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**Beyond the Field: Exploring Identity, Spiritual Growth, and Community through
the Fellowship of Christian Athletes**

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Abstract

For this Capstone Project, the researchers investigated Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) representatives' views on bringing student-athletes to have a relationship with Christ and why they think it is important. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researchers used what they have learned to formulate an action that responds to improving FCA in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience. This is important because student-athletes need a sense of community and safe space to express their relationship with God. It is argued that having a relationship with Christ is important, especially for student-athletes.

Beyond the Field: Exploring Identity, Spiritual Growth, and Community through the Fellowship of Christian Athletes

Growing up, it became clear to me that I was only a few things: a daughter, a sister, a good student, and an even better softball player. I wore the label “softball player” proudly. If you were to ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, my answer was always “a softball player.” My aspiration to become a softball player was my only reason for attending college. I worked relentlessly for multiple hours a day, seven days a week, in addition to a rigorous honors course load. I worked harder than my teammates because I had to make up for athletic ability that my five foot frame did not compensate for. Fueled by internal pressure to prove to myself and others that I was a good enough softball player, I achieved my goal to be recruited to play division one softball at the University of Hawaii. Although I had reached a major milestone in my softball career, I worked even harder because I came to the University as a “preferred walk-on” meaning I was playing on the team without an athletic scholarship. My new goal was to outwork and outplay my teammates to earn scholarship money. I never received an athletic scholarship. My next goal was to outwork and outplay my teammates every week to make the traveling roster so that I could go with my team to play games that were away. I was allowed on two travel trips. My next goal was to outwork and outplay my teammates for playing time in my position. I never started a game. I was ashamed, humiliated, frustrated, and feeling worthless. I based my whole identity on being a great softball player, and I was faced with the reality that there are women bigger, stronger, and better than I am at this sport. Feeling lost and hopeless, I spiraled into a depressive episode and struggled with thoughts of suicide. I had no idea who I was aside from a softball player.

One day, a senior invited the whole softball team to the very first huddle of Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA). Intrigued by the familiar name, I remembered that my brothers had attended an FCA baseball camp on a college campus near my home in southern California. Having no other plans that night other than going to my dorm room right after practice to wallow, I decided to go. I was met with friendly faces, pizza, a fun game of football on the sand volleyball courts, and a message that I will never forget. The person who shared that night talked

about the biblical story found in Daniel chapter 3. This story is about three people being thrown into a furnace because of their faith, but four people were seen in the fire, one of them being God. This miracle reminded me of the trials I was facing at the time, feeling like I was in the middle of this fire, and the message that was shared taught me I was not alone.

This message made me want to learn more and I was excited for the next huddle. The next huddle taught me what I truly needed to hear, that I was much more than a softball player, a student, a sister, or a daughter. I learned that I am loved by a perfect God who created me in His image. I felt an overwhelming sense of peace after this realization. I also gained a great group of friends that I could relate to and rely on through FCA. I began going to church with my new friends and our softball team began its own Bible study. My new relationship with Christ gave me a whole new purpose in life. I was asked the following year to be a part of the FCA leadership team where I was able to practice discipleship with other athletes who were facing the same struggles I faced. With the tools that FCA gave me, I was confident enough to make the decision to be baptized. The FCA Hawaii State Director baptized a few other FCA members and myself in the ocean.

Without FCA, I am unsure of how I would come to have a relationship with Christ, and without God, I would not have made it through the fire alone. FCA has strengthened my relationship with God and gave me a community that was necessary for my well-being throughout my first two years of college. Given my experience, I can confidently say that every student-athlete deserves the opportunity to be a part of FCA. Every student-athlete deserves to know that they are worth more than the success they have in their sport. Every student-athlete deserves to know they are loved regardless of their performance. FCA has helped bring so many student-athletes with stories like mine to have a relationship with God, and that is a debt I could never repay.

Literature Synthesis

The Fellowship of Christian athletes is “a community working to see the world transformed by Jesus Christ through the influence of coaches and athletes” (*Who We Are*, n.d.). The Fellowship of Christian Athletes will be referred to as FCA. The FCA is an important community for student-athletes to have the opportunity to join because it allows student-athletes to discover identities about themselves other than just a student-athlete, FCA gives student-athletes an opportunity for spiritual development which is imperative and oftentimes neglected, FCA provides student-athletes with the tools to handle difficult situations, and FCA provides a safe environment for student-athletes to build meaningful relationships with their teammates and others. Spiritual development can include, “...reading a holy writ such as the Holy Bible, prayer, fellowship with other believers, and active participation in a local church” (Waller, Flowers, & Crooms, 2023).

FCA was founded in the 1950s to “...aid in the spiritual development of middle and high school student athletes” (Ramsey, 2015). FCA began when a young basketball coach named Don McClanen collaborated with a man named Branch Rickey and had a vision for athletes to endorse God the way they had endorsed automobiles or cigarettes (*Learn How We Got Started*, n.d.). Although FCA began with a purpose in aiding middle and high school students, FCA grew to reach student-athletes at the college level as well. Ramsey states, “During the late 1990s a paradigm shift occurred when intercollegiate football coaches started to hire full-time team chaplains to become the spiritual coordinators for their student athletes” (2015). FCA has lasted through multiple generations and continues to be active on many campuses today. McDaniel provides an example of two siblings in college when he states, “...their parents, Joe and Faythe,

were full-time FCA staff members. The family attended summer camps each year, and CJ and Cayla look back on those days as playing a key role in their faith development” (2017). There are many instances such as this that prove FCA’s importance continues to be relevant.

Why is it an Issue/Opportunity?

FCA is important for many reasons. One of these reasons is that FCA provides the opportunity for student-athletes to explore their identity outside of only being a student-athlete. Many student-athletes struggle with finding their identity and carry the weight of life within those two identities. According to Flowers (year), “As demonstrated in the name student-athlete, it implies a dual identity. Few student-athletes navigate multiple identities...” (p. ?). However, with FCA, student-athletes realize there is more to life than just sports. For example, one student-athlete shares. “Some might crumble, but because of the foundation I have, I took a deep breath and remembered there’s more to life than this one mistake” (McDaniel, 2017). Student-athletes involved in FCA have this foundation because the leaders and representatives of FCA make it known that student-athletes are a child of God and so much more than just their sport. According to one representative, “...we're just there to love on them and let someone know they care about them, beyond their performance...”(Adkinson, 2019). With exploring other identities, student-athletes have a more holistic life.

Part of having a holistic life is also developing spiritually. FCA can provide a safe space for spiritual development, which is oftentimes overlooked. According to Flowers, “Participation in athletics provides student-athletes with opportunities to further themselves outside of athletics through academic assistance, educational opportunities and experiences, physical wellness, and personal/professional development. One often overlooked portion of this holistic development is

spiritual development” (2022). It has been established that student-athletes' spiritual development is often neglected, and being a part of FCA helps fulfill the need for spiritual development. For example, Ramsey states that, “The findings from this qualitative study revealed that the FCA Chaplaincy Ministry Program meets a need that is often forgotten on college campuses which is spiritual and faith development” (2015). The need for spiritual development is important, and with spiritual development comes other benefits.

As FCA contributes to student-athletes' spiritual development, FCA gives student-athletes the tools to grow in their faith which allows them to cope with other circumstances better. Student-athletes face difficulties that are difficult to manage. As McDaniel states “Today, because the athlete part of the student-athlete equation often carries a disproportionate amount of weight, it can be easy for student-athletes to lose sight of who they are and why they do what they do, resulting in burnout” (2017). Student-athletes have help from advisors and coaches to help with school and their sport, and FCA gives students the opportunity to help their faith journey. Student-Athletes growing in their faith are more "equipped to navigate the tension of multiple identity roles and cope with various circumstances"(Flowers 2022). In one example, a student-athlete claims that the “footing” of FCA has kept him “upright in difficult moments” (McDaniel, 2017). The findings show how important it is for student-athletes to have a space to develop their spirituality so they can handle difficult life situations.

While navigating these difficult situations, FCA provides student-athletes with a community as well. Student-athletes have the opportunity to grow more meaningful relationships with their teammates and other student-athletes. According to Flowers “Research continues to support the proposition that student peer relationships have a profound and lasting impact on

students' lives during college, and impact their psychosocial development" (2022). It is beneficial for student-athletes to have this community to share their experiences. Having FCA meetings is important for students-athletes, and one in particular shares the experience by stating that going to FCA gives them an opportunity to "step away from the struggles of being a student-athlete and spend time in an environment with people who understand what I go through, ... We grow together and support each other, and there's something special about knowing I'm not alone" (McDaniel, 2017).

What Has and/or Should Be Done?

With all of FCA's benefits, for the past several years, they have been active globally. In 2016, they began a summer internship program where college student-athletes involved in FCA had the opportunity to participate in sports ministry in Italy, Germany, Malta, Romania, and places in South Africa (*FCA in Action*, 2016). More recently, FCA's Global Impact had two teams sent to the Dominican Republic and Malaysia. Their goal was "for God to take them deeper into relationship with Him; let them see how they can use sport to reach others for Christ; and grow their hearts for the nations" (Freymuth, 2022). After participants spent time in Malaysia and the Dominican Republic, they had a better understanding of what ministry looks like in other cultures (Freymuth, 2022).

Conclusion

The FCA has impacted many lives for many years. FCA is an effective way for student-athletes to explore other identities, develop spiritually, cope with difficult situations, and grow meaningful relationships with others. FCA provides opportunities for student-athletes to strengthen their relationship with God and to pursue sports ministry around the globe.

Method

For this Capstone Project, the researcher investigated FCA representatives' views on bringing student-athletes to have a relationship with Christ and what they think could be done to improve it. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what they have learned to formulate an action that responds to improving FCA in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

Context

The Fellowship of Christian Athletes meet at sports fields, schools, and churches. According to the FCA's vision and mission, the FCA focuses on serving local communities around the globe by engaging, equipping and empowering coaches and athletes to unite and inspire, and change the world through the gospel. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes aims to see the world transformed by Jesus Christ through the influence of coaches and athletes (Vision & Mission). The FCA includes people of all races and ethnicities. The FCA hosts six different types of camps; sports camp, leadership camp, coaches camp, power/youth sports camp, team camp, and partnership camp. Along with camps, the FCA holds huddles, which are small local groups or chapters of individuals who have a heart for Christ, athletics, and the mission and vision of FCA. These huddles usually meet a few times a month at schools. The FCA representatives the researchers focused on are relative to the researchers sphere of influence. Researchers met with some FCA representatives at a local highschool in Monterey county in a classroom during lunch time. The classroom had standard desks that were arranged in a way to interview participants face to face. The classroom belonged to a history teacher that had history

content written on the white boards. Other participants were interviewed via Zoom, a virtual way to connect with the participants that had a busy schedule or were out of state.

Participants and Participant Selection

Daniel R. A white male who has been a state director for FCA for 12 years.

Jeremiah R. A white male who has a relatively new position for FCA as a county director in California

Mrs. M. A white female who has been an advisor for an FCA club at the local highschool in Monterey county for multiple years. She is a counselor at the highschool and oversees event planning for the FCA club.

Mr. A. A white male who has been a history teacher at the local highschool in Monterey county for multiple years. He is a mountain biking coach and acts as another advisor for the FCA club at the highschool.

Thomas M. A white male who is a student at the local highschool in Monterey county. He is the vice president of the FCA club at the highschool.

Ella C. A white female who is a student at the highschool in Monterey county. She is the president of the FCA club at the highschool.

Researcher

Haylee This topic was meaningful to me because being a part of FCA my first couple years of college was life changing. I wish that all student-athletes of all ages had the same opportunity I had. I was similar to my participants because I am very familiar with how the FCA functions, and I was different to them because they have experienced FCA in a different location than I had and from a different position. I needed to be mindful of others' opinions on how to improve FCA.

I have only experienced FCA on the surface and needed to be mindful of the participants that have had more background experience within FCA. I also knew that religion in public schools was a topic that was not receptive to all people and I respected their opinions on that.

Kyle This topic was meaningful to me because this was something I am truly passionate about. Being an athlete at a school has been a very stressful task. I felt that being in a community with God fearing individuals was important to me. Through FCA and through other individuals I was able to grow in my faith and individually as a human. I also wanted to be able to help other people and help them grow their relationship with God. I was similar to my participants because I believe in God and want to build the kingdom. I was different because I was not very experienced with FCA but wanted to learn all about it. Some people may not have wanted to share opinions they may have had. Some people may have felt that the questions I was asking were something they may not have wanted to talk about.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

1. Describe your experiences with FCA.
2. What do you see as the challenges with supporting student-athletes in their relationship with Christ through FCA?
3. What is FCA currently doing to bring and/or support student-athletes to God- by whom - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?
4. What do you think should be done to improve FCA's ability to bring student-athletes to have a relationship with Christ through FCA?
5. What personal experiences or insights have you gained from your involvement with FCA that you believe have positively impacted your faith journey?

6. Is there anything else that you would like to say about bringing athletes to having a relationship with Christ through FCA and/or the improvement of FCA?

Procedure¹

Participants were interviewed. All interviews were done individually. When it was not possible to interview participants in person, they were invited to complete a virtual interview via zoom of the same questions. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour, were audio-recorded (with participant consent), and took place at a highschool in Monterey county. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses. All interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee and took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, six FCA representatives were interviewed to see what they have to say about bringing student-athletes to have a relationship with Christ through FCA and why it is important. This is important because student athletes are able to explore identity, grow spiritually, and have people to rely on when the times are good and tough. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1).

Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: Time; Reach; and Money. Time, Reach and Money are crucial considerations when starting a club on a college campus because these three criteria directly impact the

¹ <http://my.ilstu.edu/~jhkahn/>

feasibility, sustainability, and effectiveness of the club. When starting a club, it requires a serious time commitment. The ability to organize meetings with flow takes time. Reach is important because FCA is targeted for christian athletes to build that quality community surrounded by spiritual growth within oneself and each other. The more people that are able to get involved the better off the club will be. FCA highlights the ability to bring people together and one way to bring people to these meetings is bringing food. Food is not free and the power to feed 30 people each week is not cheap. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	TIME	REACH	MONEY
FCA community at CSUMB	High	High	Medium
Instagram Page	Medium	High	None
Make “How to start Huddle” video	Medium	Low	None

FCA community at CSUMB Option 1

Our first action option was to create an FCA community here at CSUMB. This action took a large amount of time because we had to fill out paperwork to be an official club on campus. We had to plan certain activities, find locations, and meet with the FCA area director. The most difficult part of this action was searching for an advisor on campus to be a part of FCA.

Instagram Page Option 2

Our second action option was to spread awareness about this community through an Instagram page. This Instagram page took a medium amount of time. To create announcements we had to plan the day before a meeting and also be sure to capture a picture at every meeting. We were limited in this action because not everyone has access to Instagram so we were unsure of how far this information was going to reach.

“How to start a club video” Option 3

Our third action option was to make a “How to start a Club” video. This video would entail the steps we had to take to begin the FCA community here. It is an opportunity for other students interested in beginning their own campus community and to have an easier time starting their own club. This video would have taken a medium amount of time to make and the reach was low because not many people were interested in starting their own club.

Recommendation.

After analysis and reflection, we believe in creating FCA at CSUMB and starting an Instagram page is in our best interest. Important factors that influenced the choosing of the recommendation was the ability to help Christian athletes explore identity within themselves, grow spiritually, and build a lifelong community.

Concessions.

By not recommending creating a “how to start your own huddle” video, Christian athletes are at risk of going through the same struggles we faced when starting our own FCA huddle on campus such as searching for an FCA area director, searching for a campus advisor, and figuring out first steps for our first huddle meetings.

Limitations.

One of the biggest limitations is assuming that our target audience of Christian athletes on campus have Instagram or check the app frequently. The main way of spreading the word about FCA meetings is through the Instagram page so if our target audience does not have access to the Instagram page then we are not reaching the maximum potential audience.

Potential negative outcomes.

Possible negative outcomes of choosing to start FCA at CSUMB could be people being placed in a group or situation that makes them uncomfortable. While being a part of the FCA community, an athlete could feel judged and uncomfortable to attend another meeting.

Possible negative outcome of starting an Instagram page for the FCA club could be someone being uncomfortable being put on the internet through a photo or video.

Conclusion.

In all, by starting our own FCA community here at CSUMB, we began a conversation that many student-athletes were afraid to talk about, which is religion. The student-athletes we interviewed mentioned that it is hard to be seen as someone who is associated with a religious club at school, but FCA uplifts and encourages people to begin this conversation. The research proves that spirituality is oftentimes neglected in development, so beginning this conversation is essential to a holistic development. As student-athletes, life can be crazy. We also know how important it is to continue developing as a person, and we believe that God is the primary source for this. FCA helps student-athletes like us grow closer to God and we believe that every person should have an opportunity to explore that relationship with Him. As one of our interviewees gave praise to FCA for this, she says “It’s a little bit of Christ in the school-filled day.”

Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

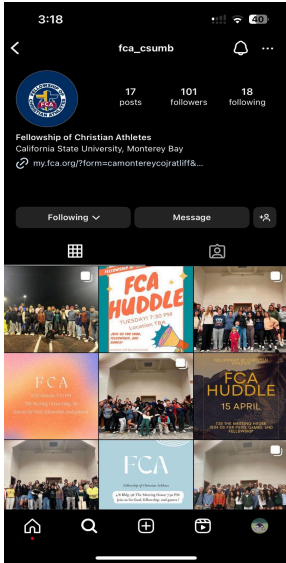
Christian student athletes appreciate being able to have a community and express their beliefs or explore religion in a safe space. We found the importance of Student athletes having the opportunity to grow closer to God to have a more holistic development. We had the opportunity to interview four people from a FCA huddle at a local high school. Two are advisors that also are faculty at the highschool and two are student-athletes that are on the leadership team for the same local highschool. We also interviewed two FCA Directors, one is the director of the Monterey area and the other is the director of Hawaii.

Our first action option was to create an FCA community here at CSUMB. We had to fill out paperwork to be an official club on campus. We had to plan certain activities, find locations, and meet with the FCA area director. The most difficult part of this action was searching for an advisor on campus to be a part of FCA. Our second action option was to spread awareness about this community through an instagram page. We had to plan the day before a meeting and also be sure to capture a picture at every meeting. We were limited in this action because not everyone has access to instagram so we were unsure of how far this information was going to reach. Our third action option was to make a “How to start a Club” video. This video would entail the steps we had to take to begin the FCA community here. It is an opportunity for other students interested in beginning their own campus community and to have an easier time starting their own club.

We chose to go through with two of these action options. We created an FCA community here at CSUMB and created an instagram to spread the news about our community. At these meetings we play a game, eat some pizza, and listen to a speaker. We have about 30 student-athletes attend regularly, many of which agree that they need a space like FCA.

We chose these options because we believe that the meetings and the instagram page will give student athletes the opportunity to expand their identity, spiritual growth, and be comfortable in a community that loves them.

Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection



These are some of the photos from our meetings that we created. We met once a week every Monday at 7:30. We spread the word by the Instagram page and word of

mouth. We invited as many people as we could and the student athletes loved the opportunity. Ever since the start of the FCA meetings, we kept the structure and flow the same and it ran perfectly every time. We have noticed people from the meetings talked about the message days after and applied it to their life. The only wish was that we could have started this beautiful community from the beginning of the semester. The next step we took was electing new leaders for the coming year. We gave them everything that we did to succeed this year. We learned that having a community where people are wanting to better themselves is extremely important. It brought us peace to know that people are going through the same struggles as us and there are people to support.

Critical Reflection

From this project, I learned the importance of being proactive. I had always hoped and wished that our university would eventually grow a community geared towards glorifying God, but I had never thought that I could be someone to begin this community. I learned that what I say and do truly matters. I learned that I am truly capable of creating change. I also learned the importance of leading by example. I could not form genuine connections with student-athletes and show them the importance of having a strong relationship with God without growing in my relationship with God myself, so I have learned to always continue growing spiritually.

In our FCA meetings, I have learned so much from the guest speakers about teaching and learning. I have seen the importance of preparation and speaking by the way they would come prepared with a story and highlight the main point for their audience. I also learned about different learning techniques because we would hold small group discussions within our FCA meetings and I saw how everyone learns in a different way and the importance of catering to those different learning styles.

Synthesis and Integration

The Liberal Studies MLOs, required coursework, and this Action Research Project impacted my professional development by pushing my capabilities to be a more empathetic and well-rounded individual and future educator. MLO 2 is about diversity and multiculturalism as a

scholar. Through FCA, I was able to examine social identities and value diversity. Although FCA is a Christian organization, we welcomed people of all religions and had the opportunity to learn about these other cultures and backgrounds to understand their needs.

MLO 4 described the importance of being a social justice collaborator. During this action project, I worked alongside stakeholders, which were the FCA directors and representatives in order to change the culture of this campus. I was able to work within the community and observe the other FCA communities in order to build an FCA community at our university. We advocated for student-athlete's well-being and spiritual development.

In order to become the professional that I envision being, I believe my next steps are to stay connected with this community and see how I can offer my experience as a learning opportunity for others that strive to see the same change that I do. I can be more consistent in believing that I am capable of creating change and being proactive until I can see that change.

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