowed us to fly close to the sun, but only for a moment. Yet everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.

Ensuring that holistic player development is connected to the football player experience is imperative. Disconnect can leave the athlete feeling like they were on the losing end of a transaction. Too often resources and programming merely check boxes while guest speakers serve as recruiting theater. I do not believe these tactics should be considered human development. This project provides research tested perspectives and strategies to integrate holistic development within the football player experience.

To my wife and best friend Demetria, thank you for sharing this journey with me. Your love, patience, grace, and affirmation allowed me to see this quest to the finish line. The life we are building together is my greatest accomplishment.

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To UCF football players and staff, thank you. Your voice alone made this project meaningful. It was my privilege to hear your story.

To Dr. C. Keith Harrison, thank you. Your energy, drive, and advocacy allowed me to overcome more obstacles than I can count.

Lastly, to my teammates past, present, and future, thank you. When I count my blessings, I count our time together twice.

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## **Abstract**

The University of Central Florida (UCF) football program consists of approximately 115 players, 11 full time coaches, and 30 support staff members. In conjunction with Knights Leadership Academy, UCF football provides student athletes the opportunity to acquire the “skills, knowledge, and experience to be confident and independent leaders in all areas of their lives.”

With less than 2% of college football players going on to a professional playing career, transitioning to life as a former player is inevitable. When playing careers conclude, athletes must reconcile their athletic journey with the uncertainty of their future self. Preparing football student athletes for life after sport is a primary duty of the program.

Connecting holistic player development to the football player experience remains challenging. Failure can perpetuate a false narrative of athletic talent exchanged for short-term on-field performance.

Using a hybrid sequential coding process, document analysis and qualitative interviews across three distinct sample populations revealed five key findings:

1. Players regularly experience diverse and personally unique disorienting dilemmas.
2. Individual player frames of reference are developed through personal experience and highly influenced by relationships.
3. The UCF football experience provides a sense of community for players and staff including various benefits and costs.
4. Existing player development and support strategy passively relies on access and availability in providing resources and broad programming.

5. The player experience shapes long term perspectives. Methods and strategies supporting off the field learning remain primitive.

Deductions from the findings of this project and extant literature recommend (a) integrating a proactive player development and learning strategy, (b) facilitating and chronicling individual exploration of frames of reference for players, coaches, and staff, (c) leveraging the already present design and influence of small groups, (d) exploring, adapting, and integrating research proven methods to support learning on and off the field, and (e) developing and providing resource and mentorship systems supporting transitions from football playing careers.

Building upon the values and investment made by Knights Leadership Academy, this quality improvement project aspires to support and evolve the University of Central Florida football program as a transformational learning experience and exemplar for holistic athlete development.

## **Area of Inquiry**

### *University of Central Florida Football*

Founded in 1963, the University of Central Florida (UCF) is a public research university primarily based in Orlando, Florida. With over 70,000 students, UCF perennially ranks as one of the largest public universities in the United States. The University's athletic program, nicknamed the Knights, offers 15 different varsity sports teams competing primarily in the Division I American Athletic Conference. Beginning in 2023, the Knights will begin competing in the Big XII Conference. UCF is a member institution of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) that serves as the college athletics governing body committed to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes.

Since their inception in 1979 at the Division III level, UCF's football program has ascended into a household Division I brand. In total, the Knights have compiled 278 total victories, six division titles, six conference championships, and an undefeated 2017 season. The Knights have appeared in 13 postseason bowl games highlighted by victories in the 2014 Fiesta Bowl and 2018 Peach Bowl. The Fiesta Bowl and Peach Bowl are both New Year's Six bowl games annually featuring the best teams in NCAA Division I football.

UCF Football is currently lead by head coach Gus Malzahn. Coach Malzahn completed his initial season in 2021 with a 9-4 overall record punctuated by a victory over the University of Florida in the Gasparilla Bowl. The current Knights program consists of approximately 115 players, 11 full-time coaches, and 30 support staff. Coaches and support staff members bring a diverse set of backgrounds, experiences, and expertise in serving the football program.

In support of UCF Athletics, Knights Leadership Academy drives the holistic development of all student athletes with specific emphasis on personal growth, career or

professional development, leadership development, and community outreach initiatives. Knights Leadership Academy's stated vision reads, "...to prepare each student athlete with the skills, knowledge, and experience to be confident and independent leaders in all areas of their lives." Knights Leadership Academy emphasizes critical thinking through discussion in a diverse and inclusive environment across the various programs or experiences provided. Knights Leadership Academy staff includes four full-time staff members specifically devoted to serving the core mission for student athletes.

#### *Area of Inquiry*

Participation in college athletics is reserved for a small fraction of those able or interested. According to the 2018-2019 High School Athletics Participation Survey conducted by the NCAA, less than 3% of high school football players go on to compete at the Division I level (NCAA, 2020). Additionally, less than 2% of college football players go on to any level of professional career (NCAA, 2020). Transitioning to life as a former player is inevitable. After leaving behind the ephemeral stage and experience of college athletics, athletes must reconcile the realities of their athletic journey with the uncertainty of their future self. Interpretation and application of college athletic participation can be challenging to comprehend. I believe participation in college athletics and the forged athlete identity can serve as a force for good, emboldening former athletes to become positive contributors to society. UCF Head Football Coach Gus Malzahn shared his interpretation of holistic player development during his introductory press conference stating, "I'm going to get coaches that will be great examples for our players. What a great dad looks like. What a great husband looks like. I also told our players I'm going to get coaches that truly care about them as a person and invest in their life, not just

football. I believe when I had coaches that truly cared about me, they got the most out of me” (UCF Knights, 2021).

The NCAA explicitly aims to support student athletes in maximizing their college experience achieving success in both the athletic arena and the classroom. The NCAA’s mission statement includes language describing graduation as the pinnacle of the college experience. Furthermore, the NCAA publicly applauds themselves based upon college athlete graduation rates. Seemingly an unintended consequence of reasonably valid thinking, what gets measured gets managed when it comes to college athlete graduation rates. Most of the effort regarding athlete well-being speaks to physical and mental safety standards and regulations. The NCAA struggles to acknowledge the self-discovery journey of college athletes.

As the body of research has increased in recent decades, so too has the emphasis for personal development support for student athletes (Student Athlete Development Task Force, 2022). Contemporary strategies for football player development often fall under the purview of the Student Athlete Welfare and Development Department or similarly charged departments. Although student athlete support services existed in the 1980s, the NCAA issued a specific call to action in 1991 focusing specialized programming on holistic development and life skills, including academic excellence, athletic excellence, personal development, career development, and community service (Murdock, 2010). This programming has evolved in recent decades to emphasizing the student athlete experience, student athlete time demands, and preparing student athletes for life after sport (Student Athlete Development Task Force, 2022). In 2014, the NCAA merged with the National Association of Academic and Student Athlete Development Professionals to provide life skills development and programming guidance (Student Athlete Development Task Force, 2022). These departments often exist outside of the physical structures



and everyday life of a football program. Due to a variety of reasons ranging from head coach disinterest to overwhelming time constraints, expertly crafted development experiences or resources often fall short of their potential impact.

Responsibly investing in athlete development is predominantly a local issue for athletic programs. Intercollegiate athletic programs may choose to allocate time and resources to athlete development at their own discretion. The NCAA bylaw governing this aspect of the student athlete experience simply reads, “An institution shall be required to conduct a life skills program on its campus” (2017). Division I football programs, typically the sport with the greatest resources, often maintain personnel or resources attributed to athlete development although role interpretations and responsibilities vary significantly. Examples within a university system may include departments such as student athlete welfare and development, life skills, student athlete enhancement, or student athlete engagement. Some football programs, distinct from other sports at the same institution, have staff members with titles such as Director of Player Development. Additionally, some programs maintain external relationships for specific programming such as drug and alcohol education, mental performance training, financial planning, or clinical support. This lack of coherent vision or practical strategy for athlete development potentially limits the opportunity for long-term impact in the lives of the players. Notably, this causes college football coaches to question the relevance or correlation between development efforts and the on-field performance coaches are judged upon.

The prevailing strategy in Division I football prepares athletes for a working career after college. Most efforts include an infrastructure of networking and fundamental job readiness training such as resume building and mock interviews. Although career readiness remains an important starting point, the looming challenges many players experience extend well beyond

having a job alone and demand more thoughtful design strategies as current players become former players. Most college football players navigate a narrowed experience prioritizing sport participation often at the consequence of personal development (Beamon, 2012). Development beyond career readiness must also consider the basic skills and abilities required to contribute as a member of society.

Existing research on athlete career transitions chiefly examines athlete identity in retrospect, often resulting from negative outcomes. Research demonstrates athletes navigating retirement from sport are more likely to engage in risky behavior including alcoholism, unanticipated pregnancies, trouble with law enforcement, and generally diminished athlete mental health (Cadigan et al., 2012). Many athletes undergo a grieving process while making sense of who they are becoming. This struggle can be symptomatic of athletes facing uncertainty in their identity independent of their lifelong role and association with organized sport (Brewer & Petipas, 2017).

Failure to connect holistic player development to the football player experience can perpetuate a false narrative of athletic talent exchanged for short-term on-field performance. This can position the player as the long-term loser and the institution as the long-term winner. This perception often leaves athletes incapable of understanding who they have become while facing their inevitable transition out of playing careers. Student athletes operate within the care of the organization for a finite period. This project aspires to explore the football athlete experience at the University of Central Florida and deliver a practical and integrated framework for meaningful holistic player development.

*Knights Leadership Academy*

UCF Athletics relies heavily on the vision and expertise of Knights Leadership Academy for holistic athlete development. Knights Leadership Academy drives developmental programming strategy responsive to the college environment and athlete experience. Staff from Knights Leadership Academy coupled with athletic training, compliance, and academic departments, collaborate for programming design. Although each department remains closely connected with each team's coaching staff, no coaches appeared to be profoundly involved in this process. The current design of Knights Leadership Academy generally aligns with Head Football Coach Gus Malzahn's coaching philosophy in prioritizing and investing in holistic student athlete development. Coach Malzahn frames his core philosophy around building authentic relationships with his players stating, "I really try to take the business side out, and really focus on the personal relationship... Kids these days... you have to have that personal relationship with them to get the most out of them and make them the best they can be" (UCF Knights, 2021). Knights Leadership Academy equally aims to "...prepare each student athlete with the skills, knowledge, and experience to be confident and independent leaders in all areas of their lives" (Knights Leadership Academy, 2022).

The four full-time staff members of the Knights Leadership Academy serve the needs of approximately 450 UCF athletes across 15 different sports. Professional development themes include mock interviews, networking events, and professional dress etiquette. Personal and leadership development efforts integrate a more discussion-based programming featuring critical thinking discussions and breakout rooms with small groups. Development efforts generally aim to avoid lecture-based experiences. Florida state law requires certain development content including campus resources, medical and wellness training, or name, image, and likeness

training. Feedback is typically conducted through convenience sampling by informally soliciting student athlete perspectives following programming. Leadership development programming corresponds with NCAA guidebook recommendations.

Program design typically operates on an annual cycle targeting specific audiences based on student athlete class designation. For example, incoming freshmen receive training related to transitioning into the college environment while outgoing seniors engage in career related opportunities. Programming attendance historically suffered from limited buy-in from football leadership or timing conflicts. Beginning in 2022 for UCF football players, attendance is required for all Knights Leadership Academy programming.

Knights Leadership Academy provides ample resources and opportunities for UCF football players to grow. Integrated design and distributed learning across influential roles closest to the players could allow for greater long-term impact and utilization of the resources available.

### *Research Purpose*

This project investigates the nature of holistic player development in the University of Central Florida football program. Stakeholders in the process include current, former, and future student athletes, coaches, staff and administration, the UCF campus community, and the broader college football and athletic community. Providing empirically supported methods and frameworks to navigate the evolving athlete experience will provide long-term benefits to the athletes themselves, the current coaching and support staff, and the organizational culture. Building upon the preexisting values and investments made by Knights Leadership Academy, this research project aspires to support and evolve the University of Central Florida football program as a transformational experience and exemplar for holistic athlete development.

## **Research Synthesis**

### *Athlete Identity Research*

Research depicts athlete identity as an individual's sense of self derived from participating and performing in athletics. Several studies found that athlete identity formation often begins early in life through continual reinforcement from familial and social circles (Beamon, 2012; Webb et al., 1998). Research also points to the psychological benefits of association with a larger group-based identity as exchanged for personal liberties and psychosocial growth opportunities (Brewer & Petipas, 2017; Stets & Burke, 2000). Brewer and Petipas (2017) refer to this phenomenon as athlete identity foreclosure where an athlete overwhelmingly invests time and energy into their sporting career limiting their remaining capacity for exploratory behavior, thus hampering their ability to develop a sense of self-identity. Participation in sport often requires immense time commitment, provides approval from peers, and offers other intrinsic and extrinsic rewards based off athletic accomplishment (Brewer & Petipas, 2017). Consequently, these perks suggest that athletes may not realize the need for exploratory behavior since their needs for competency and relatedness are being fulfilled (Brewer & Petipas, 2017). Several studies describe many aspects of athlete identity as impossible to replicate long term, including public recognition, physical fitness, physical self-esteem, and inclusion or association in a social group or team part of a larger institution, time commitments, and other intrinsic or extrinsic rewards (Brewer & Petipas, 2017; Fuller, 2004; Webb et al., 1998).

Being the largest demographic in college athletics, African American athletes are disproportionately affected in retiring athlete identities as confirmed by research literature. One in nine African American students on majority white campuses are on athletic scholarship as

compared to one in 50 white American students (Harrison and Lawrence, 2003). Studies point to deeply embedded racial identity factors enhancing the difficulty of athletic career retirement (Beamon, 2012; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Jay & Brown, 2021). Identity for African American males is often associated with athletics and perceived options in life after sport (Beamon, 2012; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003). Beamon (2012) suggests racial identity and athletics can be intertwined on physical build alone where being “big and black” shapes an implicit path to athletics and “a way to make it.” This perceived opportunity creates harmful suggestions that big and black men could not otherwise make it without athletics, often going as far as suggesting lesser intelligence (Beamon, 2012).

#### *Athlete Identity in Transition*

Research on athlete career retirement and the subsequent identity consequences has gained influence and support in recent decades. Multiple studies acknowledge athletics as a primary reason for college attendance with the bulk of the experience designed to function within team norms limiting consideration of possible future selves (Beamon, 2012; Brewer & Petipas, 2017; Lally, 2007). Lally (2007) portrays this identity narrowing resulting from engulfment by the athlete identity thereby limiting exploration of academic and social identities. Similar studies recommend athletes develop coping strategies as they navigate abrupt context shifts in their self-concept often including sentiments of loss or grieving (Fuller, 2004; Hand & Gresalfi, 2015; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Lally, 2007). Supporting these findings, researchers suggest the athlete’s already lived experience creates the best coping strategies (Bergman et al., 2020; Harrison, 2003).

Research examining athlete identity transitions into post-playing careers often provides supportive perspectives where practical recommendations arrive too little, too late. Studies

acknowledge potential challenges of identity transitions ranging from risky behavior to disassociation from a social community (Beamon, 2012; Brewer et al., 1993; Cadigan et al., 2012; Fuller, 2004; Hand & Gresalfi, 2015; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Webb et al., 1998). One study found identity labeling in a sample population of incarcerated individuals having significant effects on prisoner self-efficacy and likelihood for long-term success (Lerman and Sadin, 2022). Multiple athlete identity studies viewed labeling as equally dangerous, reporting the increased difficulty of retirement due to the requisite compliance from others, release from prior demands and expectations, and lacking prior consideration of other possible selves (Beamon, 2012; Webb et al. 1998).

Given the diverse contexts affecting athlete identity, operational interpretations, and general proclivity of contemporary research to examine athlete identity after career retirement, Larnell (2016) points out in his exploration of African American mathematics identities how identity may become a problematic construct for this research pursuit. Larnell (2016) describes identity research as a vaguely defined slippery construct where too little consideration is provided to how preexisting narratives inform identity and how various identities are determined relevant. Baldwin further frames this perspective warning, “The solution is not, to my mind, to present these people as they see themselves or as they are; we must be enabled to see them as they have been or as they might become; otherwise, we merely judge them as specimens and feel nothing for them as human beings” (1966). Consistent with Larnell’s (2016) recommendation, identity must exceed a single statement or label to avoid reifying athletes as certain kinds of persons, assuming meanings and behaviors, and raising unwelcome or unnecessary barriers or contingencies to overcome.

### *Transformational Learning Theory*

Multiple studies reveal the intersection of identity and learning as a joint accomplishment manifested by engagement in an environment and an individual's evolving perspective (Donaldson, 2009; Hand & Gresalfi, 2015; Larnell, 2016). Similar studies further suggest the critical nature of autonomous and responsible thinking in shifting environments (Hand & Gresalfi, 2015; Mezirow, 1997, 2009). Transformational learning theory provides a cyclical framework with practical methods to support evolving frames of reference allowing individuals to make sense of their own experience in pursuit of autonomous thinking (Mezirow, 1997, 2009; Taylor, 2009).

Transformational learning theory could allow designers of the athlete experience to maximize holistic development opportunities while remaining thoughtfully adaptable to the evolving needs of the athlete. Transformational learning theory research and similar studies support long-term benefits procured from critical reflection of experience and the ability to synthesize information to enhance perspectives (Brewer & Petipas, 2017; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Mezirow, 1997, 2009). Research explains this cyclical process as characterized by an initial disorienting dilemma, experimentation and inquiry, and an evolving perspective ultimately integrated into the individuals heightened frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997, 2009; Nohl, 2015; Taylor, 2009). Transformative learning theory builds upon transformative logic where initial ruptures in one's knowing context spark perspective dilemmas (Loder, 1981, as cited in Mezirow, 1991). A disorienting dilemma represents experiences that illuminate and challenge our prior assumptions shaping our perspectives on ourselves and our world (Brookfield, 2012). Mezirow describes meaning as an interpretation bringing coherence to experience (Mezirow, 1991). Disorienting dilemmas present differently for individuals challenging meaning and prior



assumptions according to the specific individual (Lawrence, 2012). Malkki (2012) provides a non-athletics related example examining disorienting dilemmas for women navigating involuntary childlessness. Malkki (2012) found that facilitated reflection can support meaning-making through a chaotic situation where meaning was previously unattainable with existing frameworks. Another tragic example may include police brutality where citizens reflect on the irreconcilable contradiction between trust in established institutions for public safety and the rule of law in comparison to wrongful injury or even death caused by the same institution. These disorienting dilemmas serve as a forcing function triggering a process of self-examination and deeper scrutiny of previously stable assumptions and beliefs (Johnson-Bailey, 2012; Willis, 2012). When assumptions or premises become distorted, inauthentic, or invalidated, reflective learning becomes transformative leading to evolved meaning schemes or perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). Research proves transformational learning theory as keenly adept at processing the weight of an athlete's unique experience and variable disorienting dilemmas beginning the transformative learning journey (Mezirow, 1997, 2009; Wilson, 2020).

Transformational learning theory resembles similar evolving learning and development theoretical frameworks including the transtheoretical model for change (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997), self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2020), and the myth-based framework of the hero's journey (Campbell, 1949). DeSapio (2017) recently scrutinized transformational learning theory for lacking practical application within the literature. Lacking consistency and alternative definitions for transformational learning theory hinder repeatability for some critics (DeSapio, 2017). Critics calling for definitional clarity on transformational learning as opposed to non-transformational learning seem to have lost sight of the individual experience within their commentary. Various disciplines have taken the basic transformational learning framework and

tailored the process to fit their specific needs. In the four plus decades since Mezirow first introduced transformational learning theory, the theory itself has navigated disorienting dilemmas with critical reflection and evolved to become more inclusive and discriminating. Critics also frequently point out a limited discussion regarding application of transformational learning theory (DeSapio, 2017). Application seems vaguer given the lack of universal definitions; however, multiple researchers have presented a variety of methods to explore their interpretation of the transformational learning theoretical framework navigating from disorienting dilemmas through critical reflection to new knowledge and an evolved perspective. Methods including but not limited to small group experiences, journaling, concept mapping, metaphor analysis, reflective writing, case studies, and action learning have also evolved through decades of implementation (Dirkx and Smith, 2009; Langan et al., 2009; Mezirow and Associates, 1990).

#### *Designing and Facilitating a Transformational Learning Experience*

In designing a learning environment for transformational holistic athlete growth, research clarifies the need for space to reflect, consider, and interpret experiences as a precedent for integration or learning (Mezirow, 1997, 2009; Taeger, 2019). The core concepts of transformational learning theory include individual experience, dialogue, critical reflection, holistic orientation, contextual awareness, and authentic practice (Mezirow, 1997, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Multiple studies support the educative quality of disorienting or discomfoting experiences as a spark to learner readiness and deeper reflection consistent with what John Dewey (1916) refers to as “productive struggle” (Cox, 2015; Murdoch et al., 2020; Theeboom et al. 2017). Research models in military and human resource contexts integrate similar thinking (Bergman et al., 2020; Brooks, 2004). Bergman et al. (2020) detail how military students in

higher education can utilize prior learning assessments to bridge the gap in understanding and translating military competencies into civilian application. By mapping and comparing initial meaning perspectives with later meaning perspectives, Brooks (2004) identifies a heightened conscious awareness in applying transformational learning theory to business management and leadership.

Research suggests several best practices consistent with fostering a transformational learning environment including but not limited to critical reflection, discourse, metaphor analysis, narrative analysis, context specific training or interventions, exposure to mentor or relevant exemplars, mindfulness, and roleplaying (Butterwick and Lawrence, 2009; Cadiga et al., 2012; Donaldson, 2009; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Larnell, 2016; Mezirow, 1997; Slavich and Zimbardo, 2012; Taeger, 2019; Taylor, 2009; Theeboom et al., 2017). These methods suggest vast improvements beyond teaching by telling while supporting a richer exploration of experience and life perspectives through a connected theoretical framework (Mezirow, 1997; Taeger, 2019; Taylor, 2009).

#### *Role of the Coach or Facilitator*

Multiple studies draw parallels between coaching and transformative learning research defining the coach as a movement facilitator through a self-regulatory learning process in pursuit of sustained wellness (Mandell and Herman, 2009; Sammut, 2014; Sokol and Cranton, 1998; Theeboom et al., 2017). Applying transformational learning theory continually prioritizes the role of the coach or educator as a provocateur modeling the critically reflective and collaborative learning practice within established environmental norms (Mezirow, 1997; Slavich and Zimbardo, 2012).

Following a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1990) or triggering event (Sokol and Cranton, 1998), learners go through several general phases of transformation including self-examination of feelings and perspectives, a critical assessment of assumptions, and planning a course towards reintegration and perspective evolution (Cox, 2015). Multiple researchers propose the facilitator's role in transformative learning is to challenge preexisting ideological assumptions through alternative discourses and interaction-based learning opportunities (Langan et al., 2009; Mezirow, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Disorienting dilemmas provide the spark for constructive teaching and learning in the form of relationships, group collaboration, reflection, engagement, and caring (Dirkx and Smith, 2009; Langan et al., 2009; Taylor, 2009). This meaning-making process ignites a critical examination of assumptions, exploring and trying new options or perspectives, and ultimately building self-confidence reintegrating the new perspectives (Mezirow, 2009; Taylor, 2009).

### **Conceptual Framework**

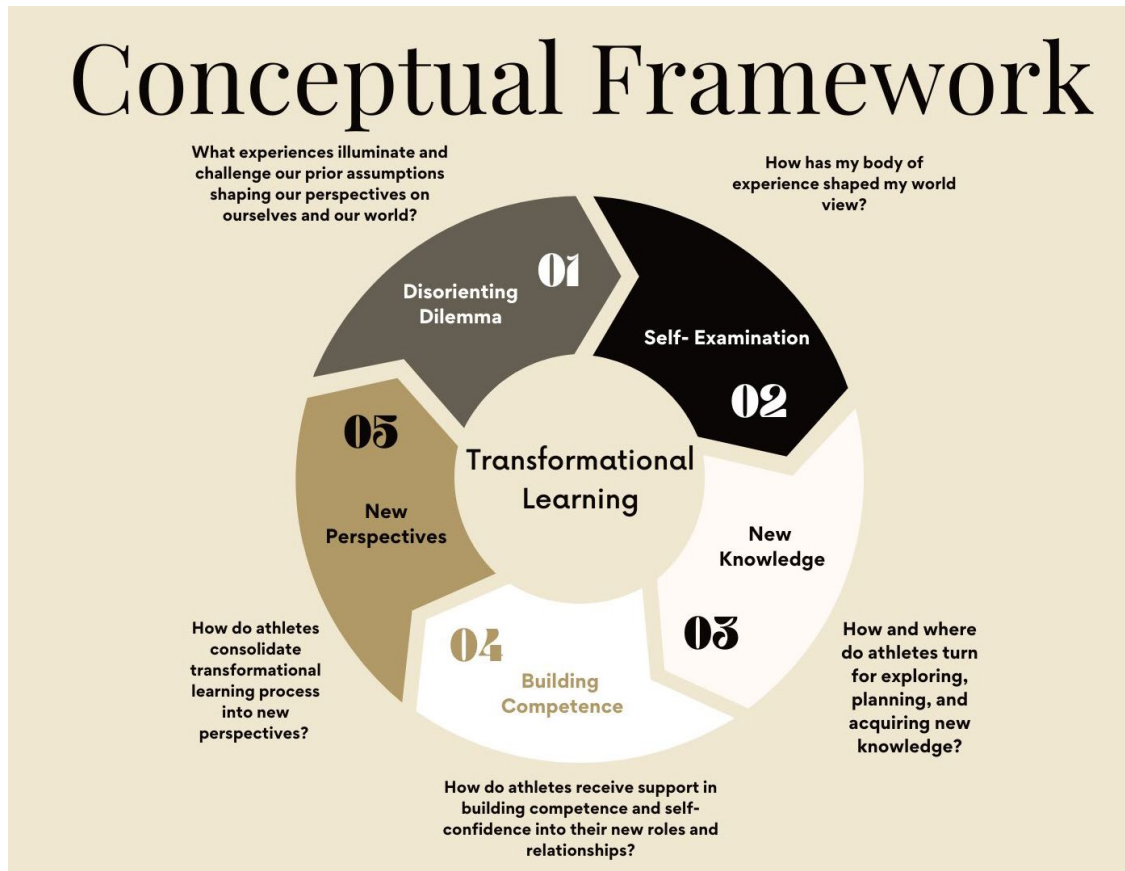
The purpose of this project is to increase the capacity of the UCF college football program to provide a transformational player learning experience. Many compelling theories were examined in preparation for this research including athlete identity theory, social identity theory, and situated identity theory. Although these theories were useful in understanding the college football player experience and athlete identity formation, Jack Mezirow's transformational learning theory (1978) best provides an adaptable framework with practically integrated methods to serve the evolving needs of college football players. The identity theories examined inform the unique lived experiences and challenges athletes face while transformational learning theory offers a model for players to make sense of their experiences. The transformational learning process is designed to allow for more robust consideration

pursuing deeper understanding in individuals. The conceptual framework below is designed to narrow the scope of the literature synthesized to identify opportunities and provide possible methods consistent with transformational learning theory to enhance the UCF football player experience.

Transformational learning theory provides a cyclical process for athletes to identify disruptions in their current perspectives, examine their perspectives and the nature of the disruption, and advance their perspectives. Figure 1 below illustrates this cyclical learning process. Transformational learning theory could support athletes navigating the potentially treacherous transition out of athletic playing careers. The transformational learning journey could serve athletes well beyond the finite years of their athletic experience supporting long term athlete wellness. By examining current players, former players, and current staff, this project hopes to raise the level of awareness for the adapted five primary phases of transformational learning including disorienting dilemmas, self-examination, new knowledge, building competence, and forming new perspectives.

This project's methodology was designed to explore each of the five primary phases of transformational learning in the lives of college football players. By examining the college football player experience from various perspectives, this study hopes to reveal how the designers of the college football player experience can more thoughtfully support and provide for transformational player learning. Increased transformational learning can instill a sustainable, long-term strategy for college football players to make sense of their evolving identities, experiences, and perspectives.

Figure 1 – Transformational Learning Cycle (Mezirow, 1978)



## Research Questions

This project utilized qualitative methods including virtual interviews and document analysis to answer the following research questions:

1. How do coaches and staff facilitate transformational learning?
2. What further strategies, resources, or training may support coaches and staff in facilitating a transformational learning player experience?

## **Data Collection**

Document analysis and informal qualitative interviews occurred during the initial relationship building process with UCF football and Knights Leadership Academy. This initial phase lent greater understanding of the broader environment for the University of Central Florida athletic program, the role of Knights Leadership Academy, and the process for serving student athletes beyond football itself. Preliminary information gathered helped scope the project challenges and sharpened focus on opportunities for further inquiry. This process informed the research question design in conjunction with the theoretical framework. The following sections detail the data collection and analysis methods employed.

### *Data Collected - Qualitative Interviews*

Individual experience, what a learner brings to and experiences within the environment, serves as a starting point for discourse and self-examination (Taylor, 2009). More life experience lends a deeper well for individuals to reflect upon (Taylor, 2009). With this in mind, interview protocols were developed specific to each of the three sample populations. Interview questions were designed to explore the UCF football experience relative to the adapted five phases of the transformational learning cycle. Questions were specifically crafted to consider how the UCF football experience prepares student athlete meaning-making capacities in their inevitable life after competition. Interview questions used for current players are broken down relative to each adapted phase of the transformational learning cycle below in Table 1. Comprehensive interview protocols including the introductory language used uniformly across sample populations can be found in Appendix A. Fifteen interviews were conducted over the course of three weeks. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes conducted over Zoom. Interview recordings were

later uploaded into Otter.ai software for transcription. These interviews comprise the primary data collected for the project.

*Table 1 – Current Player Interview Questions*

Transformational Learning Cycle Phase	Self-Examination	Disorienting Dilemmas	New Knowledge	Building Competence	Learning Consolidation
Key Concepts	How has the athlete's body of experience shaped their world view?  Critical Reflection, Frames of Reference, Point of View	What experiences illuminate and challenge prior assumptions shaping athlete perspectives?  Disorienting Dilemma, Critical Reflection, Frames of Reference, Point of View	How and where do athletes turn for exploring, planning, and acquiring new knowledge?  Critical Reflection, Practically Integrated Methods	How do athletes receive support in building competence and self-confidence in their new roles and relationships?  Critical Reflection, Practically Integrated Methods, Frames of Reference, Point of View	How do athletes consolidate transformational learning into new perspectives?  Transformational Learning, Critical Reflection, Frames of Reference, Point of View
Interview Questions	Biographical warmup - Please briefly tell me a little about yourself. What's your name? Where are you from? What position do you play? What are you studying?  Before being a player here at UCF, what experiences have been or continue to be critically important in who you are as a person?  Before being a player here at UCF, what people have been or continue to be critically important in who you are as a person?  How have these experiences and people shaped your perspective on life?	In your current experience here at UCF, what have been some of the biggest challenges related to football?  In your current experience here at UCF, what have been some of the biggest challenges not related to football?  What about your current experience here at UCF has most exceeded your expectations coming in?  What about your current experience here at UCF has most fallen short of your expectations coming in?	When you encounter a challenging football experience, how do your coaches or staff help you learn from that experience?  When you encounter a challenging experience not related to football, how do your coaches and staff help you learn from that experience?  How have your coaches helped you frame or think about your expectations from UCF?  How do your coaches help you explore, plan, or acquire new knowledge in response to these challenging experiences or expectations?	How have you asked for, found, or felt supported in developing your own support systems?  What resources or forms of support are most available or most useful to you here at UCF?  What forms of support have been missing from your personal development? How has this shaped the choices you are making for yourself?	How has your football experience here at UCF, the challenges you have faced and dealt with, and the support you have received or not received, shaped your current perspective?  How has your experience not related to football, the challenges you have faced and dealt with, and the support you have received or not received, shaped your current perspective?  How would you describe your football experience as preparing you for the rest of your life? What experiences or lessons learned specifically illustrate this idea?

*Participant Breakdown*

Three distinct sample populations were interviewed including current UCF football players, former UCF football players retired within the last five seasons, and current staff. The data collected includes six current football athletes, seven recently retired football athletes, and two staff members. One staff member is primarily in athletics administration while the other serves a hybrid role devoted exclusively to football with both coaching and player development responsibilities. Although their roles differ, both staff members are primary drivers in the design and execution of existing player development strategy for UCF football players. The sample population distributions including brief demographic information are further detailed below.



*Table 2 – Current Player Sample Population*

NAME	CLASS	ETHNICITY	POSITION	NOTES
Current Player 1	Senior (Sixth Year)	Caucasian	Defensive Line	
Current Player 2	Junior	African American	Defensive Line	Team Captain
Current Player 3	Senior (Sixth Year)	Multiple	Offensive Line	Team Captain
Current Player 4	Senior	African American	Linebacker	Team Captain
Current Player 5	Senior	Pacific Islander	Offensive Line	
Current Player 6	Senior (Sixth Year)	Caucasian	Special Teams	Team Captain

The UCF football team consists of 115 total active players. This aggregate number supports a diverse environment and experience often influenced by various subgroups such as race, academic class designation, and positional groupings. Although the six players interviewed constitute approximately 5% of the total current player population, each interview participant represented their own unique life experiences, was an upper classman with several years of experience in the program, and held prominent roles on the team. Four of the six current players interviewed serve as team captains.

*Table 3 – Former Player Sample Population*

NAME	YEARS PLAYED	ETHNICITY	POSITION
Former Player 1	2014 - 2017	African American	Offensive Line
Former Player 2	2013 - 2017	Caucasian	Offensive Line
Former Player 3	2014 - 2018	Caucasian	Special Teams
Former Player 4	2014 - 2018	African American	Wide Receiver
Former Player 5	2012 - 2016	African American	Linebacker
Former Player 6	2013 - 2016	African American	Running Back
Former Player 5	2017 - 2018	African American	Tight End

Former players interviewed participated in the UCF football program for various terms ranging from the 2013 to 2018 seasons. All former players interviewed overlapped with each other at one point in time. Each former player brought forth a diverse set of perspectives distinguished by their football career including but not limited to playing experience, specific coach relationships, overcoming injuries, or life events. This period in UCF football spanned three different head coaches. As is common in college football, this also speaks to three different sets of assistant coaches and three different organizational cultures.

*Table 4 – Staff Sample Population*

NAME	YEARS AT UCF	ETHNICITY	POSITION
Staff 1	2021 - 2022	African American	Knights Leadership Academy, UCF Athletics
Staff 2	2021 - 2022	African American	Player Development, UCF Football

Both staff members interviewed began working with the UCF football program in 2021. Both are African American males. Both have spent the bulk of their careers working in athletics. Their experience includes working with sports other than football, working at the high school athletics level, working for institutions other than UCF, and working in general business outside of athletics altogether. Both staff members were brought to UCF by current UCF athletics and football leadership. Both staff members have experience in athlete development curriculum and mentorship. Neither staff member had experience working for UCF prior to 2021.

### *Data Collection Challenges*

This project initially aspired to interview ten or more participants in each of the three sample populations. Unfortunately, communication and cooperation from the partner organization made completing the IRB approval process more complicated than initially expected. Staff turnover within the Knights Leadership Academy left remaining personnel and processes unclear regarding outside partnerships. This confusion and the corresponding administrative obstacles mired the project's progress for approximately two months. This lengthy delay forced the window for data collection into conflict with the football program's preseason training camp for the 2022 season. Competing with training camp cannibalized any opportunity to reach the initial interview goals. More specifically, this delay greatly diminished the ability to speak with coaches or staff members as desired.

The initial participant recruitment strategy utilized a convenience sampling strategy. Given the precedence of internal policy and oversight during the project approval process, expectations for additional oversight and collaboration securing interview participants were equally high. Unfortunately, UCF personnel was only able to broker a connection with one current player and one former player to recruit for interviews. After interviewing these two

participants, continued progress for the project demanded a snowball sampling strategy that proved fruitful. Each remaining interview concluded with an open request for additional participant recommendations. After having established rapport and credibility with an interview participant, recommendations and new participants willing to participate became readily available.

#### *Data Analysis Process*

Data analysis consisted of a hybrid sequential approach using both inductive and deductive coding. Inductive coding, deriving coding themes from the data itself, was used during the first and second phases of the process. Data was first organized by interview participant within each of the three sample populations. Memo notes were made to lay foundation for a coherent deductive coding process to follow later. The intent of each memo note was to identify the primary themes within each response. Following the individualized process of phase one, the second phase aggregated interview responses into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for each sample population sorted by interview question. By exploring the data filtered through two different angles, by participant and by question, recurring themes solidified for deductive coding. Phase three of the data analysis implemented deductive coding, applying predefined codes to the qualitative data, parsing the data into the five stages of the adapted transformational learning cycle.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Phase One*

Memo notes were intended to be an initial consideration for basic insight. Notes were considered exclusively within the confines of each individual interview. Notes were made in the margins identifying themes within participant responses. Although every interview included nearly identical questions, each question was open-ended by design leaving space for participants to take the dialogue in a direction of their choosing. Notes covered a wide variety of concepts and themes including but not limited to relationships, family upbringing, sense of belonging, mentors, degree completion, playing experience, external and internal pressure, coping mechanisms, etc. These notes were intended to avoid bias by other interview responses and simply seek understanding. This initial examination laid the groundwork for the second phase of analysis.

### *Phase Two*

The second phase of data analysis sorted interview responses by sample population within a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Phase two sought to identify common themes within a particular sample population. Although interview questions were originally constructed to follow the adapted five stages of the transformational learning cycle, participant responses each took a unique narrative journey. This phase revealed keen insights into each sample population on the UCF football experience.

Current players typically offered brief and surface level responses to the self-examination questions. Responses were thoughtful but generally lacked the depth found in other sample populations. These results were consistent with both the literature and project expectations given their youth and smaller body of experience compared to other sample populations. Current

players acknowledged family, coaches, and their overall upbringing as primary influences in their frame of reference. Regarding disorienting dilemmas, current players regularly referenced challenges constrained by their college experience including time management, pressure to perform, peer pressure, academic classes, and engagement with the UCF fan community. Interview responses demonstrated the narrowed perspective of current players likely resulting from overwhelming focus on UCF football participation. Current players seemed to grasp where to turn for support for common obstacles such as academics and general advice. When engaging coaches for support, challenges were often reframed relative to the immediate football tasks at hand. Building competency around new knowledge and consolidating learning followed similar arcs where the current football experience shaped lessons learned almost entirely. Relying upon the game itself as the only necessary or relevant teacher for life after ball could become highly problematic when real world obstacles beyond difficult classes and sports performance emerge. The opportunity to engage current players to explore greater depths of understanding in their current worlds seems evident.

Former player interviews demonstrated a greater depth of reflection and examination of their football careers. The sheer volume of words spoken during the self-examination interview portion appears approximately double to that of the current player population. This further reinforces Taylor's (2009) idea that more life experiences lead to a deeper well for reflection and learning. Like current players, former players acknowledged similar roles influencing their perspectives while adding additional depth for interpretation and application. Former players were able to identify discrepancies between the difficulty of their college football experience and the challenges they face as adults. Examples may include extreme physical exertion, maintaining

extraordinary standards of behavior, submitting to football coach behavior and guidance, and functioning in an environment with little autonomy.

It remains imperative to understand the perspectives of former players spanned several different head coaches and organizational cultures. For a population that enjoyed unprecedented on-field success at UCF, interview responses often suggested players felt used transactionally. Former players struggled to acknowledge feeling supported through player-coach relationships and were more inclined to describe their experience as a journey of self-discovery. Former players also identified peer support networks as primary and enduring solutions for grappling with disorienting dilemmas and building competence. Former players knew where to turn for support beyond their peers while at UCF consistent with current players. However, former players offered darker interpretations describing the culture of support as “win at all costs.” Former players often perceived support as dependent upon an individual’s worth to the team in competition. Occasionally, former players identified niche resources helping meet their needs such as academic services or student athlete welfare and development resources. In consolidating their learning experience into current perspectives, former players spoke to being forged by football often resulting from self-reliance and personal responsibility. UCF football provided abundant learning opportunities and personal exemplars, both good and bad, for former players to synthesize into their present perspectives.

Staff members shared both depth and application of life experiences. Reflecting on more life lived, staff members identified with how their individual experiences inform their current role in “serving” players. Staff interview questions examined perceptions on challenges facing UCF football players. Interpretations varied slightly while highlighting similar broad topics such as social, relational, identity, and belonging challenges.

Staff characterized participation in the UCF football experiences as familial. Staff felt confident in existing programming and available resources to fulfill player needs. Relying upon access and availability to a buffet of resources could prove insufficient as staff members acknowledged the internal difficulties common to male athletes in seeking support. Staff members reflected on the people and experiences helping consolidate learning and make sense of their world. This sentiment points to a potential opportunity for UCF football leaders to serve similarly moving forward.

Both current and former players identified a variety of disorienting dilemmas associated with the UCF football and college experience. These challenges included personal interpretations shaped by individual frames of reference. For both current and former players, areas of social development and emotional intelligence presented most often as disorienting dilemmas.

Each participant spoke with their own voice based upon their set of life experiences. All participants were able to acknowledge the influence of personal relationships in developing their frame of reference. For both current and former players, frames of reference were highly influenced by player-coach relationships.

In feeling supported for new knowledge, former players recognized an enduring sense of community shared with their teammates. For current players, support was primarily attributed to the external community surrounding UCF football while still acknowledging available support channels as needed.

Staff understood and identified with their role in designing, supporting, and facilitating holistic player growth. Staff spoke at length regarding the existing content provided by Knights Leadership Academy, feeling confident that current programming and other available resources fulfilled player needs. All participants acknowledged the difficulty players face in seeking



support. This was consistently attributed to common flaws perceived in the male athlete identity and sensitivity to outward appearances.

Lastly, the UCF football program currently utilizes several methods aligning with basic principles of transformational learning theory. These methods can serve as entry points for further integration enhancing player capacities to learn from their experiences.

### *Phase Three*

Inductive coding during the first two phases of data analysis revealed several recurring themes emerging across sample populations. These themes provided the material for deductive coding applying the project's conceptual framework. Phase three organized the data through the adapted five stages of the transformational learning cycle including self-examination, disorienting dilemmas, new knowledge, building competence, and new knowledge.

These major themes were sorted to inform key project findings. See Figure 2 below for more details.

Figure 2 – Data Analysis



## Findings

Document analysis and informal interviews established rapport with UCF staff enabling a basic understanding for current player development strategy and design. This process informed and scoped the area of inquiry to be examined.

Consistent with the conceptual framework and transformational learning cycle (See Figure 1), qualitative interview protocols were developed in considering transformational learning within the UCF football experience. Table 1 illustrates interview questions used with the current player sample population. Findings emerged through an iterative data analysis process. Inductive coding initially revealed key themes within the qualitative data. Deductive coding later clarified the findings based on the conceptual framework and the adapted five phases of the transformational learning cycle.

The five key findings aligned with my initial project questions and provided both evidence and direction to shape recommendations. Findings were also consistent with the literature investigated relating to athlete identity, athlete identity transitions, athlete identity foreclosure, and transformational learning theory. Each finding is supported with quotes from interview data emphasizing transformational learning, opportunities for future transformational learning, and existing opportunities or methods to expand and enhance.

The first finding affirms the relevance and utility of transformational learning theory within the UCF football experience. The second and third findings align with prior research illuminating how UCF football includes experiences and interpretations found nested within a sense of community and support. Findings four and five address the second project question in uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of existing player development strategy and design as well as opportunities for forward implementation.

## **Finding #1**

**Players regularly experience diverse and personally unique disorienting dilemmas. The UCF football experience is ripe with opportunity for transformational learning.**

One former player reflected on the differences between his performance mindset and romantic relationships sharing:

“I had a hard time differentiating between the performance mindset and relationship. Honestly, I don't think I really started to overcome that until I got married. Relationally I was very cold. I viewed women as only objects. Everything was performance based... I was still working through the emotional stuff that I was still trying to face and understand about myself. So relationally, I had a hard time. All the coping mechanisms that kind of started when I was a teenager started to grow worse in college. You add alcohol to the mix and that was a whole ‘nother beast.”

– Former Player

Both current and former players discussed understanding the discrepancy between their performance mindset and the average student on campus. Players are forced to reconcile these differences throughout their college experience frequently punctuated by social choices and behaviors.

College football participation presents a variety of disorienting dilemmas challenging player frames of reference. Current players discussed navigating numerous football specific challenges such as earning playing time, dealing with the pressure of competition, and overcoming injuries.

“You’ve got so much pressure when you’ve got so many people watching. You just want to make a play. You want to do the right thing and make everybody proud. The challenge

for me is just, like, trying to keep myself levelheaded. Because I feel like I get so much on myself. I challenged myself so much to work to the point where I'm nervous, I'm shaking, I got to pray to God, please help me to calm down to the point where I can just play the game.”

– Current Player

Players primarily identified areas of social development and emotional intelligence as common disorienting dilemmas unrelated to football. These challenges were depicted as negative consequences for their extraordinary commitment to football. Examples included maintaining a part-time job, living on their own for the first time, navigating relationships in a healthy manner, and engaging with peers independent of the football program.

“I paid my way through my undergrad program and a little bit of the program I’m in now... It was hard because I had a job, shoot, last summer I had two jobs, just because I wanted to make sure I had a good enough base.”

– Current Player

Another player shared the disorientation of living on his own at age 17 saying:

“Being here at 17 years old was a bit of a challenge from being home. Those type of people, once you leave home, you're on your own. It's kind of a hard process of, you know, getting to live on your own, how to budget, how to provide for yourself at that time. That was one of the hardest moments of leaving home at a young age and not having my parents up here with me.”

– Current Player

Both current and former players acknowledge their limited opportunity to participate in campus due to football obligations. One current player described this challenge saying:

“You're never around people for real. I think the challenge is trying to meet new people, and trying to try to like just like, make more contacts and relationships with other people. Because that's been hard. I literally only have like one class on campus. But I'm trying to meet new people, trying to get myself out there. But it's hard because right now you're trying to make a life, besides football, but you really don't have a life outside of football because you're here you're at the facility all day. You're at practice all day. You've got meetings. You don't really go see campus or walk around and meet new people. You want to meet new people. You don't want to see the same people every day. But it is what it is.”

– Current Player

Staff interviews spoke to the pressures and challenges common to college football and football student athletes. Staff added challenges specific to their roles including the difficulty and tension for coaches prioritizing between performance outcomes and supporting holistic player growth. This external pressure to perform creates job security related stress for staff.

“I think there's sometimes a barrier as far as our coaches understanding our athletes off the field, what they may go through. There's such a high pressure because this is a high-profile program. And there's so much pressure for these coaches to win. And [the coaches] are getting paid good money. I think sometimes understanding the kids' problems or issues off the field is a huge issue.”

– Staff Member

Ironically, this external pressure marginalizes staff willingness to invest in player-coach relationships beyond football. These challenges stand in conflict to Head Coach Gus Malzahn's coaching philosophy regarding player-coach relationship standards.

Everyone participating in the UCF football experience brings a personal set of life experiences. Understanding each individual's unique narrative, interpretations of their narrative, and how those coexist within the environment lays a strong foundation for caring relationships. Noddings's (1992) work surrounding the ethics of care demonstrates that care alone is insufficient if the recipient cannot acknowledge the care provided to them. Each interview conducted for this project clearly articulates a diverse set of needs experiences and needs. By considering each person's individuality, UCF football may achieve what Noddings (1992) describes as mature relationships characterized by mutuality where caring is a way of being in relation rather than a set of steps or behaviors to show care.

## **Finding #2**

**Individual player frames of reference are developed through personal experience and highly influenced by relationships.**

One former player described his discouragement and unwillingness to pursue staff for support stating:

“I didn't feel safe to share anything going on in my personal life with any of the first coaching staff, frankly, fuck them. I don't want any of them involved in my life outside of this game. But the other staff, I was able to go talk to the coaches. And sit down and be friends, kind of father figure vibes.”

– Former Player

Player-coach relationships greatly impact frames of reference for UCF players. For many, these relationships provided a working model for support and mentorship. Unfortunately, these relationships included both positive and negative examples.

Current players more regularly acknowledged a level of care felt from their coaching staff. One current player shared, “I know my coaching staff is there for me... Kind of like my parents. If it’s outside of football... I know I could call my coach if I was in a jam at 3 AM. And he’ll pick up... So, I would just say knowing that trust is there within us is a good thing.”

In contrast, former players were critical and skeptical of their coach relationships. Former player responses suggested limited trust and psychological safety during their experience. One former player simplified this perspective saying, “If I don’t ask them about football, I’m damn sure not asking them about non-related stuff.” Another former player described his interpretation saying, “I learned from those coaches what kind of coach I don’t want to be. And what I want to or what I don’t want to be remembered as.” Edmonson (1999) describes team psychological safety as the shared belief that interpersonal risk taking is safe within the team stemming from mutual respect and trust among team members.

Given the tremendous on-field success enjoyed by the former player population, this finding rebukes the notion that winning on the field correlates to player wellness or team psychological safety.

Each interview participant is the product of their own unique life experiences. Categorization of experiences, beliefs, people, and events help shape frames of reference (Mezirow, 2009). No two participants joined UCF football with identical experiences or backgrounds. Interview responses represented individual points of view. Additionally, interpretations and meaning varied significantly even when experiences appeared relatively



similar. Interview participants arrived at UCF from single parent homes, divorced homes, diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, diverse concepts of struggling or flourishing, different geographical and cultural backgrounds, and varying values systems. The sole thing every interview participant had in common was UCF football.

All participants acknowledged personal relationships helping shape their frame of reference. Of the fifteen interviews conducted, twelve participants acknowledged family members as primary influences. Eight of these participants explicitly acknowledged their father. One staff member attributed his current values system and frame of reference to the foundation instilled in him as a youth saying, “My foundation was built on the way I was raised, being God fearing, being respectful, and trying to be a pillar in my community.”

Eleven of the twelve influencers acknowledged outside of family were introduced through sports. These relationships played critical roles in helping individual participants make sense of their experiences. One former player reflected gratefully telling, “Those individuals laid a really solid foundation in me that there is more to life than football... As I grew up, I fell back on the foundation they laid for me, and it really made sense.”

Lastly, staff explicitly identified with their role in supporting holistic player growth through the current UCF football experience. One staff member characterized his role as “an opportunity to help somebody navigate through life.” Another staff member embraced his ability to identify with players as a Divine gift saying:

“99.9% of the young men on our team, I can relate to. I truly feel it’s a God gift. And an honor to be in this position, because I can relate to our kids... who come from poverty, single parent households, being abused as a child... I’ve seen it all.”

– Staff Member

This finding confirms previously discussed literature where individual frames of reference must be considered unique to each person. Seeking to understand how individuals derived their frame of reference and how that frame of reference exists within the context of the football experience could support increased team psychological safety.

### **Finding #3**

**The UCF football experience provides a sense of community for players and staff including various benefits and costs.**

One former player described the depth of his bond with his teammates telling:

“I was with those guys literally, 365 24/7 out of the year. They could tell when something wasn’t right. We could all tell when somebody’s feeling down or when someone is having a shitty day. It’s kind of just leaning on them. Them knowing how to make you laugh and how to make the situation better.”

– Former Player

Former players recognized a sense of small community developed with their teammates that has endured beyond playing careers. Former players frequently described participation in UCF football as creating a sense of “belonging” or “brotherhood.” This community served as a primary support mechanism for building competence and self-confidence.

Current players seemingly felt more affirmed by the external community surrounding UCF football. One current player described this affirmation sharing, “The fans and the atmosphere... if people know who you are, they’re going to come up to you and tell you, ‘We really appreciate you guys and the things you do.’ They’re like genuine people that love their alma mater.”

Ironically, current players mentioned struggling to develop meaningful relationships on campus independent of their football experience. A current player characterized missing campus social opportunities sharing, “Whenever we walk on Memory Mall, there's always something going on. But I never know about it until I'm walking by it.” In many ways, UCF football represents one of the grandest aspects of campus life, yet UCF football players find themselves easily lost within campus life.

Another current player reiterated the relationship redundancy common to the football player experience.

“You’re with your teammates all day. You see the same people in different facilities. You go to the academic building and see the same people. Go to the practice facility... same people. Yeah, I play football, but if I’m talking to somebody, I don’t really want to talk about football. I want to get away from that a little bit.”

– Current Player

The contrast between perceived community of current players compared to former players is very interesting. Former players spoke at length regarding the enduring community developed within the football program and minimally regarding external affirmation from the UCF community. The current player population seemingly did the opposite. This finding is consistent with Beamon’s (2012) research on elevated levels of social reinforcement. This likely suggests the external affirmation or praise that current players enjoy is ephemeral and solely attributable to their athlete identity on campus. This praise also seems difficult to replicate once a player’s athletic career has concluded.

#### **Finding #4**

#### **Existing player development and support strategy passively relies on access and availability in providing resources and broad programming.**

Staff members acknowledged the difficulties athletes experience in asking for help.

“Athletes as a whole, we can’t show any sign of being inferior. So, we’re scared or hesitant to ask for help. My job is to let them know I am here for them, first and foremost. But also let them know that there are resources out here for them to be successful in life.”

– Staff Member

Staff perspectives were resolutely confident that current programming design and delivery amply serves player needs. One staff member offered, “I think the way our football program is structured; I think they have everything accessible for them. I don’t think they necessarily need anything else outside of what they already have.” Staff members were also unable to identify any missing forms of support for a player’s personal development. One staff member shared, “I’m very confident we’re not lacking anything. I think if you need me to point out something, I think just letting them know that these resources are available and letting them know that it’s okay to seek help.” While unable to acknowledge any potential gaps in current strategy, staff members were able to identify the evolving need to support players in understanding themselves and create programming that cultivates self-awareness.

“A lot of our football athletes don’t really understand that they can encompass much more things outside of football... That puts a little pressure on us where we have to create programming to make sure that they have a thought after they get done playing football.”

– Staff Member

Knights Leadership Academy programming content addresses many topics critical to student athlete success. These topics include financial literacy, campus resources, personal branding, institutional branding, and counseling for health and wellness. Knights Leadership Academy programming is typically delivered in one-hour long sessions conducted annually. Introductory programming is delivered in conjunction with a student athlete's initial transition onto campus. This revolving curriculum is designed to meet the needs of approximately 480 student athletes across all sports. UCF Athletics also employs a full-time psychologist available to all 480 student athletes. Football student athletes receive additional exposure to guest speakers throughout the year, basic life skills training, and small group development opportunities such as Bible study through Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Current players demonstrated a firm grasp of available resources for short-term needs. One current player described the ease of access saying, "Help will be given to those who ask." Player needs could include medical attention, academic support, nutrition, or mental health.

"If you need help on something, all you have to do is ask and it'll be readily available.

And the University has done a great job trying to make that open and relevant... if you need help tell someone and they'll get you the best help they can possible."

– Current Player

Former players were less clear on the type and quality of support they received at UCF beyond academics. They were also less likely to pursue internal support options and more likely to seek support from family or peers.

"I didn't want to go to the therapy sessions that they had available and talk to some stranger about my problems. I didn't want to share my problems with my coaches because I didn't want them to think I was weak. I would keep pretty much to myself. I

didn't talk to anybody. I got suicidal at a point. I was just like, 'what's the fucking point?'"

– Former Player

Staff perspectives further emphasized access and availability to resources. One practical example included possessing every administrator's cell phone number. Around the clock availability seemed to provide a sense of confidence in the quality of support staff members provide. One staff member shared, "My door is open 24/7. And I feel like I'm a counselor, a psychologist, a non-certified psychologist, but I really just rely on my life lessons and what I've been through." Similarly, another staff member said, "I preach, utilize our resources that we have. Because when you get out of here, it's going to cost you to go to a mental health therapist. It's going to cost you to go see the doctor. It's going to cost you to take care of your life." By design, player development seems to mirror a buffet line rather than a proactive sense-making approach. One staff member explained, "It's all about making sure that we do everything that we can as administrators to put enough resources in front of them that they can take advantage of. And whenever they want to, they have access to all of our people."

Thoughtfully considering the challenges a player may face in seeking support underscores a potential flaw in current programming design. This acknowledgement stands in direct opposition to the notion that players simply must ask to receive support.

#### **Finding #5**

**The player experience shapes long-term perspectives. Methods and strategies supporting off the field learning remain primitive.**

The UCF football experience affords players the opportunity to develop their own personal ethos. Several players spoke about being “built” or “made” by football as if football itself was a factory preparing them for life.

“Football made me hard. Made me tough. Made me resilient. Made me focus. Made me extremely prepared. Normal life is easy compared to what I did in college. Nothing is as hard as when I played football. From the body aches to the time demands... Unless I put myself in an environment or situation that is that demanding the rest of my life is going to be a cakewalk. The only real challenges I face now are interpersonal. Building healthy relationships in general...”

– Former Player

Another former player described his main takeaways sharing:

“One, that nothing in my life that I will face in the future is going to be as challenging and hard as what I went through in the past. The way the coaches developed me, the way I grew myself, how hard the workouts were, how strenuous classes were, etc... And number two, no matter how successful you are, or how bad things are, you have to stay focused on the main goal because the people around you, they're just going to say, whatever is trendy. So you can't get too high. You can't get too low. You can't really listen to the noise that's around you because it doesn't really matter. Unless they're in that room with you in that building with you doing what you're doing. They're irrelevant.”

– Former Player

These sentiments clearly demonstrate each player’s unique capacity for critical reflection. Reflection on the college football experience clearly informs player perspectives likely extending

well past the conclusion of their playing career. Although both former players quoted above participated in similar experiences, interpretations were still personal.

The UCF football experience provides players a basic set of transferrable life skills. These skills may include time management, establishing high personal standards, prioritizing discipline, and attention to detail. Working in a team environment towards a common goal seemed to resonate in the minds of players. One player spoke to this idea saying, “People coming from different backgrounds trying to get a common goal done. That happens really everywhere you look at every job at every level.” Football also taught players how to understand their role within a broader context and work with different leaders.

“Anyone who’s ever played football knows how to play with a team...I feel like just being adaptable. I’ve had three coaching staffs. So the way they coach is different from everyone else... You get a new boss, you have to understand what they want you to do. And then do it and perform at a higher level.”

– Current Player

Methods for support unrelated to football were broad and nonspecific in the minds of the players. Support was typically characterized as routine advice. One current player described support he received from coaches sharing, “They give me the best advice that they can if they were in my situation. And I listen to that and try to adapt that into how I’m going to confront the challenge.” Some players described this process including opportunities to make choices and mistakes, space provided by the coach for simple reflection, and feedback delivered from personal experience if available or relevant. Another player offered, “They just do their best to support you in that way, by giving you advice that they have learned and stuff like that... There’s a lot of life lessons that coaches give out... They do it pretty consistently.” Availability for non-



football related support from coaches seemingly depends on a particular coach's frame of reference and capacity to teach through their experience.

Coaches were depicted as adept and adaptable in supporting football improvement. Film study was frequently mentioned as an almost daily method for improvement. One player reverently described his coach's expertise sharing, "My specific position coach is a tactician. He's got a catalogued library of film about different moves we can do during pass rush or techniques we can look at." Players described film study as including clear expectations aimed towards specific outcomes. This clarity allowed players to reflect honestly on their performance and receive coaching feedback. Players reiterated being able to count on constructive criticism for technical football improvement daily.

"In practice, if we make mistakes on assignments, or some type of play we're running, we go back, and we review the film. We watch the tapes again. They basically correct the error that was made. And it's not in a way where, 'Hey, you did this wrong, you need to fix this.' It's more like, this is what you did wrong. These are the steps you need to take to do this. And next time, this is how I want it to be performed. It's a process. It's not just like pointing out your mistakes or errors. They really help you through it."

– Current Player

The essence of improving through film study provides a broader metaphor for the player experience. Given that UCF football participation comprises most of a player's college life, UCF football possesses in turn an obligation to players to nurture evolving frames of reference and to bestow a framework for making sense of life experiences.

## **Limitations**

The findings of this project align with the literature explored, conceptual framework of the transformational learning cycle, and project questions. These findings must also acknowledge a variety of limitations. All three sample populations interviewed comprise a small percentage of the total available population for each category. Given the unfortunate delays in the project approval process, the opportunity to interview staff as initially intended was cannibalized in conflict with training camp. Staff turnover within Knights Leadership Academy left the department scrambling to adjust to meet work demands without their typical staff compliment. This also forced the relationship building process to effectively start over. Efforts to accommodate additional staff perspectives failed to come to fruition due to their training camp obligations or general disinterest. All qualitative interviews were conducted via Zoom. This limited any type of in person rapport that might have supported the interview quality. There were also no in-person observations collected regarding the daily UCF football experience. While extreme efforts were made to capture the diverse voices within the UCF football experience as initially designed, timing was a frequent obstacle for progress.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are proposed for UCF football consistent with the findings of this project, conceptual framework, and extant literature reviewed.

### **Recommendation #1**

#### **UCF Football should integrate a proactive player development and learning strategy.**

Many proven learning theories exist that could benefit coaching and development pedagogy. Mezirow's transformational learning theory provides a practical model for individuals to evolve their perspectives to be more inclusive and discriminating (2009). Mezirow's model maps out a journey of experiential learning and reflection adaptable enough to connect and serve anyone. Like Mezirow, other well-known peer-reviewed learning theories may offer insight in teaching methods and player support on and off the field. These could include Deci and Ryan's (2020) self-determination theory relating to basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The transtheoretical model of behavior change examines cyclical stages of learner readiness to adopt changes (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). Each of theories further affirm the value of meaningful relationships between teacher and student or coach and player.

The current programming design and delivery may meet the short-term needs of UCF student athletes. However, design and delivery to meet the scaling demands likely falls short of long-term retention and personalization. A proactive player development and learning strategy gives players an individualized solution to adapt and overcome their own disorienting dilemmas. This project's adapted conceptual framework could integrate seamlessly into the existing UCF player experience. When players recognize a disorienting dilemma, the transformational learning cycle illuminates the path forward to acquire new knowledge, build competence, and integrate new knowledge into their perspective. Rather than emphasizing what players should learn, the

transformational learning cycle teaches players how to learn. Furthermore, by defining learning as a process, transformational learning theory dispels the negative stigma discouraging football athletes to seek help and new knowledge. Transformational learning becomes a force multiplier in the UCF football experience as individuals better understand themselves, others, and how they coexist collectively. Lastly, by understanding how to learn, players will be better equipped to navigate future disorienting dilemmas regardless of context.

Integrating the transformational learning cycle will facilitate more robust learning experiences with benefits on and off the field. The transformational learning cycle models for coaches and staff how to support learning. Disorienting dilemmas are readily available for exploration. Examples could range from social justice issues to lacking confidence or misunderstanding their role and responsibilities on a particular football play.

The adapted transformational learning cycle encourages coaches to take on the role of learning provocateur guiding players down the path to understanding. This process adds peer-reviewed research muscle to enhance teaching rather than simply telling. This process supports authentic player-coach relationships in fidelity to Coach Malzahn's initial program vision.

## **Recommendation #2**

**UCF football and Knights Leadership Academy should facilitate and chronicle individual exploration of frames of reference for players, coaches, and staff.**

The research literature and project findings clearly demonstrate how disorienting dilemmas manifest differently for individuals. Exploring personal narratives for everyone involved in the UCF football program should be considered a starting point for transformational learning. Taylor describes individual experience as the primary medium of transformative learning comprised of what each learner brings to and experiences within the figurative

classroom itself (2009). Relevant staff may include personnel involved with coaching, Knights Leadership Academy, compliance, academics, athletic training, strength and conditioning, equipment, and building maintenance. A heightened awareness for individual frames of reference and application within the team environment creates a high tide raising all ships.

This process should begin during a player's initial recruitment. Open-ended questions can be used to help recruits articulate their frame of reference at that time. This could reveal keen insight into their wants and needs from prospective college football programs. Building player portfolios beyond physical measurables supports more meaningful player-coach relationships while at UCF. This type of information gathering to understand key player influences likely already exists as part of the basic UCF recruiting system. However, thoughtful consideration of this information as the preamble to a larger story enables greater transformational learning.

Robust player portfolios would also ease transitions for staff members. Any new staff member should engage their own frame of reference exploratory process immediately. This would provide common ground with players for initial relationship building. Leveraging transformational learning theory principles gives staff a head start as credible sense-makers and trusted advisors in player lives.

Knights Leadership Academy has experience delivering programming for student-athlete self-awareness. The CliftonStrengths personality assessment familiar to Knights Leadership Academy should be used pervasively within the football program. The same process for wrestling with feedback, identifying discrepancies between results and prior perspectives, and applying to various roles could benefit more than just student athletes. This would also give greater mileage to the investment itself.

Many other tools facilitate self-awareness and critical reflection similarly to CliftonStrengths. Everything DiSC measures preferences and tendencies both individually and collectively. Gary Chapman's 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace assessment applies Chapman's love language concept for communicating appreciation and encouragement to a working team environment. Everything DiSC would include some associated costs while Chapman's 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace assessment could be administered for free. Allowing football leadership autonomy in choosing a tool most appropriate for their team would likely increase buy-in. These tools are not to be considered solutions themselves. These tools are a gateway to better relationships providing sparks for deeper conversation and awareness.

Information gathering alone must not be considered transformational learning. Taylor (2012) reminds us that the core elements of transformational learning approaches are not simply decontextualized strategies or techniques without connection to the larger framework of transformational learning theory. Application of the core elements ignorant to the broader framework and purpose of transformational learning theory is what Taylor describes as "rudderless teaching with no clear goal or purpose" (2012). Understanding the cyclical process of transformational learning and requisite individual consideration unlocks further integration and application.

### **Recommendation #3**

**UCF football should leverage the already present design and influence of small groups.**

Small community is organically designed within the UCF football experience. Subgroups exist in several cross-sections of the team including but not limited to position groups, academic class designation, field of study, etc. These smaller networked communities provide an obvious

entry point for a transformational learning process. Leveraging these smaller communities would allow greater engagement and long-term impact of Knights Leadership Academy content. Pairing football and Knights Leadership Academy staff together to moderate development opportunities positions the staff as expert guides. For players, this strategy capitalizes on the natural learning environment where team psychological safety is already established. Edmonson (1999) describes team psychological safety as a force enhancing learning behavior given lesser concern for others' reactions that become embarrassing or threatening. This would also forge partnerships between Knights Leadership Academy and football staff while creating better environments for dialogue, reflection, and group learning.

The findings of this project regularly included player acknowledgement of impactful teammate influences. Former players spoke at length regarding the enduring support network provided by their peers. Current players discussed the significant time investment and depth of relationships with their teammates. Staff also hoped to inspire and embrace a family atmosphere for the program. Equipping peer support networks with the transformational learning process and Knights Leadership Academy provides greater opportunity for players to develop as learners and leaders. Football and Knights Leadership Academy staff can facilitate regular content debriefs within the smaller communities. For example, position groups that already meet regularly could incorporate discussions where players reflect on current events, individual disorienting dilemmas, or targeted Knights Leadership Academy content. Given the demands of the in-season football schedule, meetings conducted over the course of the offseason likely provide the best timeframe for implementation. This would establish credibility and merit in the transformational learning process enabling greater application in the future. By leveraging the already limited time available to student athletes, coaches will be able to support player growth more efficiently.

Lastly, UCF football should encourage, support, and facilitate opportunities to develop small community outside of the football program. One negative tradeoff with this recommendation may be the perpetual isolation from campus. Although current Knights Leadership Academy design allows football athletes to interact with other student athletes, this recommendation supports enhanced learning and content retention. The college experience presents many options for involvement independent of football. UCF football and Knights Leadership Academy must continually find creative ways to encourage and invest in engagement outside of football. The team benefits from more individually diverse college experiences. Application of this recommendation is only bound by creativity and awareness.

#### **Recommendation #4**

**UCF football and Knights Leadership Academy should explore, adapt, and integrate research proven methods to support learning on and off the field.**

Taylor reminds us that learners are experiencing their life as they enter a particular classroom, and the nature of these experiences provide the opportunity for transformative learning (2009). The classroom moniker could apply in many contexts for UCF football players. Film study, as discussed previously, provides a metaphor for broader transformational learning. Peer-reviewed literature surrounding transformational learning theory offers several methods and strategies to expand and enhance this process.

Critical reflection is a fundamental concept within transformational learning. Often prompted by an increased awareness of thoughts, feelings, and actions, critical reflection allows learners to question prior assumptions and beliefs (Mezirow, 2000). This reflection could apply to content, processes, and premises in advancing perspectives (Taylor, 2009). As previously suggested, this could be simply applied during regularly scheduled meetings. A few minutes for



players to thoughtfully reflect on a particular prompt initiates transformational learning for themselves and others.

Prompt ideas are limitless. Some examples include stories or ideas being discussed in the news, upcoming current events such as elections or holidays, or topics drawn from personal experience. Again, this same process could enhance football learning once established. These ideas build upon the three previous recommendations relying upon the transformational learning cycle, challenging individuals to reflect relative to their experience, and leveraging the team psychological safety and learning capacity of familiar networked communities.

Some trademark methods of a transformative reflection process include reflective writing, individual and team debriefings, and case studies. Writing allows learners to externalize experiences recalling from memory and synthesizing key moments (Taylor, 2009). A simple reflective writing experience challenges players to examine prompts by literally putting pen to paper and making sense of their perspectives. Individual or team debriefings would follow a similar design in more of a discussion forum or chat room type session. These are also intended to emphasize the individual's role, prior perspectives, and primary idea behind a given topic (Dirkx and Smith, 2009). Case studies would also support a robust reflective process. Although developing case studies may require more labor upfront, this could unlock examples found within the coaching staff's prior experience. By providing players challenging and messy scenarios where problems and solutions are unclear, players would be able to work through their own interpretations and solutions without consequence.

#### **Recommendation #5**

**UCF football, Knights Leadership Academy, and UCF Alumni Relations should develop and provide resource and mentorship systems supporting transition out of football.**

New and unfamiliar disorienting dilemmas await players as they exit the football program. Some of these challenges can be foreseen while others will arrive completely unexpected. The current job placement initiative is an appropriate starting point, but does not necessarily account for fulfillment or well-being. Some key topics during this transitional phase may include mental health resources, financial planning, tax assistance, insurance training, nutrition counseling, or medical support. Although many of these topics are addressed in the current Knights Leadership Academy programming, providing support when they have become immediately relevant to the player provides more impact. This recommendation would be the proactive embodiment of the Knights Leadership Academy mantra “NLI until you die” promising everlasting support following a National Letter of Intent.

### **Conclusion**

This project in its inception was a personal quest to better serve football student athletes. It was inspired by observing my own teammates struggle to understand their world without football. Far too often, the wisdom of athlete identity research is offered after the damage of transitioning out of sport is done. Too many football student athletes are left to wander while reconciling who they are becoming without a game they have known their whole life. Preparing student athletes for life after sport is a primary duty of the institution. This project lays out a proactive strategy to help players understand how to navigate life and learning for themselves.

UCF football is both an incredible commitment and teacher for student athletes. We would be wise to embed people and resources for player growth and support as close to the game as possible. I believe the findings and recommendations of this project can benefit the University of Central Florida football program on and off the field, provide athletes enduring learning

strategies, and launch UCF and Knights Leadership Academy as an exemplar for meaningful player development and support.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocols**

### *Introduction:*

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I recognize the demands for your time, and I appreciate your willingness to contribute to this project. As you may know, I am interested in understanding what it means to maximize the learning experience that is college football in a way that prepares players for life after sport. I am going to be asking you questions about your role here as a [current football player/former football player/staff member], how you interact with the environment, how you examine and make sense of your experience, and the supports and resources available to you as a [current football player/former football player/staff member].

### *Consent:*

Before we begin the interview, I want to remind you that participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Your responses are confidential and will remain anonymous. If you would like me to stop recording our interview at any point in time, please do not hesitate to tell me. Do you have any questions before we get started?

TURN THE RECORDER ON

### *Primary Research Questions:*

- How do coaches and staff facilitate transformational learning?
- What further strategies, resources, or training may support coaches and staff in facilitating a transformational learning player experience?

Please see Appendix B for comprehensive interview questions.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### *Current Player Interview Questions*

Self-Examination - How has my body of experience shaped my world view?

- Biographical warmup - Please briefly tell me a little about yourself. What is your name? Where are you from? What position do you play? What are you studying?
- Before being a player here at UCF, what experiences have been or continue to be critically important in shaping who you are as a person?
- Before being a player here at UCF, what people have been or continue to be critically important in shaping who you are as a person?
- How have these experiences and people shaped your perspective on life?

Disorienting Dilemmas - What experiences illuminate and challenge our prior assumptions shaping our perspectives on ourselves and our world?

- In your current experience here at UCF, what have been some of the biggest challenges related to football?
- In your current experience here at UCF, what have been some of the biggest challenges not related to football?
- What about your current experience here at UCF has most exceeded your expectations coming in?
- What about your current experience here at UCF has most fallen short of your expectations coming in?

New Knowledge - How and where do athletes turn for exploring, planning, and acquiring new knowledge?

- When you encounter a challenging football experience, how do your coaches or staff help you learn from that experience?
- When you encounter a challenging experience not related to football, how do your coaches and staff help you learn from that experience?
- How have your coaches helped you frame or think about your expectations from UCF?
- How do your coaches help you explore, plan, or acquire new knowledge in response to these challenging experiences or expectations?

Building Competence - How do athletes receive support in building competence and self-confidence into their new roles and relationships?

- How have you asked for, found, or felt supported in developing your own support systems?
- What resources or forms of support are most available or most useful to you here at UCF?
- How have your coaches supported you in navigating challenging experiences?
- How have your coaches supported you in acquiring new knowledge or building self-confidence?
- What forms of support have been missing from your personal development? How has this shaped the choices you are making for yourself?

Transformational Learning Consolidation - How do athletes consolidate transformational learning into new perspectives?

- How has your experience here at UCF, the challenges you have faced and dealt with, and the support you have received or not received, shaped your current perspective?
- How has your experience not related to football, the challenges you have faced and dealt with, and the support you have received or not received, shaped your current perspective?
- How would you describe your football experience as preparing you for the rest of your life? What experiences or lessons learned specifically illustrate this idea?

*Former Player Interview Questions*

Self-Examination - How has my body of experience shaped my world view?

- Biographical warmup - Please briefly tell me a little about yourself. What is your name? Where are you from? What position did you play? What did you study?
- Before being a player at UCF, what experiences were critically important in shaping who you were as a person?
- Before being a player here at UCF, what people were critically important in shaping who you were as a person?
- How did those experiences and people shape your perspective on life at that time?

Disorienting Dilemmas - What experiences illuminate and challenge our prior assumptions shaping our perspectives on ourselves and our world?

- What were some of the biggest football related challenges you experienced while at UCF?
- What were some of the biggest challenges you experienced not related to football while at UCF?
- What about your experience at UCF most exceeded your expectations prior to coming in?
- What about your experience at UCF has most fell short of your expectations prior to coming in?

New Knowledge - How and where do athletes turn for exploring, planning, and acquiring new knowledge?

- When you encountered a challenging football experience, how did your coaches or staff help you learn from that experience?
- When you encountered a challenging experience not related to football, how did your coaches and staff help you learn from that experience?
- How did your coaches help you frame or think about your expectations from UCF?
- How did your coaches help you explore, plan, or acquire new knowledge in response to those challenging experiences or expectations?

Building Competence - How do athletes receive support in building competence and self-confidence into their new roles and relationships?

- How did you ask for, find, or feel supported in developing your own support systems while at UCF?
- What resources or forms of support were most available or most useful to you while at UCF?
- How did your coaches support you in navigating challenging experiences?
- How did your coaches support you in acquiring new knowledge or building self-confidence?
- What forms of support were missing from your personal development? How did this shape the choices you made for yourself?

Transformational Learning Consolidation - How do athletes consolidate transformational learning into new perspectives?

- How did your experience while at UCF, the challenges you faced and dealt with, and the support you received or did not receive, shape your current perspective?
- How did your experience not related to football, the challenges you faced and dealt with, and the support you received or did not receive, shape your current perspective?
- How would you describe your football experience as preparing you for the rest of your life? What experiences or lessons learned specifically illustrate this idea?

*Coaches and Staff Interview Questions*

Self-Examination - How has my body of experience shaped my world view?

- Biographical Warmup - Please briefly tell me a little about yourself. What is your name? Where are you from? What is your current role here at UCF?
- Before being a coach at UCF, what experiences were critically important in shaping who you were as a person?
- Before being a coach here at UCF, what people were critically important in shaping who you were as a person?
- How did those experiences and people shape your perspective on life at that time?

Disorienting Dilemmas - What experiences illuminate and challenge our prior assumptions shaping our perspectives on ourselves and our world?

- What are some of the biggest football related challenges you see players experience while at UCF?
- What are some of the biggest challenges you see players experience not related to football while at UCF?
- Where do you see the UCF football experience most exceeding player expectations prior to coming into the program?
- Where do you see the UCF football experience most fall short of player expectations prior to coming into the program?

New Knowledge - How and where do athletes turn for exploring, planning, and acquiring new knowledge?

- When players encounter a challenging football experience, how do you help them learn from that experience?
- When players encounter a challenging experience not related to football, how do you help them learn from that experience?
- How do you help players frame or think about their expectations from UCF?
- How do you help players explore, plan, or acquire new knowledge in response to the challenging experiences or expectations that they face?

Building Competence - How do athletes receive support in building competence and self-confidence into their new roles and relationships?

- How do players ask for, find, or feel supported in developing their own support systems while at UCF?
- What resources or forms of support are most available or most useful to players while at UCF?
- How do you support players in navigating challenging experiences?
- How do you support players in acquiring new knowledge or building self-confidence?
- What forms of support are missing from player personal development? How does this shape the choices they make for themselves?



Transformational Learning Consolidation - How do athletes consolidate transformational learning into new perspectives?

- How does your experience while at UCF, the challenges you face and deal with, and the support you receive or do not receive, shape your current perspective?
- How does your experience not related to football, the challenges you face and deal with, and the support you receive or do not receive, shape your current perspective?
- How would you describe your football experience as preparing you for the rest of your life? What experiences or lessons learned specifically illustrate this idea?
- How do you make sure a player's UCF football experience prepares them for the rest of their life? What experiences or lessons learned specifically illustrate this idea?