What It Means to "Win" in Small College Athletics: Strategic Contingency Theory and Alternative Success

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The purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding of how athletics success is defined and operationalized for small colleges in Division III athletics. Strategic Contingency Theory was utilized as a framework to examine and better understand how athletics directors, campus administrators, and faculty define athletics success. The underlying premise of Strategic Contingency Theory is that an organization must adapt in order to survive. In-depth interviews were conducted with NCAA Division III athletics directors, campus administrators (e.g., President, Provost, Vice President for Enrollment Management), and Faculty Athletics Representatives to better understand how university and athletics administrators define athletics department success at small colleges. In all, 33 interviews were conducted across seven states at 11 different Division III institutions where student-athletes comprise 20% or more of the student body. Findings and discussion focus on athletics success in relation to competitive imbalance in Division III athletics, athletics as an enrollment driver, providing a quality student-athlete experience, and on-court winning/losing. Implications for athletics department priorities are discussed.

Keywords: NCAA Division III athletics, athletics success, student-athlete experience, enrollment goals

Introduction

In a popular press article investigating why small colleges were adding football while participation was declining across the country, Demirel (2013) visited Hendrix College, a NCAA Division III institution in Conway, Arkansas. He was surprised to find the administration was so open about their reasons for adding the sport – surmising, "each of the (new football) players provides Hendrix College an influx of the cash it needs to remain relevant in a world where pure liberal arts education is increasingly becoming an endangered species" (para. 13). Hendrix was not alone in adding football to their offerings as 29 other small colleges did the same between

2008 and 2012 (Demirel, 2013). This trend of adding sports is also not exclusive to football – sports like men's volleyball, women's wrestling, and esports have seen significant growth in recent years. (Office of Post-Secondary Education: Equity in Athletics Data Analysis Cutting Tool, 2021). At the University of the Ozarks, the percentage of student-athletes on campus has grown from 27 percent to over 50 percent in the last ten years, including the addition of wrestling, swimming and diving, and shooting sports (Office of Post-Secondary Education: Equity in Athletics Data Analysis Cutting Tool, 2021).

In the minds of some small college decision-makers, having athletics programs can be a direct strategy to attract students to the university that may not necessarily otherwise be interested in the college or university; for those institutions, athletics is a recruiting mechanism to increase enrollment (Peale, 2013). Peale (2013) detailed, "At Thomas More and the Mount (Mount Saint Joseph), they aren't trying to break even on sports. Instead, they use it as a tool, just as they would using the marching band or the honors program" (para. 8). In much the same way a prospective band student or prospective honors program begins to seriously consider a school because of specific programmatic offerings (e.g., the band or honors program), prospective small college students may select the school because of the specific opportunity to participate in Division III athletics at the institution. Thus, the athletics department itself may be a strong recruiting mechanism for the small college.

Peale (2013) contended that small colleges use athletics to drive up both enrollment and tuition dollars from the student-athletes that are not on athletics scholarship. These schools, he argued, rely on the money generated from athletics to survive (Peale, 2013). For the faction of small colleges and universities that are public institutions, they must also grapple with the recent sharp decline in funding from state governments (Douglas-Gabriel, 2015; Sherter, 2013). As such, at smaller, private institutions in which the tuition-dollars of the students are relied upon heavily for operating revenues, tuition management and enrollment management are intimately intertwined (Hossler, 2000).

As noted by the Hendrix administrator above, the reason for adding sports – and increasing roster sizes – is institutional survival. In short, at Hendrix, Ozarks, Thomas More, Mount Saint Joseph, and hundreds of similar institutions, the most significant wins (and losses) may happen before the athletes even take the field. Thus, the purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding of how athletics success is defined and operationalized for small colleges in Division III athletics. In this study, "operationalized" signifies the ways in which definitions of athletics success tangibly manifest themselves as it relates to the priorities of the athletics department.

Literature Review

Division III Athletics Background

The NCAA divided its member institutions into Divisions I, II, and III in 1973 based primarily on funding of athletics programs, scholarships for student-athletes, and fan interest (Covell et al., 2013; "Divisional differences," 2021; Yost,

2010). In doing so, the NCAA created more postseason opportunities for more schools (Covell et al., 2013). At the Division III level, student-athletes cannot receive scholarships based on athletic merit ("Division III facts and figures," 2021; Yost, 2010). For some of the more straightforward statistics, consider the following about Division III: 445 Division III institutions, 80% of Division III institutions are private, 20% of Division III institutions are public, and student-athletes comprise, on average, 25% of the student body (ranges from two to more than 67%). Moreover, Division III athletics has the greatest variation in types of enrollments in comparison to Division I and Division II as there are small private institutions with fewer than 1,000 students, larger regional public institutions, and even national private research institutions with upwards of 25,000 undergraduate students ("Division III facts and figures," 2021; Nichols et al., 2020).

NCAA Division III athletics is often under-researched, which is notable given that Division III institutions, on average, have a higher percentage of student-athletes than their Division I and Division II brethren (Kerschner & Allan, 2021; Willner, 2019; Zvosec et al., 2021a). Because there are not athletic scholarships at Division III institutions, the types of financial aid packages, the timeline of such packages, and the admissions processes and timelines of each institution can create a Division III recruiting process that is can be murkier logistically than at the Division I level (Bandré, 2011; Nichols et al., 2020; Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015).

Division III athletics departments, in general, have fewer coaches, smaller budgets, less commercial attention, and lack of traditional sport-related revenue streams (e.g., broadcasting rights deals, corporate sponsorships, ticket sales) than higher levels of NCAA athletics and professionalized sport and wins and losses do not necessarily have the same financial impact (Covell at el., 2013; Katz et al., 2021; Nichols et al., 2020; Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015; Paule-Koba & Farr, 2013; Zvosec et al., 2021a; Zvosec et al., 2021b; Zullo, 2021).

Given the diversity of Division III institutions and proposed typologies of Division III institutions (academically elite, large public, mission-driven privates, and liberal arts; Katz et al., 2015; academically elite national universities, academically elite liberal arts national colleges, non-academically elite liberal arts national colleges, regional public institutions; Zvosec et al., 2021a), examining the role of athletics success and how success is defined and operationalized is critical for the future of small college athletics.

Role of Athletics at Division III Institutions

The on-campus experience as it relates to the role of athletics on Division III campuses is likely far different for both student-athletes and the general student body relative to Division I institutions (Katz et al., 2021). Even though the athletics experience at Division III institutions may not generate as much fan interest or revenue streams as Division I institutions, Division III athletics can still add institutional value in a variety of ways (e.g., Covell et al., 2013; Katz et al., 2021; Nichols et al., 2020; Schaeperkoetter et al, 2015; Zvosec et al., 2021a; Zvosec et al., 2021b). Understanding how "value added" manifests itself is particularly important as insti-

tutions work to develop their own definitions of athletics success (Katz et al., 2015; Katz et al., 2021; Nichols et al., 2020; Nixon et al., 2021; Zvosec et al., 2021a; Zvosec et al., 2021b).

Several studies have explored factors impacting college choice for Division III student-athletes and contextualized success by detailing the role of winning as a primary measure of success for coaches and for prospective student-athletes in their college choice processes (Covell et al., 2013; Nichols et al., 2020; Nixon et al., 2021). In noting the challenges Division III coaches face in comparison to Division I coaches when recruiting - e.g., lack of athletics scholarships, fewer full-time coaches, smaller budgets - Nichols and colleagues (2020) detailed the role of recruiting efficiently in order to bring in talented basketball players. In Nixon et al.'s (2021) examination of college choice among NCAA Division I, II, and III college football players, success focused on the impact of recruits on on-field/on-court performance. Covell et al. (2013) argued for considering recruiting at the Division III level as a form of resource acquisition wherein they detailed,

> the significance of this research is based on the critical nature of attracting qualified prospects to opt to select one intercollegiate athletic participation opportunity over another, and it is difficult to understate how important it is for schools and programs to attract the most athletically proficient athletes possible so their programs may experience on-field success (p. 32).

Coaches focusing on recruiting as a mechanism to increase on-field performance is unsurprising, even at the Division III level where losses may not have as dramatic of an impact on coaching careers or departmental revenue. Considering the perspective of student-athletes as they make college choice decisions is important as well when reflecting on how student-athlete priorities may or may not dovetail with athletics departments notions of athletics success. Zvosec et al. (2021b) noted that the opportunity to be a college student-athlete may "carry a disproportionate amount of weight" (p. 45) in the Division III college choice process when there may be cheaper higher education opportunities wherein the prospective college student would not be a student-athlete. Hendricks and Johnson (2016) shared similar sentiments in that Division III student-athletes, despite not receiving athletics scholarships, still may have an "athletics first" mentality as they structure their commitments in college. While Division III student-athletes are not as "big-time" as their Division I counterparts (Katz et al., 2021), Division III student-athletes may feel that important stakeholders on campus (namely, faculty) underappreciate the level of commitment involved in being a student-athlete (Williams et al., 2010).

In examining Division III athletics administrators' organizational values, Cooper and Weight (2012) found administrators emphasized providing quality student-athlete experiences as a leading measure of athletics department success. Katz et al. (2021) highlighted that Division III athletics can add institutional value by building and maintaining relationships not just for student-athletes, but for the general student body as well since there are typically lower barriers of entry (e.g., free tickets, convenient locations) for students to socialize at Division III sporting events in comparison to large-scale Division I football and basketball games.

In an examination of the academically elite typology of Division III athletics, Zvosec and colleagues (2021a) found that athletics serves a role on campus as a time-consuming extracurricular activity where students have an opportunity to compete for postseason accolades as a student-athlete at prominent, nationally-ranked academic institutions. Such a combination would typically not be possible at academically elite Division I institutions due to poor athletics fit (i.e., not talented enough to receive a Division I athletics scholarship) and at Division III institutions who excel athletically (where academic fit may be poor). Athletics serving as an on-campus tool to drive enrollment was not prevalent at the studied academically elite Division III institutions.

In addition to research focusing on on-field success, others have examined the role of Division III athletics as serving a vital role on campus for tuition generation and meeting institutional enrollment goals. Snyder and Waterstone (2015) debated the progressive athletics culture (i.e., adding sports in order to increase enrollment) in small institutions and the related impact of financial concerns in higher education. In response to the unanimous rejection of the NCAA's 2008 proposal to add a fourth division, "the institutions were forced to evaluate Division III intercollegiate athletics in their current state and assess its viability going forward in the increasingly complex landscape of higher education" (Snyder & Waterstone, 2015, p. 195). At small institutions faced with increasing costs of higher education, administrators must be intentional in developing ways to transfer costs (Smith & Synowka, 2014; Snyder & Waterstone, 2015). For university presidents at small colleges, the idea that athletics can help a school financially based on student-athlete tuition dollars "represents a polarizing view of athletics at small colleges" (Snyder & Waterstone, 2015, p. 32).

In Bouchet and Hutchinson's (2011) case study on Birmingham-Southern College's transition from Division I to Division III athletics, moving away from the athletics scholarship model of Division I athletics to a pay-to-play model of Division III athletics was a primary motive for the institution to better stabilize its finances. Division III athletics departments serving a role as an enrollment driver on campus does not have to mutually exclusive from providing quality student-athlete experiences.. In their study on the student-athlete experiences of non-revenue sports at the Division I level and all sports at the Division III level, Paule-Koba and Farr (2013) importantly noted, "While on the surface it may appear that pumping money into the athletic program would hurt the institution, without these programs, students who base their college decision on athletics will take their talents and tuition dollars elsewhere" (p. 211). As Division III athletics departments may bear the weight of contributing to institutional enrollment and tuition goals (e.g., Covell et al. 2013; Willner, 2019; Zvosec et al., 2021a; Zvosec, 2021b), understanding how athletics success is defined and operationalized is important when considering the role of athletics in the future of small colleges.

In exploring factors contributing to the on-field success of Division III athletics departments, Katz and colleagues (2015) found two types of Division III institu-

tions tend to excel most athletically (as determined by the Learfield Director's Cup standings): those with large student body populations and highly selective academic institutions. Importantly, Katz et al. (2015) also noted there might be "alternate definitions of success" (p. 115) based on the environmental constraints and responsiveness to the strategies of other like-minded Division III institutions and the campus administrators at each Division III institution (namely at small, private, liberal arts colleges). The stakes for many of these small schools are arguably higher than simply competing for the on-field success discussed by Katz and colleagues (2015).

Strategic Contingency Theory

Strategic Contingency Theory was used to develop the general purpose of this study because its underlying tenet is that an organization must adapt to a changing environment in order to survive and be successful. Strategic Contingency Theory relies on the idea that an organization makes decisions based on economic and market conditions. In short, the organization's primary goal is to survive while adapting to the changing landscape in which they operate. It is appropriate for this study because small college athletics success may be largely measured by how the athletics department contributes to the survival of the overall college or university. Restated, Strategic Contingency Theory is founded on the premise that an organization is an open system and it must adapt to its environment if it is to survive (Daft et al., 1984; Duncan, 1972; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). One of the primary factors in this survival process is dealing with uncertainty and contingencies (Duncan, 1972; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Contingencies may include the economic environment, national culture, and speed of technological change (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). In addressing how an organization makes policy changes in response to environmental circumstances, Lawrence & Lorsch (1969) asserted, "We will be seeking an answer to the fundamental question, '*What kind of organization does it take to deal with various economic and market* conditions?'" (p. 1).

Duncan (1972) defined the environment as, "The totality of physical and social factors that are taken directly into consideration in the decision-making behavior of individuals in the organization" (p. 314). The specific boundaries of the organization set the internal and external organizational environment (Duncan, 1972). Importantly, the organization makes decisions in line with the several different environmental dimensions. Duncan (1972) argued there are two primary dimensions: (1) simple/complex dimension (number of competitors in the environment, homogeneity/heterogeneity of competitors) and (2) the static-dynamic dimension (the frequency and intensity of change the organization undergoes). Daft and Weick (1984) implored, "Organizations must develop information processing mechanisms capable of detecting trends, events, competitors, markets, and technological developments relevant to their survival" (p. 285).

With an understanding of the literature related to the background of Division III athletics, the role of athletics at Division III institutions, and Strategic Contingency Theory, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1:   How is athletics success defined and operationalized in small college athletics?

RQ2:   How do definitions of athletics success guide institutional policies and priorities related to athletics?

RQ3:   Do these types of institutions believe they have a chance to "win" (in the form of on-court/on-field success) consistently and how does that impact institutional and athletics department strategies?

Methods

Research Setting

Small colleges continue to have a role in the overall setting of institutions of higher education in the United States (Bonvillian & Murphy, 2014; Riddle et al., 2005; Westfall, 2006; Zdziarski, 2010) as they constitute more than 70% of all colleges and universities in the United States and a quarter of all undergraduates attend small colleges (Westfall, 2006). However, these small – often private, liberal arts – colleges have faced many challenges with their enrollments. Since most small colleges are tuition-driven, even a slight change in enrollment numbers can have a dramatic impact on the institution's budget (Barr & McClellan, 2010; Bonvillian & Murphy, 2014; DesJardins & Bell, 2006; Riddle et al., 2005; Zdziarski, 2010).

At the Division III level, student-athletes comprise, on average, 25% of the student body. Contextualizing the background and basic facts and figures of the NCAA Division III level provides rationale for categorizing the small college athletics environment as Division III institutions where student-athletes comprise 20% or more of the student body. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education ("Size and setting classification description," 2021) was also utilized to categorize small college athletics. In classifying the size of colleges, the Carnegie Classification details, "Size matters. It is related to institutional structure, complexity, culture, finances, and other factors" ("Size and setting classification description," 2021, para. 2). "Very small" colleges are classified as institutions with enrollments of less than 1,000 degree-seeking students (includes undergraduate and graduate enrollments). "Small colleges" are institutions with enrollments between 1,000 and 2,999 (Size and setting classification description," 2021). Additionally, Division III median (1,751) and mean (2,628) undergraduate enrollments were used in combination with the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education for "very small" and "small colleges." Ultimately, for the purposes of this study, the small college athletics environment was categorized as Division III institutions where student-athletes comprise 20% or more of the student body.

Small-college athletics departments seemingly operate on the complex side of Duncan's (1972) simple/complex dimension in their NCAA membership environment and their college/university environment. However, small-college athletics departments also may make decisions similar to other Division III colleges with low enrollments and high numbers of student-athletes (for this study, colleges with student-athletes that make up 20% or more of the student body population). Thus,

components of the interview guide questions address Duncan's (1972) static-dynamic dimension. Specifically, understanding how university and athletics administrators define athletics program success at small colleges and the implications of these alternative definitions of success on the operations of the athletics departments will be explored. Therefore, Katz and colleagues' (2015) assertion that there may be "alternate definitions of success" (p. 115) combined with the theoretical underpinnings of Strategic Contingency Theory could help explain the decision-making of small college athletics departments.

Research Approach

Constructivism served as the underlying research approach for this study, which "is rooted in the assumption that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and they develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (Andrew et al., 2011, p. 10). Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Sound qualitative data necessitates the use of rich, thick descriptions and explanations of specific processes within the studied context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In qualitative research, interviewing is a common form of data collection and involves collecting data that addresses the 'why' and 'how' of a phenomenon (Gratton & Jones, 2004). A semi-structured interview involves the researcher adhering to a specific set of questions but allows the interviewer to ask subsidiary or follow-up questions based on interviewee responses. Specifically, "semi-structured interviews allow the emergence of important themes that may not emerge from a more structured format. This enables the subjects to reveal insights into their attitudes and behavior that may not readily be apparent" (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 143).

Procedures and Participants

In-person semi-structured interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) were conducted with thirty-three participants at 11 Division III institutions across seven states. At each of the 11 institutions, 3 interviewees (the athletics director, a high up university administrator identified by the athletics director such as the university president or VP for Enrollment Management, and one faculty athletics representative) took part in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. In using purposeful sampling, the authors sought to align with Maxwell's (2013) notion that "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other sources" (p. 97).

Interviews were conducted in the following seven states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Interviews were conducted at institutions where student-athletes comprise 20% of more of the student body, as identified via the Office of Postsecondary Education's Equity in Athletics Database (OPE, 2021). In all, Author One contacted the athletics director at 41 institutions. Each interview was conducted in the participant's office or in an athletics department conference room and typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

Table 1

Institutional Profiles

School	Enrollment Range (Undergrad. Only) *	Student-Athlete Range *	% Student-Athletes *	Tuition and Fees (does not include Room and Board) **	2015-2016 Learfield Directors' Cup Final Standing Range ***	Endowment (in millions) & School Admissions Selectivity **
1	1,000 – 1,500	400-500	30-35%	$45,000 - $50,000	100-125	$75-100, More selective
2	2,000 – 2,500	500-600	25-30%	$50,000 - $55,000	1-50	$700-800, More selective
3	500 – 1,000	200-300	20-25%	$25,000 - 30,000	No points earned	Not reported, selective
4	1,500 – 2,000	400-500	25-30%	$60,000 - $65,000	50-75	$400-500, more selective
5	500 – 1,000	200-300	45-50%	$25,000 - $30,000	No points earned	$75-100, selective
6	2,000 – 2,500	800-900	40-45%	$30,000 - $35,000	1-50	$125-150, selective
7	1,000 – 1,500	300-400	30-35%	$30,000 - $35,000	200-225	$75-100, selective
8	1,000 – 1,500	300-400	40-45%	$40,000 - $45,000	300-325	$25-50, less selective
9	1,500 – 2,000	600-700	40-45%	$45,000-$50,000	1-50	$75-100, selective
10	500 – 1,000	200-300	25-30%	$25,000-$30,000	175-200	$50-75, selective
11	1,000 – 1,500	300-400	35-40%	$25,000-$30,000	No points earned	$25-50, selective

* denotes data from Equity in Athletics Database ("Office of Postsecondary Education," 2021)
** denotes data from US News and World Report
*** denotes data from Learfield Directors' Cup

Prior literature on Division III athletics success (e.g., Katz et al., 2015) and Strategic Contingency Theory guided the development of interview questions. Example questions from the interview guide included: (a) "When you interviewed for your current position, what were the discussions regarding athletics-department on-court, on-field success?" (b) "When looking back on a school year, what goes into you judging whether the athletics program was successful or not?" and (c) "How does the athletics department mission align with the overall college/university? With Division III athletics?" (e) "How level of a playing field is NCAA Division III athletics?"

Analysis

Author One transcribed each of the interviews verbatim and the authors utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) six non-linear steps for thematic data analysis: (1) familiarizing yourself with data, (2) initial coding, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. In thematic analysis, authors utilize the "method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting pat-

terns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The authors initially read the transcripts, noting initial codes on a master coding chart that included a box on the grid for each question and each of the 33 interviewee responses for each interview guide question. Each box was tagged with several words encapsulating each interviewee response. Codes are "tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56).

The coding process involved the initial development of themes and review of developed themes. For example, the following occurred as part of the codes, categories, subtheme, and theme development process for the interview guide question asking interviewees, "How level of a playing field is Division III athletics?" While reading each of the transcriptions of interviewee responses to the aforementioned question, tags were noted in each box for each interviewee. Tags included the following: playing field not level, it is a problem but does not need to be addressed, it is a problem that needs to be fixed, resources, endowment, cost, private/public, and academic prestige and offerings. The authors would then debrief until a consensus was reached. If codes showed mixed interviewee responses (e.g., some interviewees said Division III athletics is not a level playing field and the problem needs to be addressed while some interviewees agreed it is not a level playing field but it is not an issue that needs to be addressed), both subthemes were detailed in the findings/results. These codes led to the development of the theme "lack of competitive balance in NCAA Division III athletics." From there, the aforementioned tags were detailed as subthemes in the findings/results. The authors then also selected representative quotes for "vivid, compelling extract examples" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 87).

The authors adhered to Shenton's four specific suggestions for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The step of credibility includes using well-established research methods (e.g., semi-structured interviews), coding debriefing sessions, and the background qualifications of the researchers. Both authors are former Division III student-athletes and have traveled to numerous Division III institutions for prior data collection. Using one's personal voice and previous relevant experiences can create a mutual respect that is essential for rapport development (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Such researcher positionality is important for credibility and trustworthiness as well (Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015). The authors intentionally gathered data from three different stakeholder groups (athletics director, campus administrator, faculty) at different institutions because, in relation to data triangulation,

> Where appropriate, site triangulation may be achieved by the participation of informants within several organizations so as to reduce the effect on the study of one particular local factor peculiar to one institution. Where similar results at different sites, findings may have greater credibility in the eyes of the reader. p. 64

In Shenton's (2004) recommendations for dependability and confirmability, it is important to provide other researchers sufficient information to repeat the data collection process if so desired and to adhere to specific data analysis frameworks to ensure

findings are a byproduct of the data itself. For transferability, the findings need "to allow readers to have a proper understanding of it (the data), thereby enabling them to compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those that have seen emerge in their situations" (Shenton, 2004, p. 69). Results below are presented according to them and representative, verbatim quotes are used to exemplify themes.

Findings

The themes that emerged throughout the 33 interviews are organized according to the following general themes: lack of competitive balance in NCAA Division III athletics, discussions of expectations for success in athletics director hiring process, and definitions of success (including faculty, administrator, and athletics director subgroups).

Lack of Competitive Balance in NCAA Division III Athletics

Although most interviewees felt their institution aligned with the Division III philosophy, most respondents conveyed disdain for any argument that Division III athletics is a level playing field. Several interviewees even balked at the question by laughing to start their response. There was a general consensus that Division III athletics is not level, based on schools varying resources, endowment, and whether the school is public or private. Remaining financially sustainable is a competitive and strategic process that requires an awareness of what is happening at small colleges and Division III athletics departments external to each institution. Many also conveyed that there are a lot of different types of Division III schools and compared competitive athletics equity in Division III athletics to Division I and Division II. Moreover, although there was a general consensus that Division III athletics was not level, there was some variation as to whether it was an issue athletics directors, administrations, and NCAA staff wanted to change. Respondents typically gave very in-depth answers and tended to discuss the role of resources, endowments, and public/private classification, and also conveyed disparate opinions about whether there should be initiatives to change the competitive inequity in Division III athletics. Athletics Director 3 gave an impassioned response by iterating,

> It's not (level). I don't think there's – this is one of the things that drives me crazy about NCAA conventions, for instance, and legislation. They're like 'oh, well it's not equitable.' Nothing is. We're in Division III, so is Wash U (Washington University in St. Louis)… But then you also have the Wisconsin schools, where they're state schools (larger with lower tuition). … It just boggles my mind that we try to pretend that we're trying to make things fair. It's not fair. It's never going to be fair.

Importantly, Athletics Director 3 indicated opinions on the several different types of Division III schools by clearly separating Division III athletics into distinct categories: schools with stronger academic reputations and greater financial resources, state schools with larger enrollments and cheaper tuition, and schools like Institution 3 (a

private school with lower enrollment, a less prestigious academic reputation, and fewer financial resources).

Several specific pieces of Division III legislation – student-athlete academic eligibility standards and the non-scholarship Division III model leaves financial aid in the control of each institution – can lead to a competitive imbalance. Specifically, the financial resources vary at different Division III institutions and that can have a dramatic impact on the athletics program's ability to win athletics competitions. Interestingly and importantly, Athletics Director 4 used a very specific piece of financial information to distinguish between the proverbial "haves" and "have not's" in Division III athletics – the size of the institution's endowment. As was the case with many interviewees, they not only thought Division III athletics was not level from a competitive balance standpoint, but they also detailed what distinguished different types of Divisions III institutions in relation to being consistently successful from a winning and losing standpoint.

Interviewees tended to distinguish that the "haves" schools – either large Division III public schools or private schools with large endowments – tended to distinguish themselves from a competitive success standpoint in comparison to the "have nots" – small, private, tuition-driven institutions with smaller endowments. Based on interviewee responses, such distinctions strongly contribute to what they believe is an unlevel playing field in Division III athletics from an on-field, on-court winning standpoint. Importantly, these responses differ considerably from how interviewees defined athletics success at their own institutions – a definition of success that is largely defined by whether the athletics department contributes to the financial sustainability of the interviewed institutions, all of which are small, private, tuition-driven institutions and most of which self-identify as having low endowments.

While there was a general consensus about Division III athletics not being a level playing field, and that large public colleges and heavily endowed private colleges had the best chances to excel athletically, compete for national championships, and finish high in the Learfield Director's Cup, respondents were split as to whether or not there should be efforts to try to restore competitive balance in Division III athletics. Some had more of an "it is what it is" mentality and wished people would stop trying to create competitive equity. Others wished there would be more proactive conversations to give small, tuition-driven privates more of a chance to compete on a national level for championships. At Division III institutions, because of the large disparity in endowments, academic offerings, size, and public funding for higher education, some types of schools were typically able to offer student-athletes better experiences – either academically, financially, or athletics competitive success – which when combined, contributed to an uneven playing field in Division III athletics.

Discussions of Success in Athletics Director Hiring Process

As part of the effort to gain a more holistic understanding of how small college athletics departments and small college campuses compare to, and contrast with, more traditional conceptualizations of athletics success (e.g., winning), interviewees were asked not only to specifically detail how they define athletics success but they

were also asked to think of when they went through their own hiring process as athletics director. Athletics directors were then asked to describe any expectations that were discussed with them during the interview process for the department for on-field athletics success (winning).

In general, athletics directors said expectations about winning and losing were not explicitly discussed as part of their own hiring process. Many athletics directors did indicate that coaches, student-athletes, and athletics department personnel were inherently competitive people but that certain goals for the athletics department and institutional limitations made it such that winning was not or could not be a direct, top priority. Athletics Director 11 representatively echoed many other athletics directors' sentiments by saying,

> Winning was never an issue, has never been brought up. It was more participation. It was more DIII philosophy, more graduation, retention, was really what we've built here. Being a small, tuition-driven institution, not heavily endowed, very tuition-driven. The idea was (enrollment) numbers, retaining numbers and graduating good students. And be competitive, whatever you want to define competitive, whatever that type of thing is.

Athletics Director 11, along with many other athletics directors, indicated that winning could be a byproduct of enrollment and a quality student-athlete experience. It was not likely for student-athletes to have a good experience if they were consistently losing. Retaining those student-athletes and recruiting new student-athletes was closely associated with a quality student-athlete experience, which was associated in part with not always losing. As such, for athletics directors and for administrators placing expectations on athletics directors, winning itself was not a direct priority. While lamenting the lack of a level playing field in Division III athletics, many athletics directors voiced that winning simply could not be seen as a primary measurement of athletics success because of some inherent limitations as a small, often resource-deprived institution.

Many athletics directors, while answering this question – and other interviewees throughout their interviews – consistently mentioned that as enrollment-driven institutions, one of their leading foci for success was whether the athletics department met enrollment goals that helped the overall institution meet its enrollment goals and thus maintain financial solvency. They knew that in order to meet the financial objectives of the institution, enrollment numbers and tuition dollars were supremely important. Such an emphasis was accentuated by the fact that these institutions had not only high overall student-athlete percentages at the institution but because incoming freshmen classes were frequently more than 45% student-athletes.

Definitions of Athletics Success

Another prong of the overall approach to gain a deep understanding of how small college athletics success is measured was to directly ask interviewees how they expressly define athletics success. As will become evident in describing interviewee responses, interviewees tended to respond in ways that reflect their specific role on campus. As such, faculty tended to look at more academic measurables, campus

administrators looked at the overall viability of the general campus and the role of athletics in that viability, and athletics directors looked at more internal measures of athletics department operating and then expanded into how those internal components contributed to the financial solvency of the institution.

Faculty Definitions of Athletics Success

Faculty interviewees tended to focus on the role of athletics specifically in relation to academic performance. Additionally, faculty emphasized the pragmatic role of athletics for financial initiatives and campus culture. FAR 9 representatively defined athletics success from the FAR point of view by emphasizing,

> The first thing I always look at or think about is the degree to which our student-athletes are well-integrated into the campus life, the degree to which they are successful academically in the broadest sense – both in terms of grades and graduation and participation fully in their academic programs. And the degree to which the coaches, in my interaction with them, seem to appreciate and are aware of the student-athletes, and in that order (student and then athlete), and don't get that reversed. I don't even – I mean I enjoy it when we win but if we don't, doesn't bother me a lot.

FAR 3 echoed such sentiments and further emphasized that student-athletes and academic departments can be mutually beneficial. Specifically, student-athletes can help for enrollment in different academic programs and therefore can increase academic resources for the whole campus body. In turn, student-athletes can have an empowering and career-defining academic experience. FAR 3 stressed,

> To me, for the athletic department to be successful, it's sort of two-fold. It's bringing in student-athletes that will benefit our program and vice versa. Where [the school] will help them. But also to retain them as students and to me that's the success, to bring in students that can handle the academic side. And I think that's the number one goal with DIII, is the education first and athletics second.

FAR interviewees, in general, emphasized that the athletics department was successful in their eyes by having student-athletes that were strong contributors from an academic standpoint.

Administrator Definitions of Athletics Success

As mentioned previously, administrators tended to define athletics success by looking at the overall campus viability and how athletics contributed to that viability. Many acknowledged the importance of the student-athlete experience and adhering to the Division III philosophy but also emphasized the paramount importance of the athletics department contributing to the financial solvency of the institution. Importantly, administrators indicated that they felt student-athletes could have a well-rounded experience and that the campus could highly value the money associated with the athletics department and the tuition dollars brought by such high numbers of student-athletes on campus. Administrator 1 captured this idea and the idea that was conveyed by many of the other administrators by detailing that,

> The most important criterion is the student experience. So, it's maybe cliché Division III philosophy, but I truly, deeply believe it. That the learning that takes place through participation in athletics is vital to our mission, to our liberal education mission. So that's the ultimate, I'd say criteria as far as which performance is judged… But another way, a practical sense, we are enrollment-driven, and most colleges like us are, and we really have to hit our goals in athletics recruiting to meet our class. And so I can say that without feeling apologetic about it because I feel like I believe that the experience the students (student-athletes) have when they get here justifies it – it really is a great experience for them. But we have to hit those roster sizes too to keep all of the machinery turning.

Administrator 9 not only contrasted the small college athletics environment to other types of Division III schools but also contrasted with large, Division I state schools:

> So when places like [a large, nearby Division I public school] have budget problems, one of the things they do is they look to cut sports, save expenses. That doesn't make sense at a place like ours. At a place like ours, when you have budgetary problems, it's usually tied to enrollment and you're trying to find ways to improve your enrollment – you may add programs. … I think we're in a risky business of higher education in that each year requires a lot of energy and effort and pain to balance our budget but I'd say the athletic department is so integral a part of the institution that its budgetary woes or budgetary success are going to be parallel to or consistent with the institution as a whole.

Clearly, administrators focused on the role of athletics as it relates to the functioning of the overall college. Although there was an emphasis on students – and student-athletes – enjoying their college experience, it was also of paramount importance that the athletics department was able to consistently contribute enrollment numbers to the institution. Enrollment goal-setting was part of a collaborative process between coaches, athletics directors, and campus administrators. Some administrators did not directly mention winning but did so in other parts of the interview when explaining how they thought the student-athlete experience would be enhanced if the student-athletes were not losing by large margins on a consistent basis. Other administrators, when asked to define athletics success, did directly incorporate winning into their answer while discussing the overall student-athlete experience.

Contrary to most respondents, Administrator 4 chose to not compare Division III athletics to Division I athletics but rather spoke of the role of Division III athletics in creating a powerful student experience that has pragmatic implications for the institution. Importantly, albeit with a bit of a different focus than other respondents, Administrator 4 emphasized,

> The reality is, athletics works. Right? So, when you think about retention rates, and satisfaction, and success, you could pretty much count on your varsity athletes to be retained at a higher rate than others… If I had all the money in the world, I would say we should all have a coach or a mentor because clearly the impact that a coach can have on a student's life, I think it's

the coach that's the difference in that team experience, that is the difference between an average retention rate and a better retention rate.

Athletics administrators felt winning was never a primary goal of the athletics department. However, for some factions of administrators, not consistently losing was somewhat important because it was related to the overall student-athlete experience. Overall, administrators indicated that athletics could serve several important purposes, with enhanced student experiences and stronger financial viability of the campus are two leading goals for measuring athletics department success.

Athletics Director Definitions of Athletics Success

In comparison to Faculty Athletics Representatives and to campus administrators, athletics directors tended to be slightly more direct in discussing winning as a measurement of athletics success. Again, however, winning was either a tertiary measurement of success or it was considered a byproduct of an enhanced student-athlete experience. Further, while faculty and campus administrators clearly valued measurable statistics such as GPA, retention rates, and enrollment numbers, athletics directors tended to emphasize similar statistics and also discussed athletics success in terms of on-field, on-court performance. When asked how athletics department success is measured, Athletics Director 9 responded in a way that was quite similar to the responses of other interviewed athletics directors:

> Well, from a department standpoint, and it's really the same if you look at each individual sport, there's some degree of quality of experience that we're trying to evaluate... Obviously, competitive success is part of it. From a department perspective, I guess you measure competitive success by how many conference championships you won, how you fared national in the Director's Cup – those types of things. And then is our, has our department been successful in recruiting at the level that we need to or expect to, both I guess in terms of quantity and quality, although it's certainly easier to judge the quantity sooner than it is to evaluate the quality…Those would probably be – quality of experience, competitive success, the level of recruitment, and then making sure that we're healthy financially.

Student-athlete experience and competitive success were linked with the level and ease of recruiting, all of which ties to the financial stability associated with having engaged, contented, and desired quantities of student-athletes. Moreover, in relation to competitive success, athletics directors tended to discuss winning and losing in relation to an all-conference trophy or some similar sort of accolade in which each institution in an athletics conference had a composite finish based on the aggregate of each sport's finish in the conference standings. Athletics directors did indicate the importance of campus goals for conference finishes to be in line with resource allocation for the athletics department. For example, Athletics Director 3 indicated the strong desire to be more competitive within the conference but also acknowledged some administrative constraints to doing so. Consider Athletics Director 3's definition of athletics success with a particular emphasis on the role of administration in satisfying athletics department goals:

> I'm going to look at enrollment obviously. I'm going to look at how much money we raised. I'm going to look at our retention of our staff and what I've been able to do with regards to getting more resources from the institution, whether that be adding full-time coaches, or adding operating budgets, raising more money. Satisfaction of our student-athletes is a huge part of that, as far as retention… We talked as a staff like what do we need to do in order to compete at a higher level and what is success for us and developing the strategic plan. But at the same time, our president needs to tell us what he expects too… The institution has to make a decision if they care if we're competitive or if they only see us as an enrollment tool.

Some athletics directors were content with their history of performance within the conference, others said there needed to more of a connection between resources and expected finishes, and others indicated there was not a significant amount of hope for an influx of resources so had to manage finishing consistently in the bottom third of conference standings. As mentioned previously, athletics directors tended to initially measure athletics success in terms of factors internal to the athletics department or within their own athletics conference (in terms of competitive success) and then expanded how those factors contributed to the overall health of the institution. Athletics directors consistently emphasized the importance of having definitions of athletics success that are measurable and that also fit into the college's institutional priorities.

In general, athletics directors' responses tended to be relatively similar to the responses of both faculty athletics administrators and campus administrators. Specifically, each type of interviewee (FAR, campus administrator, athletics director) valued the student-athlete experience, academic performance, and some sort of pragmatic contribution in terms of enrollment and tuition dollars. Faculty Athletics Representatives tended to value academic performance the most and athletics competitive success the least whereas campus administrators prioritized the student-athlete experience and the role of athletics in relation to the financial solvency of the institution. Athletics directors shared similar values as the faculty in relation to academic performance and to campus administrators in regards to the student-athlete experience and the pragmatic financial role of the athletics department to the institution. However, athletics directors tended to value on-field, on-court performance more so than the faculty or the campus administrators, particularly in relation to the school's performance as measured within conference standings and championships. The definitions of athletics success for each group intuitively makes sense when considering the specific roles on campus that were reflected. As such, faculty valued academic contributions of the student-athletes, campus administrators valued the athletics department's contributions to the campus culture and institution's financial health, and athletics directors valued internal performance measures such as student-athlete GPA, student-athlete retention rates, coaches' recruiting numbers, and competitive success as measured by aggregate all-conference finishes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The idea of the mutually beneficial nature of small college athletics was very salient when interviewees described their own definitions of athletics department success. Notably student-athlete experience and financial goals were all interspersed throughout the top priorities of how athletics department success manifests itself. Typical conceptualizations of winning athletics contests were also part of the definitions, but typically ranked lower than the aforementioned priorities of the student-athlete experience and the athletics department positively contributing to the tuition and enrollment goals of the overall institution.

Such ideas help to address the research questions underlying this study (How is athletics success defined and operationalized in small college athletics? How do definitions of athletics success guide institutional policies and priorities related to athletics? Do these types of institutions believe they have a chance to "win" (in the form of on-field/on-court success) consistently and how does that impact institutional and athletics department strategies?)

For all parties involved, it was crucial to find the ideal roster sizes for a quality student-athlete experiences, retention and graduation rates, and campus-wide enrollment and tuition goals. As part of the hiring process for athletics directors, winning was not discussed. There was some acknowledgement of a likely connection between winning and the student-athlete experience, but the emphasis during the hiring process was for the athletics directors to lead a department focused on mission attainment, the student-athlete experience, and meeting tuition goals. Ideas about winning and losing falling lower on the priority list seem to run counter to previous work showing that student-athletes may disproportionately value winning and losing in the college selection process (Hendricks and Johnson, 2016; Zvosec et al., 2021b). Importantly, however, Zvosec et al., (2021b) also noted that a primary motive for attending a Division III institution is to have an opportunity to be a collegiate athlete (an opportunity that typically would not exist at Division I or Division II institutions). Considering that the opportunity to be collegiate student-athlete is such an important factor in the college choice process, (Hendricks & Johnson, 2016; Zvosec et al., 2021b) and that student-athletes may feel that faculty do not fully appreciate the time commitment involved in being a Division III student-athlete (Williams et al, 2010), it is notable that interviewed FARs in this study wanted student-athletes to be more integrated into campus life and academics. In such scenarios, it is likely important for the stakeholder groups involved (coaches, faculty, student-athletes, athletics administrators) to communicate regarding ways in which the student-athlete experience involves student-athletes feeling more appreciated while also better showcasing their interest in exceling academically. The emphasis on the student experience and athletics offering socialization opportunities for the study body builds upon Cooper and Weight's (2012) work in which Division III administrators prioritized the student-athlete experience and Katz et al.'s (2021) work detailing the relationship-building role of athletics offerings.

Under the tenets of Strategic Contingency Theory, the organization's primary goal is to survive. In order to do so, it must adapt to the external environment in which it operates (Daft et al., 1984; Duncan, 1972; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). As emphasized previously, the environment is "the totality of physical and social factors that are taken directly into consideration in the decision-making behavior of individuals in the organization" (Duncan, 1972, p. 314). Duncan (1972) asserted that in the environmental simple/complex dimension, the number of competitors in the environment and the homogeneity/heterogeneity of the competitors must be taken into consideration. In the small college athletics environment, many small colleges operate under the umbrella of Division III athletics. Importantly, the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the competitors must be factored in as well. Throughout the interviews, it was very clear that there were several trends within both the small college athletics environment and within small colleges in general that were driven by attempts to remain competitive in the environment. Further, the homogeneity of many small college athletics programs and the heterogeneity between several different types of Division III schools (e.g., public state schools, academically elite institutions with large endowments, and small private institutions with lesser academic notoriety and smaller endowments) helped create an uneven playing field from a winning and losing standpoint in Division III athletics.

Such ideas add to previous work highlighting that the types of institutions that typically profile as most successful in relation to NCAA postseason success are not the types of schools in this study; rather, large public institutions and nationally-ranked, academically elite institutions are more likely to excel during NCAA championships (Katz et al, 2015; Zvosec et al., 2021a). Considering the diversity of Division III institutions in terms of enrollment, academic prestige, and whether or not there is an overwhelming reliance on tuition-dollars to remain fiscally solvent, it is understandable that there could be "haves" and "have nots" in Division III athletics as it pertains to nationally-competitive, on-court/on-field success. Building upon this, however, is the idea of Katz et al.'s (2015) argument for "alternative success" for the "have nots" – namely, many small Division III colleges. In this (large) segment of Division III athletics, understanding the role of athletics and athletics department priorities is directly related to how athletics success is defined and operationalized for small colleges.

Athletics departments have had to adapt to the environment in order to enhance the institution's chance for financial survival. Such adaptation has essentially been forced for those that wish to survive, since organizations seek out environments that dually satisfy stability and viability (Dess & Beard, 1984). While this examination of the small college athletics environment has inherently focused on small colleges, it is extremely important to discuss that not all Division III institutions are small colleges. Rather, homogenous factions of small, tuition-driven institutions and the heterogeneity between such small tuition-driven colleges, private institutions with larger endowments, and relatively large Division III public institutions have created what nearly every interviewee detailed: an uneven playing field in Division III athletics. As such, small colleges could adapt to the environment, but only to an ex-

tent because of resource constraints internal to the institution. Small, tuition-driven institutions could not adapt themselves into institutions with robust endowments, or could not strategically convert to large, state institutions. Further, tuition-driven small colleges typically are less successful from the standpoint of winning and losing than their Division III counterparts that have larger endowments or are large, public institutions (Katz et al., 2015).

Interviewees indicated such different factions within Division III athletics and that Division III institutions are not one homogenous group. Thus, many interviewees voiced that, as a whole, Division III athletics was not a level field. Importantly, interviewees also emphasized that while Division III as a whole is heterogeneous, small-tuition driven institutions are relatively homogenous and it is important for each small college to work to distinguish itself from other institutions when recruiting prospective student-athletes that are also considering matriculation at other small Division III institutions. Therefore, in relation to Duncan's (1972) simple/complex dimension of Strategic Contingency Theory, small colleges have to operate in response to an environment with other relatively homogenous small, tuition-driven institutions while also under the Division III umbrella that contains relatively heterogeneous types of institutions such as (1) private institutions with larger endowments that are not as reliant on student tuition dollars for financial sustainability and (2) relatively large public institutions with more offerings on campus and traditionally lower costs of attendance.

The idea of an increasing reliance on athletics (and their tuition-paying student-athletes) as an institutional enrollment goal has, for years, represented a controversial view of the role of Division III athletics (Covell et al., 2013; Snyder & Waterstone, 2015; Zvosec et al., 2021a). However, utilizing athletics in such a strategic manner does not necessarily mean athletics has to be a "bare bones" experience with skeleton staffs and budgets. Rather, caring about the student-athlete experience while still prioritizing financial sustainability does not appear to be mutually exclusive. To reiterate what Paule-Koba and Farr (2013) detailed, "While on the surface it may appear that pumping money into the athletic program would hurt the institution, without these programs, students who base their college decision on athletics will take their talents and tuition dollars elsewhere" (p. 211). Under the most basic premise of Strategic Contingency Theory, wherein adaptation is a must for survival, there seems to be a narrow, but possible, road for small colleges to balance the student-athlete experience and institutional enrollment goals, even if that may not necessarily always equate to "winning" in the traditional sense of on-court/on-field notoriety on a national scale.

As outlined previously, there may be "alternate definitions of success" for different factions of Division III institutions, namely small, enrollment-driven institutions (Katz et al., 2015, p. 115). Importantly, in the environment of Division III athletics, small colleges operate in both a relatively homogenous environment with many other small, tuition-driven institutions that strategically utilize athletics to meet financial goals of the overall institution and also in a heterogeneous environment in which they compete for championships against well-endowed private institutions and large,

public schools. Ultimately, under the tenets of Strategic Contingency Theory, the institution's primary goal is to survive (Daft et al., 1984). Small colleges must deal with the simultaneous homogenous and heterogeneous Division III environment. That is, small colleges must continue to work to differentiate themselves from other like-minded small, tuition-dependent institutions, while also facing the very stark reality that the "typical" small college cannot consistently compete for national championships with more resourced highly-endowed or large public institutions.

Winning and competing in NCAA tournaments is important for aiding in student-athlete experience and retention rates – and for inherently competitive coaches and student-athletes. However, winning athletics competitions is not a primary measurement of small college athletics department success. Many of the interviewees from the selected institutions indicated the typical small college athletics department cannot compete consistently in NCAA Division III tournaments with highly endowed institutions or large, public state schools. The inherently tuition-dependent nature of small colleges arguably necessitates a strong reliance on the athletics department to meet institutional tuition, enrollment, and financial goals.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study was not without its limitations. Student-athletes and coaches – two vital constituency groups of the small college athletics environment – were not interviewed as part of this study. Moreover, while different constituency groups on campus (e.g., athletics director, faculty athletics representative, campus administrator) were interviewed, the interviewees only represented a snapshot of the athletics environment at their institutions. The selected interviewees could arguably be inclined to describe the role of athletics on campus in more positive terms due to the nature of their specific jobs. Interviewees did indicate they felt faculty represented the largest constituency group that could be resistant to the increased reliance on the athletics department to help meet institutional enrollment and financial goals. Notably, faculty that did not have some sort of connection to the athletics department were not interviewed. As was a common idea present throughout this study, there was a strategic relationship between the institution and the athletics department. More staffing and resources had consistently been devoted to athletics in an effort to rely on student-athletes as a large percentage of the overall student body. There could be other avenues to strategically address enrollment concerns. This could include, for example, devoting resources to a robust recreational or club sports program or to specializing in particular academic programs. Information about such endeavors or interviews with institutional staff who would prefer such a focus were not conducted. Finally, in regards to limitations of this study, while data was collected from 11 institutions across seven states, interviews were not conducted at institutions on the East Coast or West Coast. Data from such institutions could have potentially indicated some geographic differences in the small college athletics environment.

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