

Navigating the Intersection of COVID-19 and (Re)new(ed) Calls for Racial Justice: A Qualitative Examination of the Experiences of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Professionals in College Athletics during a Year of “Social Justice Awakening”

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals in the NCAA athletics governance structure. The specific focus was centered on the multiple crises of summer 2020, including both the COVID-19 pandemic and calls for social injustices and their effect on DEI work and the impacts on DEI professionals within college athletics. In total, 23 semi-structured interviews were completed with the DEI professionals, with five major themes emerging from the results, including: (1) Reorganization of Priorities, (2) Reactive vs. Proactive Work, (3) Challenges of Virtual DEI Engagement, (4) Emotional Fatigue, and (5) Validation of DEI work. The implications for future research and practitioners will be further explored.

Keywords: college athletics, COVID-19, diversity, equity, and inclusion

Introduction

In 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) put a halt to the world in many ways not experienced before. Precautions meant to limit the spread of the contagion significantly impacted the economy, entertainment industry, and the social interactions people were used to having with others (Adgate, 2021; Dangerfield, 2020; Udalova, 2021). In education, by the end of April 2020, 90 percent of students across the world were completing some type of virtual or remote learning program (UNESCO, 2020). Similar to other industries, the sports industry was hit uniquely



hard, with major event cancellations or postponements, including that of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, the men's and women's NCAA basketball tournaments, the Little League World Series, and Wimbledon. The sport sector is a key driver in the current international market and is an entrenched structure within our global economy and society, which meant that sport lockdowns and cancellations had drastic financial impacts (Nauright et al., 2020). Economically, the impacts were felt at all levels, as the top European soccer leagues lost an estimated \$7 billion and the big four sport leagues in the U.S. are estimated to have lost around \$14.1 billion (Birnbaum, 2021; Lane, 2021). On top of the economic losses, most sport organizations and stakeholders experienced significant socialization impacts due to lockdowns across the country, the Centre for Sport and Human Rights (2020) suggested the social impact and potential for mental health concerns due to COVID-19 in sport could be severe, which led to them encouraging organizations to take a people-first approach and to engage in conversations with stakeholders (e.g., athletes, coaches, staff, etc.) regarding mental health and their current realities.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the only 2020 event that had significant implications for the well-being of people living in the United States and across the world. As Donnelly (2020) stated, the U.S. dealt simultaneously with COVID-19 and renewed calls to address systemic racism in US society. Upon learning of the horrific murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd (amongst many others), a large number of U.S. citizens (and citizens around the world) voiced disgust over the inequitable experiences of racially minoritized¹ populations, allowing the summer of 2020 to be called 'the social justice awakening' (Worland, 2020). This social justice movement, similar to that of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. during the late 1960s, was elevated by groups committed to the liberation of Black people and other oppressed populations. In 2020, specifically, Black Lives Matter (BLM) was at the forefront of the national discourse surrounding racial injustice, and the BLM message centers-around a desire for change, with some of the main discussion points revolving around the incarceration of Black individuals, police brutality, social injustice, and systemic racism (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). This message took center stage during the summer of 2020, with demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins occurring nationwide to show solidarity with the BLM movement toward social justice reform. These conversations also infiltrated the sports world, with Hylton (2020) observing how many sport organizations, coaches, and athletes launched (performative) statements addressing social injustice or engaging in racial and social justice action, many for the first time in history.

Given sport is a microcosm of society (Coakley, 2015), it is not surprising that conversations surrounding racial injustice and systematic racism would (once again) permeate the sports arena. Increases in social activism within sport (see e.g., Cooper et al., 2019; Kluch, 2020) brought a level of uncertainty for sport organizations as most wrestled with how to properly handle the social justice climate during the summer of 2020 (Evans et al., 2020a). For example, in the National Basketball Association (NBA), following a video release of the Jacob Blake shooting, for the first time ever in NBA history, players from the Milwaukee Bucks decided to forego

their game that night to stand in solidarity with those fighting for social justice. Ultimately, all NBA games were canceled that night, marking a transcendent moment in sport social activism history (Kreps & Reis, 2020). These actions in professional sport regarding social activism signify a potential turning point for sport leagues. In the current sport governance structures, the silencing of minoritized voices has been a long-standing practice, allowing policy makers to question, challenge, and/or dismiss persistent racial inequities, leading to a mutual acceptance of the status quo (Evans et al., 2020a).

Just as social justice conversations have influenced professional sport, collegiate sport has seen athletes, coaches, and administrators use their voices to offer statements around systemic injustice. While a thorough conversation discussing systemic racial inequalities in collegiate sports falls outside the scope of this study, it is important to note that racially minoritized athletes, coaches, and administrators face a variety of deep-level DEI issues.² Academically, racially minoritized athletes have to combat the ‘stupid jock’ narrative (Edwards, 2000) and graduation rate disparities favoring white athletes (Southall et al., 2015). For coaches and administrators, leadership positions have historically been occupied by white, heterosexual, and able-bodied males (Lapchick, 2020). Thus, these few examples highlight the injustices associated with the current landscape of college athletics.

To address these issues, athletes have been more vocal in their recent activism, mostly centered on racial inequities. For example, Kylin Hill, a football player at Mississippi State University, threatened not to play unless changes were made on campus regarding racist symbols, while also helping to push legislation at the state level to remove confederate images from the state’s flag (Lyles, 2020). The increase in collegiate athlete activism (Mac Intosh et al., 2020), coupled with growing outside pressure on universities and athletic departments to take a stand and promote social justice, has led to the issuance of numerous statements regarding racial injustices (McKenzie, 2020). However, university responses to internal and external pressures regarding racial equity have historically been seen as reactionary, with the focus being on surface-level statements and actions rather than committing substantial resources to dismantle the racist systems that exist within college sport (Bimper & Harrison, 2017; Fink et al., 2003). Statements regarding diversity and inclusion at the NCAA level are more focused on following relevant and respective laws rather than forwarding the cause of creating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) focused environments (Cooper et al., 2020). Further, most DEI work in sport organizations occurs accidentally or becomes a reactionary move, based on external and internal pressures (Spaaij et al., 2018). For instance, Keaton (2020) has argued that the emergence of social movements and high-profile scandals involving failures in DEI have led to the creation of DEI-specific positions in NCAA athletic departments. With an increase in exposure, commitment, and accountability toward social justice reform, along with the barriers that the COVID-19 pandemic provided, an investigation into the impacts of these factors on DEI work within intercollegiate athletic departments is warranted. As such, it was the purpose of this study to examine how DEI professionals in college athletics navigated the cultural climate of 2020 – a climate that saw

unique DEI challenges at the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and a re-emergence of calls for racial and social justice in U.S. public discourse.

Literature Review

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Sport Organizations

At the NCAA and institutional levels, there has been a long-standing history of attempts to address the inequities present within the current collegiate athletics structure. For example, the NCAA and its Office of Inclusion champion many DEI initiatives/programs, including diversity education workshops, the Presidential Pledge, the NCAA fellow's leadership development program, the NCAA leadership institutes for ethnically minoritized women and men, and the NCAA gender equity and issues forum (NCAA, n.d.a.). Despite all of the funding, programming, and pro-DEI statements, a lack of commitment toward DEI in the NCAA has long been documented (Lapchick, 2020). For instance, Fink and Pastore (1999) argued that discrimination and oppression of minoritized athletes and coaches in sport was rampant in NCAA Division I sport. One major concern has been a lack of diversity in positions of power and leadership on college campuses, as these positions have historically been occupied by white heterosexual men, leaving little diversity in the key decision-making systems (Fink et al., 2001; Lapchick, 2020). To counteract the underrepresentation of minoritized groups, college campuses and sport organizations alike have seen an increase in their DEI work. For example, research has illustrated that efforts to increase diversity within sport structures has the potential to improve the quality of decision-making and outcomes (Cunningham & Melton, 2011; Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Spaaij et al., 2020).

Diversity within sport organizations also has the ability to increase marketplace understanding and the goodwill associated with an organization's social responsibility objectives (Cunningham & Melton, 2011). Further, a strong commitment to diversity may increase attractiveness of an organization in terms of recruitment and retention of potential employees and college athletes, as organizations can leverage their commitment to diversity and promote a positive workplace (Bopp et al., 2014; Cunningham, 2009). Environments that are more inclusive may also increase cognitive and social development amongst employees within sport organizations (Hirko, 2009). However, while diversity in sport organizations holds great benefits for stronger capabilities, development, and outputs, most diversity movements occur on accident or are implemented in reaction to current internal and external pressures (Cunningham, 2009; Spaaij, et al., 2018). These reactionary commitments to DEI work are detrimental to sport organizations, as proactive diversity initiatives may lead to more overall success in DEI programming (Fink et al., 2003). To be proactive rather than reactive, Singer and Cunningham (2012) encouraged athletic departments to place value within the organizational structure on diversity. For example, they argue that an athletic department that focuses on recruiting, hiring, and retaining diverse personnel embeds DEI within its organizational structure. The ability to infuse these DEI practices into an athletic culture allows the focus on diversity to become part

of the normal day-to-day of sport organizations (Cunningham, 2015). A different strategy to engage meaningfully with DEI work is by providing diversity trainings (Cunningham, 2012; 2015).

Unfortunately, research has shown that resistance to DEI initiatives and programs in sport organizations is a multi-faceted problem (Spaaji et al., 2020). One way this problem has been investigated is through analyses of DEI statements from sport organizations and athletic departments. For example, Ortega et al. (2020) examined athletic department mission statements and found that only 29 of 250 athletic departments (11.6%) had diversity-specific mission statements. The racially-charged events of the summer 2020 transformed this commitment, as we have seen a dramatic increase in public statements, along with the creation of diversity committees, the renaming of buildings, and removal of statues honoring individuals with racist pasts (Turick et al., 2020) – yet these outward-facing DEI initiatives were seen as reactionary rather than proactive (Hylton, 2020). The growth of social justice awareness around these issues is important, but may also be detrimental, as the recent push for racial equity has centered on the importance of manifestations of overt racism rather than emphasizing the deep-rooted institutional racism that currently exists in U.S. sport governance structures (Hylton, 2020). As Brayboy (2003) noted, university diversity commitments, policies, and statements may potentially act more as freestanding narratives rather than substantial drivers in creating organizational culture change. This leads to statements on diversity and inclusion not signifying a real commitment to change, as universities are more concerned about responding to outside pressure (media, alumni, etc.) instead of actually implementing practices and policies that evoke substantial change on college campuses (Cooper et al., 2020).

One way to ensure successful DEI efforts is to gain support and/or buy-in from senior leadership. For example, Fink et al. (2003) found that when key leadership decision-makers of a sport organization promoted a culture of diversity as a core competency of the athletic department's mission, successful diversity plans and culture were adopted. A culture embracing the diversity of students and staff can assist in breaking down the pervasiveness of similarity that exists across the majority of athletic departments and establish support of, and for diversity (Fink et al., 2003). Without support from key leadership, diversity policies and processes struggle to be implemented across departments and culture shifts are rarely realized (Cunningham, 2008). This is especially true across college campuses, as diversity initiatives can reveal substantial power dynamics between leadership and faculty/staff (Griffin et al., 2019). Thus, those holding senior leadership positions have a unique opportunity to bridge potential gaps to shape and develop diversity initiatives and programs that can improve DEI in sport organizations (Cunningham, 2012; Spaaji et al., 2018). However, in college athletic departments, senior leaders often hold onto colorblind objectives with little acknowledgment of the systemic inequities (academic achievement/readiness, bias and discrimination in staffing, leadership representation, etc.) that exist within programs (Bimper & Harrison, 2017). With the lack of buy-in from leaders for diversity initiatives, the culture of a sport organization will stagnate and continue to push important DEI work to the margins (Spaaji et al., 2018).

Racial Injustices and College Athletics

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the college sport landscape. For example, the cancellation of winter and spring championship events dramatically affected individuals within athletic departments, as college athletes saw their seasons/careers come to an end and many employees were furloughed or fired altogether (Nietzel, 2020). Amongst those still working in the sport world, struggles with mental health/well-being, physical activity levels, and work-life balance were among the most common challenges during the pandemic (Evans et al., 2020b). Furthermore, the utilization of virtual settings became the new ‘normal’ (NCAA, n.d.b.). This was a huge shift for athletic departments, as most relied heavily on face-to-face interactions pre-COVID, leading to a unique struggle to adapt to the virtual meeting spaces for all in the department (McCarthy, 2021; Meyer, 2020; NCAA, n.d.b.). This struggle was especially seen in the additional program offerings (academics, compliance, DEI, etc.) within college athletic departments, as the information overload was a lot for college athletes to absorb (Meyer, 2020; NCAA, n.d.b.).

Experts also have stressed the importance of understanding the lived experiences of sport professionals during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Evans et al., 2020b). Answering this call, a growing body of research has focused on individual experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, including youth athletes (Branquinho et al., 2020), elite athletes (Bowes et al., 2020; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021), Olympic and Paralympic athletes (Clemente-Suarez et al., 2020), and NCAA Division I, II, and III college athletes (Bullard, 2020; Graupensperger et al., 2020; Johnson, 2021). The findings from these studies highlight the consistent struggle of athletes when it comes to their mental health during the pandemic, which is uncharted territory for many. For example, Johnson (2021) found that about one in three college athletes experienced heightened stress levels due to worries surrounding their athletic endeavors, academics, and personal health, leading to increased levels of stress and an overall decrease in their mental health. It was also found that COVID-19 more drastically affected Black and Latinx college athletes, who were twice as likely to report someone close to them being hospitalized or dying due to the pandemic (Johnson, 2021).

The implications of COVID-19 on DEI work is also a major concern moving forward, as Eikhof (2020) stated, without policy intervention specifically addressing diversity and inclusion in the workforce, underrepresented groups are more likely to experience discrimination and drop out of the workforce. Within the disability sport community, similar challenges were evident, as recent reintegration plans are limiting opportunities in disability sport since the population is viewed as ‘at risk’ (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased potential threats toward women sports worldwide. Clarkson et al. (2020) highlighted that women’s sports have historically been underfunded and undervalued, leading to them being the first slated for downsizing during a recession.

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Symbolic interactionism theory was first developed by Blumer (1969) to address

how humans make meaning of life, and how this meaning dictates their social worlds around them. As Sage and Eitzen (2016) elaborated, symbolic interactionism theory can be described as “how individuals and groups interpret and understand their social worlds by attaching meaning to symbols” (p. 16). The original inception of symbolic interactionism was centered on three key premises: (a) human behavior is dictated by the meanings they give to certain things, (b) meaning is central to social interactions, and (c) an interpretive process is used to help make sense of the interactions that are experienced (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism theory also sets the groundwork for helping sociologists understand how individuals assign meaning to human behavior, realities, identities, and social interactions (Hewitt, 2000).

Symbolic interactionism theory helps shape and understand experiences within sport (Donnelly, 2020). Weiss (2001) described sport as the most ideal space to further examine the complexities of symbolic interactionism theory as it formulates much of our lived experience and social symbols (i.e., values, norms, and principles). Symbolic interactionism theory also has application in sport due to its ability to predict and dictate central relationships created in the field (Weiss, 2001). These central relationships have the ability to shape one’s individual identity and can be expressed through personal relationships, professional relationships, or interactions with one’s favorite teams, symbols, or players. In investigating these central relationships, there also might be some applicability to help dictate one’s behavioral outcomes in certain situations and also help shape an individual’s lived experiences and their perceived outcomes from these experiences (Blumer, 1969).

Burton (2015) highlighted the unique ability of symbolic interactionism to better understand the experiences and perceptions of women in their career advancement in sport. The findings suggested that women experienced self-limiting behavior in their attainment of leadership positions, as they fell into the ideological gender beliefs of sport leadership being a male domain. Symbolic interactionism, similarly, was used by Sartore and Cunningham (2012) to understand the experiences of female sport leaders. Their findings suggested women hold lower levels of societal power and status, potentially leading to them facing more negative experiences in leadership roles. The aforementioned studies show that symbolic interactionism can be used to understand the experiences of underrepresented groups in sport settings, as it allows one to better situate oneself within a larger system and examine how this system shapes their experience (Weiss, 2001). Given the underrepresentation of racial and gender diversity in college athletic departments, and a lack of DEI professionals in the space in general (Keaton, 2020), the lived experiences of DEI professionals in college athletic departments hold unique value worthy of examination via symbolic interactionism. Such an examination will allow for a better understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals driving DEI action within the NCAA athletic structure.

While the experiences of athletes during COVID-19 lockdowns have been established in the emerging COVID-19 and sport literature, other key stakeholders – such as athletic administrators or coaches – within sport organizations are largely missing, which is surprising as they too might be able to offer unique perspectives

on their sport experience during COVID-19. Therefore, the purpose of our study was to investigate how DEI professionals in college athletics, specifically, navigated two crises in 2020 – the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustice – with a particular focus on how those crises impact DEI work in college athletics. While this study is part of a larger project looking at the experiences of DEI professionals in the NCAA, we specifically seek to understand how the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic with renewed calls for systemic racial and social justice influenced professionals and drove DEI action in intercollegiate athletic departments. Based on the relevant literature outlined above and drawing from symbolic interactionism theory to investigate lived experiences, the following two research questions guided this inquiry:

RQ1: How did the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and growing calls for racial/social justice impact DEI work in college athletics?

RQ2: How did DEI professionals navigate the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and growing calls for racial/social justice?

Methods

In order to answer the research questions, an in-depth qualitative interview protocol was adopted to understand the lived experiences of DEI professionals in college athletics during the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological research design was selected as the most appropriate method, based on its ability to encompass a deeper understanding of participants lived experiences while allowing phenomena to emerge organically (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vagle, 2018). The participants hold unique roles and experiences as they engage in their respective athletic department's DEI work on a daily basis. Qualitative inquiry was best suited based on its ability to better uncover the participants' experiences and record patterns that emerge from these responses (Patton, 2015). Further, this method allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the DEI work in college athletics, an under-researched area in the sport management field (Glesne, 2018).

Procedure and Participants

The sample for this study was comprised of DEI professionals in the NCAA athletics governance structure. To be included in this study, participants had to fulfill at least one of the following two criteria: (1) Their current job responsibilities included DEI specifically or (2) they led or co-led DEI efforts at their respective institution. To identify potential participants in this study, the researchers collected data from all NCAA member schools' official websites, searching both staff directories and press releases, as well as the NCAA directory. To recruit participants, purposive sampling was utilized in order to target one specific group to better understand the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers' also utilized snowball sampling techniques, since at the time of data collection, the amount of DEI professionals in the college athletic structure was relatively small. In total, 51 potential participants were identified as meeting the criteria for inclusion in this study, 23 of which agreed to participate.

After securing IRB approval, data collection was conducted from March to August of 2020. The interview protocol followed a semi-structured approach and was developed utilizing the literature in the field and the authors' individual expertise in DEI. Some examples of questions included in the interview guide were, "How has COVID-19 affected your work on DEI?", "How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your athletic department?", "What current/future challenges do you anticipate for your work due to the pandemic?", and "What challenges have you faced in your DEI work?" The semi-structured interviews were completed either by phone or by video conferencing software (i.e., Zoom or Microsoft Teams). The interviews lasted between 40-70 minutes in length. Upon the completion of their interviews, participants were given pseudonyms to provide confidentiality to their responses. Next, the interview audio files were transcribed and checked by a member of the research team for transcription consistency. Upon completion of their interviews, participants were invited to complete a voluntary demographics form.

While the total sample of this study included interviews with 23 participants, only 19 of the 23 participants filled out the voluntary demographic form. However, it is important to note the remaining participants self-identified demographic information (e.g., their gender identity, race, or sexuality) during the interview. The sample consisted of ten participants identifying as men ($n = 10$), eight identifying as women ($n = 8$), one identifying as non-binary ($n = 1$), and four non-respondents ($n = 4$). The respondents self-identified their sexual orientation as straight/heterosexual ($n = 15$), gay or lesbian ($n = 3$), queer ($n = 1$), and not reported ($n = 4$). Lastly, the participants were also asked to self-identify their race and ethnicity, with the sample including Black or African American ($n = 12$), white, ($n = 6$), and Latino/Latina/Latinx ($n = 1$) participants. Our sample was comprised of individuals from multiple levels within the NCAA structure, including Division I ($n = 12$), Division II ($n = 3$), Division III ($n = 6$), conference representative ($n = 1$), and national governing body ($n = 1$). The job titles of participants varied; however, position titles and demographic information have been removed from our participant table (see *Table 1*) in order to protect the confidentiality of participants (relatively small sample of DEI professionals in college athletics).

Data Analysis

Interview transcriptions were analyzed with the help of the qualitative data analysis software *Dedoose*. The analysis process consisted of both inductive and deductive coding (Miles et al., 2018). For this study, once the data was organized for the coding process, the research team read and re-read the interview transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. The first coding cycle followed a line-by-line open coding approach. Since the research team had multiple coders, each individual coded a series of transcripts and the team met to compare the initial codes for consistency. A pre-established codebook was not used going into the study; rather the codebook developed organically as each author coded interviews, checked the coding of our colleagues, and then met to discuss the coding processes. The open coding approach was selected as most appropriate because it allowed researchers to identify the sepa-

Table 1
Participants

Name	Title	Division	Name	Title	Division
Kobe	Administration	NGB	Steve	Administration	I
Antonio	Administration	I	Allen	Commissioner	II
Carter	Administration	I	MJ	Head Coach	II
Clara	Administration	I	Red	Administration	II
Clark	Administration	I	Ruth	Administration	II
Frank	Administration	I	Alice	Administration	III
Jabari	Administration	I	Betsy	Administration	III
Paulson	Administration	I	Eliza	Head Coach	III
Pete	Administration	I	Juan	Administration	III
Peyton	Administration	I	Julia	Administration	III
Rachel	Administration	I	Leah	Administration	III
Rico	Administration	I			

rate themes that emerged from the data (i.e., inductive), while allowing symbolic interactionism theory to be infused with those themes afterwards (i.e., deductive). For the second round of coding, the research team utilized axial coding to help organize the initial codes into overarching categories and emerging themes found in the data.³

To address the trustworthiness and validity in this study the authors utilized various methods, including transferability and confirmability (Miles et al., 2018; Rolfe, 2006). The first approach, transferability, was achieved by actively seeking diversity in the sample, including multiple divisions and universities across the NCAA. This allowed for the codes and themes that emerged to transcend locations and experiences allowing for the generalizability of the data. The next approach to ensure trustworthiness and validity was confirmability, to achieve this, the authors relied upon the DEI expertise of the researcher group. For example, during the data analysis the authors conducted multiple group checks, and these checks were used to discuss the original codes and allowed for multiple voices to confirm the data.

Findings

Guided by symbolic interactionism theory, the data analysis revealed five higher-order themes across the two research questions guiding this inquiry. In alignment with the first research question, which asked how the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and (re)newed calls for racial and social justice affected DEI work in intercollegiate athletics, three primary themes emerged: (1) *Reorganization of Priorities*,

(2) *Reactive versus Proactive Work*, and (3) *Challenges of Virtual DEI Engagement*. To address the second research question, which focused on the experiences of DEI professionals specifically, the additional themes emerged from the data: (4) *Emotional Fatigue* and (5) *'Validation' of DEI Work*. Each theme is outlined below, with a particular focus on how participants made sense of their experiences advancing DEI work at the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed calls for racial and social justice.

Reorganization of Priorities

The first theme that was identified across the participants' interviews was the dramatic shift in priorities within athletic departments toward the importance of DEI programming due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the national discourse on racial and social injustice ($n=23$; 100%). This dramatic shift in priorities occurred in two distinct ways: (1) there was an increase in individual and department engagement and education ($n=21$; 95%), and (2) there was an ease of access to DEI programming through the utilization of online platforms ($n=15$; 65%). The participants first discussed the increase in individual (e.g., athletes, coaches, and staff) engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Pete (DI, administrator) stated: "I've seen people just being more involved and just aware of what's happening." This individual engagement was also mentioned by Peyton (DI, administrator), who explained that she was "having conversations with people I've never talked to in my life. I'm being asked to come in and talk to teams, and coaching groups, and consulting in all these different places and being able to educate." These two examples also demonstrate the importance of the summer of 2020 and the social justice awakening intersecting with the COVID-19 pandemic to increase the individuals within the athletic department's engagement regarding DEI work.

Participants also highlighted the shift in priorities from their athletes, often focusing on how they can utilize their platform to drive social change or provide support during the pandemic. This was echoed by Frank (DI, administration):

This generation of [college] athletes, and I think, rightfully so, are engaged and are keenly aware of what's going on around them and they're questioning, they're asking. They're seeking better understanding. They're in a place where they want to make a difference and that they understand their platform.

Frank's quote emphasizes an underpinning of the symbolic interactionism framework, as athletes began to give greater meaning toward their commitment to education and advocacy. Further, participants in this study expressed their need to better connect and understand their college athlete experiences, which would improve their athletic department's DEI work. For example, Antonio (DI, administration) stated:

However, with the George Floyd incident, this is now all galvanized, and so, we're going to be doing a piece around how students are managing this moment, what their feelings are, and more importantly, how can they seek to, going forward, be actively a part of a racial uplift and civility. The circumstances thrust that into the environment.

While increased opportunities were evident due to the virtual setting during COVID-19, especially as the pandemic coincided with the continued murders of Black and Brown people at the hands of police, the re-prioritization of DEI work – as Antonio (DI, administrator) discussed above – was elevated by both external and internal pressures.

Participants also discussed the increase in engagement for DEI programming in their respective athletic departments through the ease of access to learning in a virtual environment. For example, Junior (DIII, administrator) noted the ease of access for bringing in guest speakers and scheduling. He stated:

The whole logistics of getting someone actually here and taking the whole day to do the workshop ... all that kind of stuff, coaches and a lot of athletic departments, that's hard to do and harder to manage. But to schedule a two-hour webinar, now, it just seems like part of your day.

As stated by Junior, the ease of access to programming in the virtual-space has allowed DEI professionals to increase the programming in their athletic departments, based on higher demands from athletes and leadership. A similar sentiment was shared by Leah (DIII, administrator), who was one of the many participants pointing out how the shift to prioritizing learning opportunities in the virtual setting was a positive shift for DEI work. She stated, “as a result of COVID-19, there have been so many more opportunities to engage virtually via Zooms and webinars and my days are filled with a lot of professional development opportunities.” This ease of access toward DEI programs and initiatives in the virtual setting coupled with the growing demand for engagement, allowed a potentially easier shift in priorities for individuals, as quality DEI programs were meeting their needs and programs were more readily available and fit within their daily schedules. In contrast, before the COVID-19 pandemic, DEI programs were potentially seen as additional time commitments from those within the athletic department.

Reactive versus Proactive DEI Work

The next theme that was identified in the data was participants highlighting reactive versus proactive DEI work ($n=18$; 78%). Participants shared a variety of ways in which their DEI work was reactive rather than proactive, which played out through a lack of resources and struggles in responding to current events. This theme was best captured by Frank (DI, administrator), who noted that “we need to be more proactive in ensuring that our [college] athletes are supported not just within our institutions, but within their communities ... I think because it's not truly valued until something happens.” Furthermore, Indeed, participants frequently pointed to specific moments that made them realize that DEI work in athletics tends to be reactive rather than proactive – such as the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police in June of 2020. Moments like these helped start conversations in their departments regarding the need to be more proactive in DEI efforts.

In another example of reactive rather than proactive DEI work, participants explained how recent events led to their universities and athletic departments releasing statements addressing the inequities that exist for Black individuals (and other minoritized populations) in the U.S. Participants even reported substantial pushback

from senior leadership in response to the national unrest. For example, Leah (DIII, administration) shared:

Well, there's a lot of politics in place and we have to be careful about the way we navigate this, and we need to get permission from this person, and this person, and this person, and to me that wasn't good enough.

Peyton (DI, administration) echoed that sentiment, saying:

...you fast forward, what, two and a half weeks, three weeks, to when George was murdered, I'm getting a call...for me to start pulling all these things together for our athletic director to write a statement because he wants to take a stance. I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" You literally told me no, and then now because again, everyone else is doing it, you want to do that.

Although the participants discussed the importance of taking proactive steps in their DEI work, it is clear that reactive work occurs across multiple levels of the athletic departments. For example, when athletic departments release statements regarding injustices, but do not properly meet these calls to action with the proper resources (fiscal or staff), it often leads to less impactful DEI engagement.

For example, another subtheme outlining that DEI work was often reactive rather than proactive, was a lack of resources, which was first described in a lack of human resources – that is, staffing – for doing DEI work. As Kobe (NGB, administrator) stated:

We are historically understaffed as an office. Most of the work is reactionary, unfortunately, meaning instead of staying ahead of it and keep coming up with new efforts and innovative ways to tackle those topics, we are pretty much pulling up files and reacting to current events.

He added that "institutions or leaders are okay with releasing the statement, but not necessarily investing in DEI professionals or allocating funds for that work, or if they do allocate funds, it's usually insufficient." As other participants noted as well, their athletic departments often did not have a sufficient number of staff needed to proactively provide impactful DEI work ($n=13$; 56%). Indeed, most individuals in this study were the only individuals engaging in DEI work within their athletic departments. This was particularly true for individuals at Division II and Division III institutions, where DEI was often not part of their official job description but rather it was their personal passion allowing them to drive DEI initiatives.

Participants also described the lack of financial resources from their department to support their DEI work, with COVID-19 putting major budget constraints on athletic departments ($n=10$; 43%). Paulson (DI, administrator) noted that "some institutions really can't offer the resources right now because they're trying to budget in a certain way that they can keep afloat." While DEI work has historically been an underfunded space, the COVID-19 pandemic might be further restricting the financial resources needed to implement impactful DEI work. As Clara (DI, administrator) stated:

I just don't see athletic departments putting money towards DEI even though you probably should. I don't see them doing it when you can barely

keep the lights on ... I don't know now, specifically post-COVID-19 it's just like money's gone.

Overall, worries about potential budget constraints for DEI work was a concern expressed by the participants.

Challenges of Virtual DEI Engagement

While online platforms helped enhance opportunities for virtual DEI work across athletic departments, participants noted that virtual settings can serve as potential setbacks for doing meaningful work in this space ($n=14$; 60%). For example, participants discussed how the virtual setting might not be the best space for having tough conversations, as captured by Betsy (DIII, administrator) who shared, "it's pretty hard to do diversity and inclusion without that face-to-face contact. I know we can do presentations online, but I feel like it's really hard to get people to engage in those materials if they're not actually there [physically]." This demonstrates the unique predicament DEI professionals faced with engagement in virtual settings.

Participants also discussed the fact that virtual engagement was often less impactful because it was easier for individuals to get distracted or to not participate in the programming. For example, Paulson (DI, administrator) described his experience with virtual modules as "you just click [next] because you got other stuff to do ... you don't need to give it your full attention." This was further elaborated on by Jabari (DI, administrator) in his evaluation of one of their athletic department's latest programs offered for students:

The biggest thing is obviously just not allowing us to be in one room to discuss tough issues. I talked about having 135 folks on Zoom to discuss race and police brutality and systemic racism. Though we felt it was powerful, it would have been so much more powerful to be in one room having these conversations, having people be face-to-face with some of the folks who were emotional in that conversation. That stuff is priceless to be able to experience that in-person. That's been a huge miss for us right now. All the programming that we're doing, if we could have people in one room doing it, it's just more beneficial.

While virtual settings were the safest spaces for engaging in DEI work during the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the interviews suggests it may be leading to less impactful DEI engagement. This ties to the third tenant of the symbolic interactionism framework, as the interpretive process individuals go through in social situations helps shape meaning and dictate our interactions, which seem to be drastically affected in the virtual online space. This lack of impact was also seen in the work the participants did themselves. For instance, Juan (DIII, administrator) stated aptly that "really just trying to reach the students is challenging." Similarly, Paulson (DI, administrator) added that students "want to come to your office and talk to you, but they can't. They want to have meetings in-person, but they can't. You have to do it on Zoom. Is that really beneficial?" Thus, the participants frequently shared that they looked forward to the days when they can be back in-person to engage their athletes, coaches, and staff in more impactful in-person DEI work.

Emotional Fatigue

The second research question was focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic and the national discourse on racial and social justice affected the DEI professionals themselves rather than the work they engaged in. The first theme that participants frequently spoke to when it came to their own experience was that of *emotional fatigue* ($n=13$; 56%). The participants described that their feelings of emotional fatigue were often rooted in a lack of work-life balance ($n=9$; 39%). This absence of a stricter work-life balance brought participants new challenges, particularly as working from home blurred the lines between work and personal life. For example, Pete (DI, administrator) explained:

Now work is always work. You can't get away from it. I'm used to separating [work and home] like church and state. I'm used to, when I leave work, I'm leaving work, and [when] I'm at home, I'm at home. Whereas now those lines have been blurred. That's been challenging.

This response highlighted the challenging aspects of separating work and life, leading to feelings of exhaustion among the participants ($n=11$; 47%). Juan (DIII, administrator) also added that "I feel as though I'm working way harder now than I ever had before ... way harder."

Participants' emotional exhaustion and fatigue were further exacerbated by the fact that during the summer of 2020, they were asked to engage more with staff, athletes, and other stakeholders due to the renewed, or in some cases 'new', attention paid to systemic racial and social injustice, leading to even heavier workloads. It was not surprising, then, that participants frequently discussed the impact the increased workload had on their mental health and overall well-being. Allen (DII, commissioner), for example, described experiencing "exceptional stress" due to the "endless work that doesn't feel or appear to get us any closer at times to where we want to be." Perhaps most poignantly, Peyton (DI, administrator), echoed this sentiment by sharing that "it has been the longest month I think of my entire life, emotionally and spiritually ... I don't even know what day it is." These findings tie well into the symbolic interactionist construct that human behavior is dictated by the meanings they give, in this case, participants were highly identified with and believed in the impact of their work, therefore, they were willing to work long hours to provide a better experience for all involved in their athletic department.

A final sub-theme that emerged from participants' accounts of emotional fatigue was focused on the steep learning curve when it came to diversity and inclusion work and the feeling of constantly having to learn ($n=8$; 34%). Which is perhaps best captured by the following quote from Clara (DI, administrator):

I've only been doing it for what? Technically, say, four years. I feel like one year of doing diversity and inclusion work is like dog years. It equates to seven years of experience based off of the number of things that you're exposed to, what you learn, interactions that you have, the things you see. You just get so much more experience in these spaces. Even though I've only been at [my current institution] for three years, it feels like I've been there for 20,000 years.

As Clara's quote shows, the pressure being put on DEI professionals leads to emotional fatigue, especially as they themselves were also trying to process the social justice events they are helping their constituents navigate.

Validation of DEI Work

The last theme that emerged was a new sense of validation participants felt for the DEI work they were doing within their athletic departments ($n=16$; 69%). In fact, many participants shared that the unique context they found themselves in – having to navigate a pandemic and renewed attention to racial and social injustice – allowed them to feel more appreciated for the DEI efforts they were promoting. Symbolic interactionism can help explain this, as participants often discussed the importance of their work as it now held great meaning across the athletic department due to the increase in engagement, leaving our participants with feelings of validation. For example, interviewees felt that while their work may be overwhelming at times, the rewards at the end made the work worth it and renewed their commitment to DEI efforts in their athletic departments. Leah (DIII, administrator), for example, knew that her work had impact. She said that while she felt exhausted at times, what drove her was “knowing that I can make an impact if I do not let up.” Similarly, Peyton (DI, administrator) discussed the recent optimism she has for her work, leading to greater personal impact. She explained: “Like I said, glass half full, very thankful to be in spaces I've never been in, having conversations, feeling like, for once, the role that we have is important.”

Participants also discussed how the work they were doing was making an impact on DEI practices, specifically ($n=11$; 47%). For example, Juan (DIII, administrator) noted that his department “approved [mandatory annual] unconscious bias training for all employees ... that was something that myself and the director of HR really wanted to happen.” Likewise, Frank (Division I, administrator) highlighted that the unique cultural climate of 2020 allowed for individuals to push boundaries within DEI engagement:

Here's the thing, in the past, it's always been there, but it hasn't been spoken about. Now, it is said, it is being discussed within teams, it's being discussed within large groups. ... It's those types of things that are coming to the forefront, which give us an opportunity to be better as people. I think those are the things that the pandemic in some ways has allowed for it because it has slowed us down to really see what happened with George Floyd, to really see what's happening around our nation. I think it's those things now that gives us an opportunity to be better.

In this comment, Frank shows that increased DEI engagement was often linked to self-growth which led to a sense of validation. These types of accomplishments allowed participants to feel validated in their work, while also showing that the athletic departments themselves are potentially committed to furthering the DEI space as well as those that were growing personally and professionally.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how DEI professionals in college athletics navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racial injustice – with a particular focus on how those crises impact DEI work in college athletics. Two research questions were adopted to focus on how the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and growing calls for racial/social justice affected DEI work in college athletics and the experiences of DEI professionals. The qualitative results indicated five major themes, including *Reorganization of Priorities*, *Reactive v. Proactive Work*, *Challenges of Virtual DEI Engagement*, *Emotional Fatigue*, and *Validation of DEI Work*. These results highlight several key contributions to the growing literature aimed at examining DEI professionals driving change in college athletics, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and a summer of social justice (re-)awakening.

This study utilized symbolic interactionism theory, which is best defined as a framework to understand individuals lived experiences through their behaviors, realities, identities, and social interactions (Blumer, 1969; Hewitt, 2000). For the DEI professionals in this study, the symbolic interactionism theory allowed for unique and individual perspectives (personal and professional) to emerge. While the participants all highlighted similar experiences within their roles, they all gave meaning to their experiences in unique ways. For example, participants in this study expressed how their own personal identities play a major role in their commitment to DEI work; as such, they played a major role in their engagement and lived experiences regarding DEI work. While individuals that attain underrepresented positions in sport (DEI professionals) hold unique lived experiences, they also hold overlapping ideals, experiences, identities, and perceptions (Burton, 2015; Sartore & Cunningham, 2012). Thus, symbolic interactionism theory should be further used to analyze and understand the lived experiences of underrepresented individuals holding sport leadership positions.

In addressing the first research question, our study reinforces existing literature in illustrating how DEI work in intercollegiate athletics tends to be reactive rather than proactive, a finding that became particularly evident to the participants in this study during times of social unrest. This reactive approach to DEI work highlights a lack of commitment from sport organizations toward the work, which is often expressed in DEI action being taken either on accident or in response to external or internal pressures (Cunningham, 2009; Spaaij et al., 2018). While an increase in programming is a potential positive for the future of DEI work in college athletics, a long-term commitment to systematic change may be lacking. Bimper and Harrison (2017) found that university responses to social injustices are rather broad and lack consistent commitment to change systems rooted in systemic racism, a finding that is reinforced by the experiences of the DEI professionals in this study. This study underlines the importance of utilizing the increased awareness around DEI work in sport organizations in the context of the 2020 social justice (re-)awakening to drive

long-standing commitments to furthering the culture of DEI in the athletics – something that is often lacking in reactive DEI work (Hylton, 2020).

DEI professionals also highlighted the differentiating levels of support needed to help meet the growing demand for DEI work within their athletic departments; in fact, the need for support became more evident in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased calls for meaningful social justice action. Participants expressed the need to receive support in the form of buy-in from leadership, additional staff, and financial resources (e.g., funding). This is in line with previous findings, as the support of DEI work from key leadership positions was vital in sport organizations adopting a strong DEI culture (Cunningham, 2008; 2012; Spaaij et al., 2018). Cunningham (2008), for example, highlighted the importance of leadership committing to change before any DEI work can affect the structural culture within an athletic department. Additionally, this study highlighted the unique application of DEI in college athletics post COVID-19 and summer of 2020, as outside pressures from fans, alumni, and donors have pushed athletic departments to further negotiate and reimagine their commitment to a culture of DEI. For the first time, a lack of commitment to DEI work, may actually impact external perceptions of an athletic department.

The findings from this study highlight that leadership buy-in is vital to successful DEI work, especially during the unique challenges that emerged from the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and the summer of 2020's social justice awakening (Cunningham, 2008; Fink et al., 2003; Griffin et al., 2019). It is important to note here that while the participants expressed receiving some pushback, there was also a sentiment of optimism over leaders' willingness to engage and commit to a culture of DEI through programming, initiatives, and funding, which may lead to substantial progress for DEI work in college sport. While this expression of support from leadership might be tied to the summer of 2020's events and not long-term DEI culture shifts, it is a promising finding. This finding also directly aligns with the framework of symbolic interactionism theory, which states, behaviors are dictated by individuals' perceptions. Thus, those in higher level leadership positions heightened engagement with DEI conversations may suggest perceptions are shifting, a positive finding for the future of DEI programming in college athletics. In regard to providing proper resources, the findings suggest the recent increase in demand for DEI programming will have to be sustained despite the financial hardships athletic departments face due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings from this study also shed light on DEI engagement in a virtual setting. While the ability to host DEI programs was easier with virtual platforms such as Zoom, DEI professionals sometimes struggled to facilitate meaningful engagement in those spaces. One concern with virtual meetings was the ability to handle tough conversations regarding DEI with empathy and compassion. As Asare (2020) argues, the online space for DEI work is a feasible outlet for meaningful work, but it needs to be reimaged into a space where engagement is simple, creative, and effective. While the virtual setting allowed for people to be together safely, the perception of community and belonging may be challenged in the virtual setting with potentially

less engagement for DEI work. As such, substantial increases in demand for DEI programming, the necessity to move towards virtual meeting spaces, and a lack of funding/resources potentially impeded DEI professionals conducting meaningful and impactful work during the summer of 2020.

In alignment with the second research question, which focused on experiences of DEI professionals in college athletics, this study found navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and new calls for racial justice led to a variety of emotions. With the events leading to the feelings of heightened levels of stress, strains on their mental health, and a sense of validation for the work they engaged in. The lack of work-life balance combined with the intersection of COVID-19 and the racially charged events created high-stress environments for these DEI professionals to navigate. In the context of symbolic interactionism theory, participants may perceive themselves as fighting a never-ending work-life balance battle, potentially leading to negative social interactions and burnout from DEI positions. These results align with recent COVID-19 pandemic sport studies, with findings indicating extreme levels of stress leading to poor mental health (Bullard, 2020; Graupensperger et al., 2020; Johnson, 2021). In similar context, Kilo and Hassmén (2016) found burnout amongst sport coaches was associated with organizational factors, in this sense, it would suggest athletic departments with a focus on leadership buy-in and organizational culture focused on DEI could lessen the feelings of emotional fatigue and stress amongst their DEI professionals.

Another potential reason for the mental health concerns expressed by participants could be tied to their own personal identities. For example, over half of the participants in this study self-identified as either Black/African American or Latino which meant these individuals were attempting to *personally* understand, cope, and heal from the traumatic events in the summer of 2020, while *professionally* occupying their DEI work roles. Ward and Akhtar (2020) observed that DEI professionals in Fortune 500 companies experienced similar struggles. While the DEI professionals in this study experienced heightened stressors, they also indicated their work was gaining power and legitimacy. This finding suggests potential – and promising – differences from past results, which found that DEI professionals held minimal power on college campuses (Griffin et al., 2019). Indeed, the newfound sense of validation for DEI work can serve as a powerful platform to create meaningful change in institutions across the NCAA.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into a unique time in college sport history, there are limitations to these findings. First, this study was conducted during 2020, which saw college sport grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic and growing calls for racial equality and social justice across the nation. As such, this spotlight into the work of DEI professionals captures a unique moment in time and may provide limited insights into DEI practices pre-COVID. Second, the sample included individuals who either had DEI responsibilities as part of their job or drove DEI

work via the (unrelated) positions they held. With the NCAA passing legislation for each member institution to appoint an Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee (ADID), further research is needed to explore the experiences of ADIDs within college athletics specifically. Due to the nature of qualitative research, in-person interviews with participants would have been preferred, however, the virtual setting was selected as the safest option for participants and researchers. Finally, an investigation of key stakeholder perceptions is warranted, as they are vital in the development of an athletics culture that centers DEI. Future research must investigate current DEI programming to identify potential high-impact practices for and barriers to transformational change – an inquiry we have established in previous work (Wright-Mair et al., 2021; Kluch et al., 2022).

Implications

This study has important implications for DEI practitioners in NCAA athletics. For practitioners, this study sheds light on the unique application of DEI work during times of global crisis – in this case, a health crisis. To promote meaningful and impactful DEI work in the college athletic setting, DEI professionals need to be supported by their leaders and be provided with the structural support (e.g., finances or resources) to meet increased demands for DEI work. Future research may also build from this study to investigate the education and training of DEI professionals, potentially assisting in better understanding the impact of DEI practices in athletic departments. In addition, athletic departments should increase funding for DEI work, as expanding this work has shown to be impactful for an organization's diversity culture, and currently, these units are either not being funded at all or receiving very little support financially. One way to do this with tight athletic budgets (post-COVID-19), would be for athletic departments and DEI professionals to integrate their own work with campus-wide initiatives/departments, which may help improve the resources and reach of their programming.

Next, this study has multiple theoretical implications for future research and inquiry. For example, this study used symbolic interactionist theory to further understand the lived experiences of DEI professionals in the college athletic setting, but this study suggests inquiry into external (e.g., fans, alumni, and donors) and internal (e.g., senior leadership) group perceptions of DEI work utilizing symbolic interactionist theory may be warranted. Further, the participants in this study described powerful emotions attached to their DEI work. This is particularly important given that many DEI professionals – including the ones in this study – hold minoritized identities themselves and are thus more likely to experience heightened stress and mental health conditions. The use of symbolic interactionism theory in the context of this study allowed for the individual voices of varying minoritized identities to be examined independently, while also highlighting similarities amongst their experiences. This suggests the theory should continue to be utilized in investigations examining experiences amongst under-represented groups in sport, as sport experiences dictate individuals' values, norms and principles (Weiss, 2001).

Conclusion

Overall, this study sought to understand the unique experiences of DEI professionals in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed calls for racial and social justice across the United States. As college sport continues to grapple with the impact of the pandemic, sport management practitioners and researchers alike must center DEI in their strategic plans as they navigate uncharted territory in the years to come. The participants in this study deserve compliments for their work in advancing DEI in intercollegiate athletics, and this current moment can serve as a turning point for driving strategic DEI work in and through U.S. sport. As college sport returns to the ‘new normal,’ there is a need to meet our participants’ call to be more proactive in DEI work to meet the needs of minoritized members of the NCAA sporting community.

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Notes

1. We use the term racially minoritized throughout to describe racially and ethnically diverse populations. This term acknowledges and indicates the power of structural racism as a tool that seeks to divide and classify individuals with limited power based on social constructions of race. We do not use the term “minorities” as we recognize it is not an objective indication of quantity, but rather a status given to people who have limited power in society, and is entirely subjective based on those who hold power (Benitez, 2010; Stewart, 2013).

2. In the context of this study, the term surface-level diversity focuses on verbiage, statements, and social categories, while deep-level diversity includes attitudes, opinions, values, and action (Phillips & Loyd, 2006).

3. When it comes to the positionality of the authors, the research team represents a diverse set of identities and perspectives. The first author identifies as a white, able-bodied, and straight cisgender man. As a doctoral student in sports administration, his research focuses on DEI initiatives within interscholastic and collegiate sport structures, with a focus on women sport leadership. The second author is a faculty member in sport administration and identifies as a white, able-bodied, straight man. He has a research agenda focused on diversity and inclusion in sports as well as college athlete's well-being. The third author identifies as a white, able-bodied, and queer cisgender man. He is a faculty member with a research agenda focused on DEI in sport, athlete activism, and inclusive leadership, and has a sport-specific background in DEI consulting as well as industry experience working for sport organization's offices focused on DEI. Finally, the fourth author identifies as a Black, multi-racial, first-generation, immigrant, woman faculty member in higher education. Her research agenda is focused on creating equitable institutional environments for racially minoritized populations.