

Analyzing the High School Athletic Administrator Role: Pressing Issues Facing the Position

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In working to provide meaningful athletic programs that benefit student-athletes and other key stakeholders in the department (Grant, 2024; Martin et al., 2025), high school athletic administrators embrace substantial and wide-reaching responsibilities (Forsyth, 2024). As these demands continue to evolve (Fraina et al., 2021; Price et al., 2022), the role has become more complex and susceptible to negative experiences if not properly managed (Conant, 2017; Park and Curtner-Smith, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2014). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the most prominent issues affecting the athletic administrator role and their perceived importance for effectively fulfilling the position. With the support of the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA), a survey was distributed to its national membership, ultimately securing 680 responses. A total of seven athletic administrator issues were analyzed and each rated as important by participants. One issue in particular (i.e., *AD Responsibilities*) was viewed as extremely important, with two issues (i.e., *Providing ADs the Proper Tools to Manage* and *Relationship with Administration*) deemed to be of very

high importance. To pursue deeper meaning into these results, four interviews were then conducted with athletic administrators. This study offers key insight for practicing high school athletic administrators to understand the pressing issues impacting the position and their influence on one's ability to lead an athletic department.

Keywords: athletic administrator, athletic director, high school athletics, interscholastic sport, contemporary issues, National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association

With more than eight million student-athletes across the United States (NFHS, 2024), interscholastic athletics play a vital role in the development of participants, both on and off the field (Forsyth, 2024). For many student-athletes, involvement in interscholastic athletic programs helps cultivate a healthy understanding of success, failure, and fairness (Forsyth et al., 2019). Through their experiences, student-athletes learn other societal norms that will give meaning to their participation (Forsyth et al., 2022). At the helm of athletic departments are athletic administrators, who make a substantial impact on the lives of student-athletes (Forsyth, 2024) through the accountability and commitment invested to establish meaningful athletic programs (Whisenant et al. 2014). To this end, interscholastic athletic administrators perform a pivotal role in the learning and collective growth of all participants who become involved in their respective school's athletic programs (Martin et al., 2025).

Over time, the expectations for impactful sport programming have evolved in response to the rise in travel teams (Forsyth et al., 2020) and increased prioritization on winning by key stakeholder groups (Johnson et al., 2017). This new environment has created challenges for athletic administrators who strive to uphold the philosophy of education-based athletics as a core tenet of the athletic department

(Blanton et al., 2024). Furthermore, practitioners must now embrace wide-reaching and emerging responsibilities that include, but are not limited to, addressing rising financial concerns permeating high school athletics (Forsyth et al., 2020b), developing risk management plans that minimize potential areas of liability (Forsyth et al., 2020a), combating participation issues tied to increased pressure for student-athletes to sport specialize (Fraina et al., 2021), and navigating and establishing policies tied to social media (Price et al., 2022). For many, responsibilities within the high school are not solely tied to the athletic administrator position. Whether also serving as a school administrator (e.g., assistant principal), teacher, or coach, those in a dual role experience greater demands that contribute to job-specific stress (Ha et al., 2011) and have to become more reliant on support systems to aid in task completion (Ratts, 2025a).

These realities within the athletic administrator position have added further challenges to the role given the growing and compounding issues that exist. With a rise in negative experiences tied to the demands of the position (Conant, 2017; Ha et al., 2011; Judge & Judge, 2009), increased burnout and turnover have caused instability within the leadership of high school athletic departments (Sullivan et al., 2014). In fact, the National High School Athletic Coaches Association shared that the cur-

rent turnover rate for athletic directors is typically two to three years. Given the expanding responsibilities now required of today's interscholastic athletic administrator, researchers have analyzed many of the day-to-day challenges facing these practitioners, including *Administrative Issues* (Forsyth et al., 2020a), *Budgetary Issues* (NFHS, 2024), *Coaches Issues* (Forsyth et al., 2021), *Competitive Balance Issues* (Johnson et al., 2017; Stoffer et al., 2021), *Concussion Issues* (DePadilla et al., 2018), *Decision-Making Issues* (Forsyth et al., 2020b), *Dual Role Issues* (Ratts, 2025a; Ratts, 2025b), *Ethical Issues* (Fraina et al., 2022), *Media Issues* (Martin et al., 2025), *Motivation Issues* (Fraina et al., 2020), *Official Issues* (Forsyth et al., 2021), *Parents Issues* (Johnson et al., 2019), *Participation Issues* (Fraina et al., 2021), *Performance Appraisal Issues* (Ratts, 2024; Ratts & Pedersen 2023), *Prevailing Issues* (Forsyth et al., 2024a; Forsyth et al., 2024b), and *Public vs. Private School Issues* (Johnson et al., 2018). To advance this previous work, the current study aims to look specifically at the athletic administrator position and the most prevalent issues facing the role itself.

As athletic administrators work to address the challenges faced in their day-to-day role, receiving support and investment from key stakeholders is essential to effective management. At a national level, the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) provides guidance and resources to its membership of current athletic administrators through education, training programs, and mentorship opportunities. Within the school itself, the culture established directly impacts the effectiveness of the athletic director (Park & Curtner-Smith, 2018). Sport employees who perceive positive and realistic expectations have stronger

commitment to the organization (Taylor et al., 2019). Specifically, when athletic leaders receive support from school administration, negative outcomes are minimized (Mazerrole & Eason, 2013), and athletic administrators feel empowered (Ratts, 2024). Thus, to effectively lead an athletic department, practitioners are reliant upon others.

Given the vast responsibilities, such as managerial tasks, communications, human resources, and networking (Forsyth, 2024), expected of today's high school athletic administrator, practitioners can face substantial demands in their role. To build upon the previous research surrounding athletic administrators and further understand the role, this study focused on the overarching administrator position and the areas impacting their ability to fulfill the position. Thus, the purpose of this research was to identify the applicable issues deemed by current practitioners to be the most pressing and important facing high school athletic administrators. By pursuing context into the specific elements necessary to effectively serve as an athletic administrator, results offer key insight into the practitioner experience and capture potential implications on the high school sport landscape through the perspectives of those serving in the role.

Literature Review

High school athletic administrators strive to provide meaningful experiences for student-athletes and other key stakeholders through effective programming (Grant, 2024). In today's climate, responsibilities necessary for managing an athletic department have grown (Forsyth, 2024; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004), as risk minimization (Forsyth et al., 2020a), evolving

financial concerns (Forsyth et al., 2020b), the pressure to specialize (Fraina et al., 2021), and social media policies (Price et al., 2022) represent just a few of the new considerations facing the position. With these rising duties, issues such as role conflict and role overload can emerge (Ha et al., 2011) and lead to burnout (Sullivan et al., 2014) and decreased job satisfaction (Conant, 2017). As such, feeling support from administration is vital to minimizing the impact of these stressors (Martin et al., 1999; Mellor et al., 2020; Ratts, 2025a) and preventing turnover intentions from athletic administrators (Sullivan et al., 2014). To further understand the most pressing issues facing the current high school athletic administrator position, this literature review examines existing work on the responsibilities and issues facing these practitioners, as well as the role of relationships with school administration on this experience.

Athletic Administrator Responsibilities

Over time, the demands placed on effective high school athletic administrators have continued to increase, with four main areas (i.e., managerial activities, human resources, communications, and networking) representing traditional responsibilities (Forsyth, 2024; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004). Managerial activities focus on the day-to-day operations required for leading athletic programs, including planning, organizing, and directing team operations and events. Evaluating coaches, meeting with key stakeholders, and compiling feedback represent the human resource responsibility of athletic administrators. Further, while communications

continue to include traditional platforms such as phone, fax, and mail, the evolution of technology and ways of promoting athletic programs have led to additional mediums that require the attention of leadership, such as the introduction of social media accounts, department websites, and online platforms. Finally, effective networking encompasses the development and maintenance of both personal and business relationships that benefit the overarching athletic department (Forsyth, 2024; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004).

Across these categories are specific responsibilities of athletic administrators, such as developing and managing budgets, planning and maintaining venues, supervising events, hiring and reviewing coaches, trainers, and staff, and ensuring the proper implementation and execution of athletic programs. Growing expectations from stakeholders have expanded these duties, as rising financial needs within an environment of decreasing funds (Forsyth et al., 2020b; Fowler et al., 2017), risk management concerns (Forsyth et al., 2020a), and the growing necessity for social media policies given their increased use by students (Price et al., 2022) all reflect additional considerations for today's athletic administrator. Thus, practitioners must be able to navigate these expanding realities within high school sport to provide the guidance necessary for ensuring meaningful athletic experiences.

To further complicate the management of these responsibilities, some athletic directors operate as the sole leader within the athletic department given the lack of an assistant athletic director. Without this resource, more of the onus is put onto the individual to effectively lead athletic

programs. In order to manage these demands, greater emphasis is placed on developing support systems around the athletic director that can step in to assist with departmental tasks and provide coverage when needed (Ratts, 2025a). Despite all of these responsibilities and expectations of the position, however, promoting an educational focus within the athletic department continues to be at the heart of the athletic administrator role (Forsyth et al., 2020a). This necessitates guiding the development of athletic programs and making decisions related to their operations in a way that further promotes the core educational aim of the athletic administrator role (Forsyth, 2024).

Issues Facing Athletic Administrators

With the many roles and responsibilities facing high school athletic administrators, issues have emerged that stretch across the high school athletic department and complicate the position. As such, practitioners who struggle to navigate these concerns often possess negative perceptions toward the role and have higher levels of turnover (Conant, 2017). Previous work has examined the day-to-day challenges facing current practitioners in high school athletics to examine contexts such as *Coaches Issues* (Forsyth et al., 2021), *Competitive Balance Issues* (Johnson et al., 2017; Stoffer et al., 2021), *Concussion Issues* (DePadilla et al., 2018), *Dual Role Issues* (Ratts, 2025a; Ratts, 2025b), *Ethical Issues* (Fraina et al., 2022), *Media Issues* (Martin et al., 2025), *Motivation Issues* (Fraina et al., 2020), *Official Issues* (Forsyth et al., 2021), *Parents Issues* (Johnson et al., 2019), *Participation Issues* (Fraina et al., 2021), *Performance Appraisal Issues* (Ratts, 2024; Ratts &

Pedersen 2023), *Prevailing Issues* (Forsyth et al., 2024a; Forsyth et al., 2024b), and *Public vs. Private School Issues* (Johnson et al., 2018). Recognizing the existing challenges facing the position thus becomes vital for athletic directors to understand the pressing concerns of the role and effectively implement strategies aimed at addressing them (Ratts, 2025b).

Time Demand Issues

Given the vast responsibilities of the athletic administrator position, finding time to address issues is difficult. When not properly managed, the experiences of practitioners are adversely affected, which can impact perceptions toward the role and one's willingness to remain in the organization. Two areas of concern are role conflict and role overload. Ha et al. (2011) examined the presence of these stressors in the work of high school athletic directors and found the job demands contributed to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and depersonalization. When higher levels of role conflict and role overload are present, job satisfaction tends to decrease at a greater rate, stress levels increase, and athletic directors are more likely to leave the profession (Conant, 2017). Elevated stress and burnout have also been found in those who perceived these issues to be founded in the career itself, especially when the conditions felt too difficult to manage (Martin et al., 1999). Thus, consideration of the specific elements and environment of the athletic department must be employed to ensure athletic administrators are positioned to navigate the role successfully and minimize potential negative outcomes.

Ethical Issues

Wide-reaching ethical issues within the high school sport landscape have further contributed to the stressors experienced by athletic administrators, including maintaining sportsmanship and positive behavior within athletics, navigating the influence of competing outside sport organizations and club sports, health concerns, and the overemphasis on winning (Fraina et al., 2022). This echoes previous work by Judge and Judge (2009), who described these expansive duties as boundary spanning where athletic directors must promote and maintain the department's athletic programs. The task-based roles, which reflect the day-to-day operations necessary for running the athletic department, have been found to cause the highest levels of stress in athletic directors (Judge & Judge, 2009). As state associations continue to promote meaningful and fair participation experiences for student-athletes, further emphasis on areas such as competitive balance (Johnson et al., 2017; Stoffer et al., 2021) and navigating public and private school debates (Johnson et al., 2018) have added further issues for athletic administrators to consider.

Stakeholder Issues

Issues with parents represent the stakeholder conflict causing the most problems for practitioners (Judge & Judge, 2009). Johnson et al. (2019) provided additional context into parent-related issues, noting the poor treatment of coaches and officials to be a common and growing problem. Given the stressors of the athletic administrator position, a highly competitive and demanding culture has emerged, eliciting more work demands from athletic

directors (Judge & Judge, 2009) that ultimately result in more burnout (Sullivan et al., 2014). This is further compounded when the athletic department has limited personnel support, as individuals have experienced greater stress and time concerns that increase negative perceptions toward the position (Martin et al., 1999).

Financial Issues

Rising costs and declining funds continue to pose a concern within high school athletics (Forsyth et al., 2020b). With many high school sport stakeholders prioritizing winning (Johnson et al., 2017), the pressure to ensure successful programs has led athletic departments to implement a pay-to-play model to address financial shortfalls. This model places responsibility onto the student-athlete and their family to help fund their athletic participation (Eyler et al., 2020). When utilized, this strategy directly conflicts with the true meaning of education-based athletics (Fraina et al., 2022) by placing an overemphasis on winning and eliciting an overinvestment from stakeholders (Johnson et al., 2017). Further stress is then transferred onto athletic directors as they strive to balance minimizing financial concerns, navigating this emerging win-at-all costs environment, and fulfilling their role by promoting education-based athletics (Forsyth et al., 2020a).

Support From School Administration

The effectiveness of a high school athletic administrator is dependent upon the culture and support provided by upper administration. Socialization factors present within an organization directly impact the experiences of employees. Park and Curtner-Smith (2018) found that

the conditions present in a school can directly support or negate an individual's efforts. This was echoed by Deenihan and MacPhail (2017), who added that employees in a supportive environment felt appreciated and empowered in their roles, enhancing their performance and improving their perceptions toward the organization. When realistic expectations are put in place for an employee's work, conflicts decrease, which can contribute to positive perspectives and stronger connections to the organization and their role (Taylor et al., 2019).

In sport specifically, support from leadership is a particularly important organizational factor for effectively navigating responsibilities. Mazerolle and Eason (2013) noted supervisor support and the ability to share role expectations as two key cultural elements that minimize negative consequences. By establishing relationships with leaders in the organization, sport employees have improved experiences given how they embrace their roles (Mellor et al., 2020). Ratts (2024) examined the role of high school sport stakeholders in helping athletic directors conduct coaching evaluations. Administrators were found to be one of the most important stakeholders contributing to this effort given their role as a leader within the school, the time spent at sporting events, and their understanding of the importance of performance appraisals. When these relationships were in place with administration, athletic directors reported feeling supported to make decisions and effectively engage in this process (Ratts, 2024). However, a perceived lack of support from leadership causes work conflict for employees that diminishes their experiences and inhibits their efforts

(Rynkiewicz et al., 2022). To address this, individuals are forced to then commit additional time and effort to create a setting that allows them to be successful in their role (Park & Curtner-Smith, 2018).

As burnout and turnover intentions continue to rise within the high school athletic director role (Conant, 2017; Ha et al., 2011), many practitioners have opted to leave the profession in pursuit of positions with lower stress and time demands. With school administration striving for consistency to effectively maintain the educational mission, the efforts employed by these leaders can directly impact employee investment. Zdroik and Veliz (2020) found that when athletic directors can incorporate key school stakeholders in the decision-making process, overall relationships are strengthened. Thus, the retention and development of high school athletic directors are dependent upon the relationships established with administration.

Purpose

The literature reviewed for this research study offers an overview of the athletic administrator position and issues that pertain to interscholastic sport. However, limited previous research has examined the specific issues facing the athletic administrator position, including how they impact the ability to oversee high school athletic programs. To address this gap, the current study identifies the perspectives of interscholastic athletic administrators regarding athletic administrator issues and the perceived importance these issues have on their profession. By demonstrating the importance of these issues, this study would support and complement the current body of literature on interscho-

lastic athletics by focusing on the role itself and the impact of these concerns on the ability of practitioners to be effective leaders. Additionally, this research can enhance stakeholders' understanding of the pertinent issues related specifically to athletic administrators.

The current study is a part of a large national study that considered 11 categories: (a) athletic administrators, (b) coaches, (c) education-based athletics, (d) finance, (e) officials, (f) parents, (g) participation, (h) specialization, (i) sportsmanship, (j) Title IX, and (k) other. These 11 categories encompassed a total of 87 issues considered relevant within interscholastic sport; the importance is defined in the Methods. Thus, this research investigation seeks to capture the pertinent issues surrounding athletic administrators and how important these issues are to the interscholastic athletic profession. In doing so, practicing athletic administrators can utilize these results to better inform and guide their efforts within the current high school sport landscape, especially in the context of the most pressing issues facing the position.

Methods

A mixed-methods approach was implemented to thoroughly examine the pressing athletic administrator issues affecting the position within high school athletics. Specifically, an exploratory sequential design was employed, in which the beliefs related to the issues deemed most important by participants were secured, and then, in-depth context related to these issues was pursued (Creswell, 2015). Thus, a survey instrument was developed and distributed to current high school athletic administrators to capture their views on the identi-

fied issues. Once this was completed, interviews were conducted to add detail and meaning to the survey results through the perspectives of seasoned administrators. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) outlined, using this mixed-methods approach allows the quantitative data to identify the beliefs of participants, while the qualitative data then offers insight into the experiences of individuals that contribute to these established viewpoints.

Eight phases were utilized to conduct the present study: a) contacting the NIAAA, b) creating a panel of experts, c) identifying contemporary issues, d) survey development, e) pilot study, f) survey distribution, g) data analysis, and h) interviews.

An invitation was first sent to the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) to request their participation in the research effort. The NIAAA represents the overarching body responsible for supporting, educating, and guiding practicing athletic administrators across the country. After a discussion centered on the study's purpose and potential benefit for the NIAAA through their involvement, this organization agreed to provide assistance where needed.

From there, a panel of experts was recruited to help in the development of this research and its key issues. The NIAAA suggested utilizing the NIAAA state coordinators ($n = 95$), who represent active athletic administrators across the United States, as the expert panelists. This decision offered the research geographical representation, with at least 10 panelists from all eight regions in the country.

To identify contemporary issues (phase three), the research team enlisted

the NIAAA. Each state coordinator was contacted and asked to submit up to five issues they viewed as the most pressing for high school sport programs and the efforts of practicing athletic administrators. Upon review of the submitted issues, several overlapping areas were identified. After grouping together related issues, a total of 87 current issues were deemed by the expert panel to be most relevant to today's interscholastic sport programs. For the specific context of this study, a total of seven issues emerged from responses within the category of athletic administrator issues. In working to ensure consistency and accuracy, a member of the Professional Development Academy (PDA) leadership team, which offers guidance on relevant topics impacting practicing high school athletic administrators, was included to review the developed definitions for each issue. These definitions thus provided guidance to participants on how each issue was defined for the context of this research (see Appendix).

Once the relevant and most pressing contemporary issues had been identified, the research team then moved forward with developing the survey instrument. A deductive reasoning approach was implemented, wherein higher order themes were used as the basis for separating each issue into broader categories (Straus & Corbin, 1998). In the context of the current study, that resulted in assigning issues to the larger areas representing their role within high school athletics. For example, issues pertaining to maintaining and upholding education-based athletics were assigned to the *Education-Based Athletics* category. Further, any issues focused on officiating were positioned within the *Officials* category. The identified issues were

thus separated into one of the following categories: *Administrators, Coaches, Education-Based Athletics, Financial, Officials, Parents, Participation, Specialization, Sportsmanship, Title IX, and Other*. Therefore, these 11 categories¹ encompassed the overarching survey instrument and included a Likert-scale with values ranging from 5 = extremely important to 1 = very little importance.

A pilot study was then employed as an opportunity to have the survey instrument tested and generate feedback to ensure it was clear and effective. The NIAAA was again contacted to receive their input on how best to approach this effort. Through discussion, it was decided that the PDA leadership team would be asked to serve as participants for the pilot study. Members of this leadership team represent predominantly retired high school athletic administrators, which allowed for meaningful feedback on this study that would help benefit current practitioners. In addition to filling out the survey, each member was also asked to offer any input on the survey instrument, which DeVellis (2017) outlined as a strength of pilot studies. Of the 17 PDA leadership team members, 14 participated in this pilot study, which represented an N=82% response rate. Feedback from these individuals suggested that the survey instrument was clear and

¹ Given the large breadth and depth of data included in a national sample with 11 categories and 87 total administrative issues, it was beyond the scope of this study to assess each issue in isolation. Thus, it was necessary to extract portions of the data set for individual analysis. This targeted extraction allowed the authors to focus more thoroughly on specific categorical issues, such as the current lens of issues facing the athletic administrator role. Additional examinations using the same data set to compare issues at multiple points in time have also been explored and would provide further context (e.g., Forsyth et al., 2024a, 2024b, Fraina et al., 2021, 2022).

ready for national distribution. As such, the survey instrument was retained.

Once the survey instrument was ready, it was distributed to the entire NIAAA membership via the online platform LifeTrack. The NIAAA helped facilitate this process by sending a written invitation and the survey link to its entire membership, encouraging athletic administrators to complete it given the benefits that would be provided to practitioners through the study's results. This effort resulted in 14,000 individuals receiving the survey, with 680 responses secured ($N=4.85\%$) for this national sample.

Data analysis was conducted by computing the traditional measures of central tendency (e.g., mean, standard deviation). A one-tail analysis of variance (ANOVA) with an alpha level of .05 allowed the researchers to determine if a significant difference existed across regions within the contemporary issues studied. A Games-Howell post-hoc test was then computed for any issues found to be significant. This allowed for significant differences across geographical regions to be identified.

Semi-structured interviews with expert athletic administrators represented the final step in this study. This effort aimed to pursue deeper context on the main issues tested through the perspectives of those with detailed experiences in the field (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Those recruited to participate in these interviews offered a valuable combination of experience as a practicing athletic administrator while also serving in high school sport leadership roles aimed at developing and cultivating those working in the position. As such, participants included: Athletic Administrator 1) a current

athletic administrator who is also actively serving as a national liaison for their state's interscholastic athletic association, Athletic Administrator 2) the current associate executive director for the national interscholastic athletic association who previously worked as an athletic administrator for more than 30 years, Athletic Administrator 3) a current high school athletic director and board member for their state's interscholastic athletic association, and Athletic Administrator 4) a current director of athletics who previously held an executive-level position for a national governing body in interscholastic sport. In total, these experts in the field have more than 130 years of experience as high school athletic administrators, which provided in-depth perspectives and insight that aided in the discussion of the study's main results. The perceptions of these experts added thick and rich description to the results of this study.

After completing initial phone calls with these four athletic administrators to request their participation, written commentaries from each individual were requested via email communication. This approach provided individuals with sufficient time to thoroughly detail their perspectives on the wide-reaching data secured in this research. Results were shared with the athletic administrators, who then offered their written professional interpretations of the most pressing issues identified by participants in the national survey. Upon receiving the written commentaries from each of the four athletic administrators, responses were collated verbatim and sent back to these individuals for member checking. This included giving each administrator the opportunity to add additional comments before ulti-

mately sharing their final approval (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Once transcripts had been approved by the interviewees, data were then coded to align responses within the established categories of issues. As the purpose of the interviews were to offer more in-depth context into the issues deemed to be most important by participants in the national survey, utilizing a deductive approach allowed for the analysis to examine how the data fit into the categories that were developed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The athletic administrators who completed these interviews were asked to provide their interpretations of survey responses, which aimed to capture the issues viewed as most pressing. Thus, coding efforts clustered data into the research's issue categories before moving more specifically into the individual issues found within each category. In the context of this study, this included coding data within issues such as *AD Responsibilities* and *Providing ADs the Proper Tools to Manage*. Through this coding approach, interview responses were leveraged to provide deeper understanding into the issues by securing the perspectives of veteran athletic administrators and their experiences with these concerns.

Results

The results of this study, which focused on the most prominent and important athletic administrator issues in today's high school sport landscape, are discussed in the following sections: 1) expanding descriptors for level of importance, 2) national descriptive results, and 3) sectional differences.

Expanding Descriptors for Level of Importance

Using a five-point Likert scale (5 = extremely important, 1 = very little importance), participants were asked to rate all athletic administrator issues based on perceived level of importance. Importance levels for each issue in the data set were interpreted using additional variances when ranking mean scores. Please reference Table 1 for the expanded variances on the level of importance for athletic administrator issues based on participant responses.

Pilot Study

For both the national and pilot studies, the descriptives (i.e., means and standard deviations) of each issue were calculated (see Table 2). All seven issues were rated

Table 1

Level of Importance on Athletic Administrator Issues

| Survey Rating Scale | Expanded Rating Lens |
|----------------------------|---|
| 5 = extremely important | 5.0 – 4.5 = extremely high importance |
| 4 = very important | 4.4 – 4.0 = very high importance 3.9 – 3.5 = high importance |
| 3 = important | 3.4 – 3.0 = important |
| 2 = somewhat important | 2.9 – 2.5 = somewhat important 2.4 – 2.0 = low importance |
| 1 = very little importance | 1.9 – 1.5 = very low importance 1.4 – 1.0 = extremely low importance |

as being of extremely high importance or very high importance (according to the expanded descriptors created by the researchers; see Table 1) by members of the PDA leadership team in the pilot study. More specifically, *Retaining ADs* and *Providing ADs the Proper Tools* were viewed as the most important issues, with *AD Responsibilities* and *AD Mentoring* following in importance rating.

National Sample

The national sample rated *AD Responsibilities* as extremely high importance. Two issues (i.e., *Providing ADs the Proper Tools* and *Relationship with Administration*) were perceived as being of very high importance, while *Retaining ADs*, *AD Mentoring*, and *Lack of Support for ADs* were viewed as high importance. Finally, *Finding ADs* was deemed as important.

Sectional Differences

By distributing the survey to athletic administrators electronically, the research team had the opportunity to review results through a geographical lens. Specifically, data were examined across regions within

the country (see Table 3). While importance levels differed among the regions for *AD Responsibilities* $F(7,672)=.452$, $p=.869$; *Retaining ADs* $F(7,672)=1.578$, $p=.139$; *Providing ADs the Proper Tools* $F(7,672)=1.213$, $p=.293$; *AD Mentoring* $F(7,672)=1.264$, $p=.266$; *Finding ADs* $F(7,672)=1.404$, $p=.200$; *Relationship with Administration* $F(7,672)=.306$, $p=.951$; and *Lack of Support for ADs* $F(7,672)=.935$, $p=.479$, the one-tail ANOVA did not reveal any significant differences across all sections.

Discussion

Today's high school athletic administrator faces wide-reaching responsibilities necessary for effectively managing and operating their athletic department (Forsyth, 2024). In working to provide meaningful experiences for high school sport stakeholders (Grant, 2024), these practitioners embrace substantial time and work demands that can contribute to role conflict and overload (Ha et al., 2011), burnout (Sullivan et al., 2014), and decreased job satisfaction (Conant, 2017). Thus, intentional consideration is needed to understand the challenges for those

Table 2

Athletic Administrator Issues for National Sample

| Issue | National Sample | | Pilot Sample | |
|--|-------------------|------|-------------------|------|
| | X | SD | X | SD |
| AD Responsibilities | 4.54 ¹ | .752 | 4.44 ² | .881 |
| Retaining ADs – Turnover Rate | 3.84 | 1.02 | 4.56 ¹ | .527 |
| Providing ADs the Proper Tools to Manage | 4.29 ² | .824 | 4.56 ¹ | .726 |
| AD Mentoring | 3.87 | .954 | 4.33 ³ | 1.00 |
| Finding ADs | 3.39 | 1.04 | 4.11 | .781 |
| Relationship with Administration | 4.12 ³ | .958 | 4.22 | .833 |
| Lack of Support from ADs | 3.96 | 1.05 | 4.22 | .833 |

1 Rated most important; 2 Rated second most important; 3 Rated third most important.

Table 3*National Sample: Athletic Administrator Issues by Section*

| | | Nat'l | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5 | S6 | S7 | S8 |
|----------------------------------|----|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| AD Responsibilities | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | 680 | 49 | 65 | 60 | 92 | 120 | 73 | 91 | 130 |
| | X | 4.54 | 4.67 | 4.55 | 4.53 | 4.45 | 4.55 | 4.50 | 4.58 | 4.53 |
| | SD | .752 | .746 | .729 | .724 | .717 | .742 | .783 | .731 | .817 |
| Retaining ADs – Turnover Rate | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | 680 | 49 | 65 | 60 | 92 | 120 | 73 | 91 | 130 |
| | X | 3.84 | 4.20 | 3.96 | 3.70 | 3.82 | 3.89 | 3.79 | 3.85 | 3.70 |
| | SD | 1.02 | .934 | .883 | 1.04 | 3.82 | 3.89 | 3.79 | 3.85 | 3.70 |
| Providing ADs the Proper Tools | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | 680 | 49 | 65 | 60 | 92 | 120 | 73 | 91 | 130 |
| | X | 4.29 | 4.44 | 4.30 | 4.38 | 4.10 | 4.25 | 4.39 | 4.29 | 4.30 |
| | SD | .824 | .818 | .705 | .825 | .931 | .855 | .759 | .809 | .813 |
| AD Mentoring | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | 680 | 49 | 65 | 60 | 92 | 120 | 73 | 91 | 130 |
| | X | 3.87 | 4.04 | 3.80 | 3.98 | 3.98 | 3.80 | 3.93 | 3.92 | 3.71 |
| | SD | .954 | .911 | .904 | .770 | .954 | .903 | 1.03 | .933 | 1.07 |
| Finding ADs | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | 680 | 49 | 65 | 60 | 92 | 120 | 73 | 91 | 130 |
| | X | 3.39 | 3.59 | 3.40 | 3.51 | 3.33 | 3.29 | 3.54 | 3.50 | 3.23 |
| | SD | 1.04 | .933 | 1.02 | 1.06 | 1.01 | .973 | 1.17 | 1.15 | .992 |
| Relationship with Administration | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | 680 | 49 | 65 | 60 | 92 | 120 | 73 | 91 | 130 |
| | X | 4.12 | 4.12 | 4.21 | 4.05 | 4.10 | 4.05 | 4.19 | 4.14 | 4.14 |
| | SD | .958 | 1.07 | .780 | .998 | .954 | 1.02 | .892 | .889 | 1.01 |
| Lack of Support for ADs | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | 680 | 49 | 65 | 60 | 92 | 120 | 73 | 91 | 130 |
| | X | 3.96 | 4.12 | 4.00 | 3.76 | 3.82 | 4.08 | 4.00 | 3.98 | 3.95 |
| | SD | 1.05 | 1.18 | 1.08 | .980 | 1.07 | 1.00 | 1.14 | .960 | 1.05 |

tasked with leading the athletic department, especially as expectations for success continue to evolve. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives and perceived importance of current athletic administrators for the most pressing issues facing practitioners in their roles. In doing so, the results provide key guidance for the elements of the position that are perceived to be the most vital in affecting those in the position. The follow-up interviews conducted offer insight into key areas that quantitative data could not provide (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). By further examining the most pressing issues identified by athletic administrators and offering implications for today's practitioners, this discussion will detail the contribution of this research for existing athletic administrator issues.

Athletic Administrator Issues

All seven athletic administrator issues analyzed for this research were deemed to be important by respondents. Three issues were rated at a 4.0 or higher in importance, with one issue (i.e., *AD Responsibilities*) being viewed as extremely important, and two issues (i.e., *Providing ADs the Proper Tools to Manage* and *Relationship with Administration*) encompassing very high importance based on the survey instrument data. These three issues will be examined further using the perspectives of current administrators.

AD Responsibilities

As the responsibilities of athletic directors continue to expand, the increased demands can have detrimental impacts on practitioners, including lower levels of satisfaction (Conant, 2017) and greater burnout (Sullivan et al., 2014). Partici-

pants in this study echoed their concerns for this overload in responsibilities, noting it as the single biggest athletic administrator issue. In fact, this issue was rated as being of extremely high importance given the potential impact on the individual due to these role demands. Providing meaningful education-based athletics experiences for student-athletes and other departmental stakeholders encompasses a range of duties and considerations that must be managed by high school athletic administrators to facilitate effective programming (Forsyth, 2024; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004). With the position continuing to evolve (Fowler et al., 2017; Price et al., 2022), the current athletic administrator position reflects a complex, multi-layered role that is prone to stress and burnout (Judge & Judge, 2009; Sullivan et al., 2014).

The challenges associated with these expanding expectations were a point of emphasis for interviewees. As Athletic Administrator 2 noted, "In my opinion, ADs are overloaded with an excess of responsibilities that they don't have enough time, resources, and support to do their job." Another administrator (1) reflected on the evolution of the position. "Over the years, the responsibilities of the AD have grown enormously, including legal and liability issues, sportsmanship, eligibility, participation, parent/fan interactions, and more," they outlined. "It is crucial that the 21st century AD stays current." As results highlight, the growing demands placed on these practitioners can add to the impact of role-related stressors, such as role conflict and role overload (Conant, 2017; Ha et al., 2011).

Athletic Administrator 1 felt that the weight of too many responsibilities can

become even more burdensome when those around the practitioner fail to appreciate that “the list of responsibilities truly is endless.” They continued, “Most often, people believe that the athletic administrator simply goes and watches games every day.” This perspective fails to account for the work that is actually done, such as “recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and training coaches,” “tireless efforts required to schedule events around the lack of officials or transportation problems,” “disciplinary actions taken against a coach or student,” and “community outreach and complaints from parents.” For administrators to effectively address this issue, further support from their environment (Park & Curtner-Smith, 2018) and more realistic work expectations (Taylor et al., 2019) are essential moving forward.

Providing ADs the Proper Tools to Manage

The perceived lack of resources necessary to manage their role embodies the second biggest athletic administrator issue identified by participants. With a rise in the types of concerns and considerations that must be embraced (Forsyth et al., 2020b, Fraina et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2019), equipping athletic administrators with sufficient tools and resources is essential for effectively navigating the responsibilities common in the position. Athletic Administrator 1 detailed how each day in the role brings with it its own circumstances and challenges that require different abilities. “The AD toolbox needs every tool possible because in my experience, there was never a day that didn’t present a unique challenge,” they noted. Adding to this, “every day was different, and every day required decisions that affected student-athletes, coaches,

parents, and the community.” As the results demonstrated, being able to fulfill the wide-reaching tasks that come with the position requires a perceived ability from practitioners to be able to do so.

Perhaps one of the most important tools needed for current administrators is the time to accomplish their responsibilities, which Athletic Administrator 1 further described. “Time is also an important tool for the current AD, and we need to ensure there is time to take care of all the challenges that arise throughout the day and the school year.” Practitioners embrace an evolving and fast-paced landscape in high school athletics that can become overwhelming if individuals do not perceive the bandwidth to successfully manage it. When administrators feel unable to effectively meet the demands of the role, many ultimately opt to leave the profession (Conant, 2017; Ha et al., 2011). Given the importance placed on this issue, having sufficient resources becomes paramount to embracing the athletic administrator position, which places responsibility on school leadership and other stakeholders to offer support and help fulfill tasks (Mellor et al., 2020; Ratts, 2024).

One way to develop this toolbox is through training and educational opportunities that can further facilitate growth and knowledge needed to embrace the role. Athletic Administrator 4 stressed that being offered the opportunity for “personal growth on the journey to becoming an effective manager and leader is equally essential” to other forms of support from school leadership. This is achieved through what another administrator (3) called “probably the most important tool an athletic administrator needs to be pro-

vided,” which “is the opportunity for professional development.” Through these experiences, Athletic Administrator 2 has found that “state and national involvement has taken many off the AD island at the local level and introduced them into a state/national network of strengthened support to stay in the job.” To be successful, practitioners not only need resources to complete the wide-reaching tasks essential to the position, but also the opportunity to develop specific skills that can help in these efforts. Examples of this were provided by Athletic Administrator 4, who identified interpersonal skills, communication, leadership capabilities, and problem-solving skills as just a few of the competencies viewed as “critical for effective management.” Thus, results support athletic administrators seeking ways of expanding their toolbox and working with their school to pursue meaningful development experiences.

Relationship with Administration

Relationships with administration embodied the third issue rated as being of at least very high importance for participants based on the survey’s results. Even when provided the tools necessary to manage the vast responsibilities in the athletic administrator role, leading an athletic department cannot be done in isolation and requires the support and assistance of school administration (Ratts, 2024). In reflecting on the importance of relationships with school administration, Athletic Administrator 1 shared that “the relationship with the administrative team and the AD is paramount. Throughout my career, I felt the most supported when I was included as part of the administrative team.” Given the relationship be-

tween athletics and academics within an educational setting, interactions are frequent and impactful.

These relationships are a vital element of the high school athletic administrator experience that can have substantial consequences (Mazerolle & Eason, Mellor et al., 2020). When positive support is perceived, individuals have reported feeling empowered to make decisions (Ratts, 2024) and experiencing improved performance and perceptions toward the organization (Deenihan & MacPhail, 2017). Athletic Administrator 3 has found that “the relationship between the athletic administrator and the principal/head of school needs to be open, honest, and sincere” to contribute to these beneficial connections. Further, when leadership decisions need to be made by the athletic administrator, there is a “sense that the decision about to be made will be supported.”

In contrast, negative interactions with administration can exist as a major issue for high school athletic administrators, as a lack of support from leadership can lead to diminished experiences (Rynkiewicz et al., 2022) and increased burnout (Sullivan et al., 2014). One administrator (2) has noticed “an increased number of school leaders who are unfamiliar with the role of the athletic administrator.” Not only does this negatively affect relationships between these stakeholders, but “that unfamiliarity also lends itself to a lack of understanding of the root of athletic problems and not valuing the influence athletics has on the school culture, graduation rates, etc.” This reality reflects the environment where administrators often feel isolated and alone in addressing issues that arise, which necessitate more time and effort from individuals (Park & Curt-

ner-Smith, 2018) and contribute to adverse perceptions toward the organization (Denniham & MacPhail, 2017). As such, there is a need for school administration to invest in relationships with athletic administrators to position them for success when leading the athletic department.

Programmatic Recommendations

Using the results of the current study, key recommendations are discussed that offer guidance to interscholastic stakeholders responsible for establishing programmatic goals. The value of facilitating educational and training opportunities for athletic administrators was emphasized by participants as a key way of aiding in the development of practitioners. Through these experiences, athletic administrators can receive guidance and establish skills that allow them to better navigate the profession, its core elements, and the challenges they face. However, the overload in responsibilities and the time investments that must be made to manage the role represented two of the biggest areas of concern for those in this study. As a result, dedicating time to these programming courses can be difficult for current practitioners. For individuals to be able to devote energy into these experiences, support from stakeholders in the organization (e.g., school administration, athletic department staff) is essential to take on role responsibilities and lessen the duties required by the athletic administrator (Ratts, 2024; Ratts 2025a).

Given these realities, intentional consideration must be employed for how the core issues from this study can be leveraged to support those in this role without further contributing to the demands of the position. Potential avenues for incor-

porating these concerns into leadership development and course training include context for a) NIAAA leadership training program, b) course inclusion, and c) state associations.

NIAAA Leadership Training Program

The NIAAA Leadership Training Program curriculum aims to provide instruction and guidance for practitioners (Forsyth, 2015; Forsyth, 2024). Representing six potential levels of certification (e.g., registered athletic administrator, certified athletic administrator, certified master athletic administrator), this self-led program stretches across the administrator's school, community, and profession. With this training consisting of 61 courses focused on key concepts such as foundational concepts (e.g., legal issues, budgeting and financing), operations and management (e.g., field and equipment management, game management), and leadership (e.g., personnel, assessment), athletic administrators are equipped with key strategies and considerations relevant to the role.

Athletic administrator issues examined in the current investigation (i.e., *AD Responsibilities*, *Retaining ADs – Turn-over Rate*, *Providing ADs the Proper Tools to Manage*, *AD Mentoring*, *Finding ADs*, *Relationship with Administration*, and *Lack of Support for ADs*) are considered foundational and leadership issues within the leadership curriculum. Specific courses in the NIAAA Leadership Training Program could incorporate the study's results to help practitioners manage the key issues identified.

Course Inclusion

Two specific types of courses within

the leadership training program represent potential fits for the results of this study. First, the flagship course of the program, LTC 501: Guiding Foundations and Philosophies, provides an overview of a high school athletic administrator's responsibilities. By detailing the vast responsibilities common to the role, which participants identified as the most pressing athletic administrator issue, further context could be added to this programming using the present results. Other courses in this context considered a good fit for issues discussed in the current investigation are LTC 502, titled "Strategies for Organizational Management," and LTC 503, titled "Enhancing Organizational Management." Additionally, there is an emphasis specifically on the prevalent issues facing high school athletics, which are captured in the course 710-B, "Current Issues in American Sport." As the most recent examination of key athletic administrator issues in the interscholastic sport landscape, this study offers further content that could be incorporated into this focal area within the training curriculum.

State Associations

As state associations are responsible for recognizing and providing support for the relevant issues facing their individual athletic administrators, the results from this national study share context for these governing bodies to consider. With all seven athletic administrator issues (i.e., *AD Responsibilities*, *Retaining ADs – Turnover Rate*, *Providing ADs the Proper Tools to Manage*, *AD Mentoring*, *Finding ADs*, *Relationship with Administration*, and *Lack of Support for ADs*) rated as important by participants, this study provides empirical support for state associations in working to address

the issues found to be most prevalent for practitioners. Each state can use these results to consider these concerns through the lens of their specific membership and work to meet their individual needs.

Given the direct connections that state associations have with the athletic administrators under their governance, finding opportunities to utilize the results from this study in a meaningful way can have a profound impact on practitioners. At a foundational level, issues related to the position itself, including an overload in responsibilities and needing specific tools and resources to manage the role, offer a starting point for these governing bodies in examining ways to assist members in their efforts. For example, state association meetings can invest time discussing the pressing issues facing athletic administrators and offer an open forum for sharing ideas to become more efficient in completing tasks or develop knowledge bases that will aid in their efforts. Another potential avenue is to establish a mentorship program where veteran administrators can be paired with newer practitioners in the state to serve as a resource and help them navigate the role. By leveraging the access and interactions that state associations have with athletic administrators, membership within the state can be better equipped to embrace key issues of the position, which will improve their experiences and minimize the growing burnout and turnover rates through this support.

Limitations

Given the use of both the quantitative and qualitative approaches, there is an inability for results to be tracked utilizing a longitudinal analysis. Additionally, as there are approximately 14,000 practicing ath-

letic administrators within the NIAAA's membership, non-response was prevalent with a total of 680 respondents completing the survey. For those who participated, the size of school was not thoroughly examined, which could have provided further context into the results and the importance placed on athletic administrator issues. Finally, the qualitative part of this study did not represent the traditional approach to this methodology. Instead, the semi-structured interviews were utilized to provide additional expert context that aided in the discussion of results.

Recommendations for Further Research

Despite the efforts employed to utilize relevant and pressing athletic administrator issues within high school athletics, this was not an exhaustive list of potential concerns. Further research could be implemented that identifies additional issues common to the position. For example, the most pressing issue in this study, *AD Responsibilities*, focused on the growing job duties necessary of current athletic administrators. A potential follow-up effort could be implemented that examines the individual responsibilities common to the role and examine which of those areas are perceived to be most important or the biggest causes for concern. This would add important context into not only the reality of an overload in responsibilities for practitioners, but also the key elements that are viewed as priorities within the work of high school athletic administrators.

Additionally, while expert interviews served as further context aimed at advancing understanding of the study's results, there is an opportunity to invest more

thoroughly in a qualitative approach that pursues depth for these athletic administrator issues. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) noted how interviews offer in-depth considerations that quantitative data cannot. Thus, interviews with athletic administrators across various levels (e.g., local, state, national) and school sizes are recommended to focus on the issues examined. Doing so can capture the perspectives and experiences of practitioners in this area and pursue another layer of support for the current study's results.

Conclusion

High school athletic administrators play a vital role in the development of student-athletes through the management of and expectations for athletic programs (Forsyth, 2024). The responsibilities of this position have expanded and become more diverse, especially as the current landscape of this segment continues to evolve, which creates the need to understand more thoroughly the key athletic administrator issues common to the role. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze issues deemed to be the most pressing for practitioners and capture the perceived importance of these areas on fulfilling the position. Through surveys with 680 athletic administrators, all seven issues examined (i.e., *AD Responsibilities*, *Retaining ADs – Turnover Rate*, *Providing ADs the Proper Tools to Manage*, *AD Mentoring*, *Finding ADs*, *Relationship with Administration*, and *Lack of Support for ADs*) were found to be important by participants, with one issue (i.e., *AD Responsibilities*) viewed as extremely important and two issues specifically rated as very high importance (i.e., *Providing ADs the Proper*

Tools to Manage and Relationship with Administration). Based on these results and the perspectives of four expert athletic administrators, this study details context into the rising athletic administrator issues facing those leading high school athletic departments, as well as the potential implications that exist for the position moving forward.

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Appendix: Definition of Terms

Athletic Administrator Issues

1. AD Responsibilities: The ever-expanding role of the AD now includes many more responsibilities than in the past, including finance, marketing, and budgeting.
2. Retaining AD's - Turnover rate: Due to job complexities, long hours and other issues, the turnover rate for AD's is very high. In some states as high as 20-25% per year.
3. Providing AD's the proper tools to manage: As AD duties expand, what are to-day's tools that can help the AD manage his or her day in an efficient and effective way, particularly in a high-tech society.
4. AD mentoring: Coaching turnover is very high in most districts. As such, the AD needs to be a mentor to new and/or inexperienced coaches. As well, the AD must serve as a mentor to other athletic staff. Finally, the AD needs to model mentoring to his or her coaches so that coaches see how to mentor student athletes.
5. Finding AD's: AD turnover is high. Finding capable and willing individuals to fill empty AD positions is difficult.
6. Relationships with Administration: Whether or not the AD is officially listed as a school administrator, they certainly act in that capacity. Therefore, maintaining a good working relationship with other school administrators is key.
7. Lack of support from AD's: While athletic administrators should support the coaching staff by promoting professional development opportunities for them, creation of positive culture, providing budgeted funds for coaching clinics, and supporting open communication. In addition, the athletic director should conduct educational sessions for coaching staff members regarding policy, rules, and expectations for the athletic department, school, and school district. Still, coaches may sometimes feel that they are not being supported in some situations.