College Sport Communicator Leaders' Perceptions of Sport Information Operations

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Recent research indicates College Athletic Communicators (CACs) could benefit from more staff in the communication department (Elliott et al., 2023). However, the administration may not support the request as additional staffing may not fit in the budget. Therefore, the research presented in this study aims to explore the perspective and experiences of College Sport Communicators (CSC) professional association leaders to evaluate how to better serve the CAC profession with an understanding of limited resources. In this study, semi-structured interviews with CSC leaders were conducted. Overall, findings indicate there is a need to better support CACs in the field, and many governing bodies exist to provide resources – the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA), CSC, and NCAA conference offices. A summary of recommendations from CSC leaders to help support the profession is included in the findings.

Keywords: College Athletic Communicators, Sport Information Directors, Intercollegiate Athletics, Person-Environment Fit

The profession of college sport communication has undergone a remarkable evolution since its inception. In the early years, College Athletic Communicators (CACs) primarily acted as liaisons between collegiate sports programs and the media, providing essential game statistics and press releases. With the evolution of technology and the rise of digital media, the profession witnessed a transformative shift. CACs became integral in crafting compelling narratives around student-athletes, preserving the rich history of athletic achievements, and engaging with fans through various communication channels. CACs evolved into strategic communicators, managing diverse responsibilities such as content creation, brand building, and community engagement. The demand for real-time communication, coupled with the integration of visual storytelling, elevated the role of CACs to encompass a broader and more dynamic spectrum of tasks.

CACs are not the only college athletic department employees who are facing increased workloads, which may contribute to burnout and turnover within the industry. From 2019 to 2022, Division I athletic departments had an average turnover rate of 48%, while Division II athletic departments experienced a 58.1% turnover rate (Huml & Taylor, 2022). Huml and Taylor (2022) note that COVID-19 may have impacted turnover, particularly at public institutions. However, the impacts of COVID-19 on turnover are unclear. Therefore, this is a pertinent issue across roles within athletic departments. Specifically, CACs may experience burnout as a result of the evolving nature of the industry and feel overworked and underappreciated in their position (Battenfield & Kent, 2007; Elliott et al., 2023; Hardin & McClung, 2002; Stoldt, 2013; Whiteside, 2014). However, this issue is not specific to CACs. A study by Taylor et al. (2019) identified job burnout as a significant nationwide issue within college athletic departments. Burnout is a pervasive issue within college athletics, extending beyond the realm of CACs to impact various employee populations within athletic departments. Other vital roles, such as athletic trainers, athletic directors, and coaches, are also susceptible to burnout due to the demanding nature of the collegiate sports environment. The cumulative impact of feeling overworked and undervalued contributes significantly to professionals' decision to "leave the field in pursuit of a better life" (Huml et al., 2023), amplifying the turnover rates within college athletic departments. Dixon et al. (2023) recommend organizations strive to create inventive and personalized policies that align with individual employee preferences. This involves tailoring policies to accommodate the diverse needs of employees. The goal is to optimize the overall experience for all employees by acknowledging and respecting their unique preferences. Addressing burnout emerges as a pivotal strategy in mitigating the broader issue of turnover and recognizing the need for support structures, professional development, and clear delineation of key responsibilities within the profession. Because college athletic departments depend on CACs to craft their public image (Pedersen et al., 2020), it is imperative to work to reverse current CAC turnover trends and improve employee satisfaction. This has led to a growing recognition of the need for support structures, professional development, and a clear delineation of key responsibilities within the profession.

Recent research analyzed the perspectives and experiences of CACs to explore sport communications operation management and find recommendations to improve sport communications operations on campus (Elliott et al., 2023). The summarized results indicated that CACs could benefit from more staff in the communication department. Although increased staffing support for the CACs may be the most desired way to ease CACs feeling overworked in their current position, the request may not be fully supported by the administration as additional staffing may not be part of the athletic department budget. Therefore, scholars should evaluate other options to alleviate the feelings of being underappreciated and overworked. Elliott et al. (2023) suggested the College Sport Communicators (CSC) professional association may be a strong advocate for the profession and may be able to provide needed resources for those serving in the CAC positions on campus.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate CSC leaders' perception of

current tasks and challenges within CAC roles and how it impacts its members. Additionally, this study identifies suggestions for athletic departments and CSC to better support the athletic communications profession. The perspective of CSC leaders is valuable as these members continue their work on campus, conference or bowl game offices, while also serving on committees getting a holistic perspective of the issues in the CAC position. The following section offers a review of the literature related to CACs and the employees working in the profession.

Literature Review

Regarding news dissemination, today's communicators must present information in various forms including press releases, game stories, media coverage, broadcast rights, and social media posts. Much of the existing literature on CACs predates the growth of social media in sports (e.g., Brewer, 2000; Stoldt, 2000). However, social media and other technologies have forever changed the college sport communications landscape (Stoldt & Vermillion, 2013). Claude Felton, the longtime head of athletics communications at the University of Georgia, stated, "the advances in technology over a relatively short period of time represent the most significant change and impact in our communications mission. The speed and efficiency of communications tools are overwhelming along continuing technology advancement" (Pedersen et al., 2020, p. 27-28).

Recognizing the changing environment of college sport communications and the importance of career satisfaction, the CSC professional association surveyed association members in 2020 to discern satisfaction levels. The survey results indicated 87.49% of CACs' responsibilities increased over the past three years (College Sport Communicators, 2020a). Further, the results illustrated that nearly 71% of those with increased responsibilities did not receive increased compensation. In terms of the future of sport communications, the survey suggested only 9.55% of CACs would promote a job in athletics communications (College Sport Communicators, 2020b). Despite the association identifying issues and providing recommendations through this survey, CACs may be included in the perceived movement of intercollegiate athletic employees seeking out other career options due to the current dynamics in the intercollegiate athletic field (Huml & Taylor, 2022). Therefore, more research must be done to effectively find solutions to the turnover, specifically related to CACs.

Limited scholarly attention has been given to the operations of college sport communications, particularly the experiences of employees. In response to the changing demands of CACs responsibility, primarily due to the impact of social media, it is imperative to explore college sport communications through a variety of lenses, including exploring broader impacts of changing communications standards on those working within the sports industry (Sanderson, 2023).

Career Satisfaction Burnout

Employee burnout and subsequent turnover are a growing area of concern within collegiate athletic departments (Huml et al., 2021; Weight et al., 2021). Burnout

has been defined as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from chronic job stressors (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Causes of burnout in the communications profession can be attributed to a high workload as CACs often work long hours, including evenings and weekends, during peak sports seasons, leading to high levels of emotional exhaustion.

Pertinent to conversations involving CACs, Weight and colleagues (2021) suggest lower-level employees tend to face burnout more often. CACs have struggled to gain positions of leadership and influence within their organizations, which is an issue across the public relations industry (Moore, 2020). Specifically, within college athletics, there has been a call to move the view of CACs from technicians to managers (Moore, 2020; Stoldt, 2008). Similarly, CACs' job titles often remain static without promotion. In the 2020 survey of CACs' job satisfaction, the results demonstrated that 70.53% of CACs did not receive an advanced or higher job title after receiving a raise (College Sport Communicators, 2020a). Because CACs often struggle to have leadership roles (Whiteside, 2014), CACs may be particularly susceptible to issues of burnout. The struggle for leadership roles within athletic communication is closely linked to the prevalent issue of burnout. As non-senior employees in athletic departments, sports communicators often face overwhelming workloads, varying tasks, and limited recognition for their contributions. The constant pressure to deliver timely and accurate information to various stakeholders, including media, coaches, athletes, and fans, can also create an environment conducive to burnout, which has been confirmed by previous research. Although research recognizes that CACs are overworked and underappreciated (Battenfield & Kent, 2007; Hardin & McClung, 2002; Stoldt, 2013; Whiteside, 2014), it does not appear practical solutions for alleviating burnout have been identified in the research. This is important to investigate as burnout among CACs has various negative consequences, including decreased job satisfaction, reduced performance, higher turnover intentions, and even physical and mental health issues.

Multidimensional Model of Burnout

The present study is guided by the Multidimensional Theory of Burnout (Maslach, 2003). Job burnout is defined as, "a psychological syndrome that involves a prolonged response to stressors in the workplace. Specifically, it involves the chronic strain that results from an incongruence, or misfit, between the worker and the job" (Maslach, 2003, p.189). Specifically, Maslach (2003) delineates the theory into three key dimensions to job burnout: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment. According to Maslach (2003), emotional exhaustion can be conceptualized as feelings of being emotionally and physically depleted. Cynicism refers to the response to the work (Maslach, 2003). Lastly, reduced personal accomplishment, or inefficacy, may lead to feelings of lack of productivity (Allen, 2019). According to Maslach (2003) exhaustion and cynicism may arise due to being overextended and poor relationships within the workplace. Whereas, the perceived lack of resources contributes to increased feelings of inefficacy. Importantly, this framework suggests burnout is not an individual issue. Instead, burnout should be

conceptualized within an organizational context. As such, discussions and proposed interventions for burnout should consider organizational remedy approaches instead of being solely individual-centered (Maslach, 2003).

The Multidimensional Theory of Burnout has been used in sport and recreation studies.

Allen's (2019) applied the concept to fitness professionals, who often find themselves drained after long hours of trying to motivate others toward adopting healthy lifestyle changes. Allen (2019) provides strategies for professionals to reduce job burnout including setting boundaries, creating work/life balance, finding meaning in work, and creating a support team. Moreover, recent literature has applied the Multidimensional Theory of Burnout to discern stressors and burnout symptoms exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Jang et al. (2023) identified stressors and burnout symptoms among campus recreation employees during the pandemic, aligning with the multidimensional framework. This finding underscores the relevance of considering the three dimensions outlined in the Multidimensional Theory of Burnout in the phenomena of college sport communicators reporting the feeling of being burned out.

Bianchi et al. (2014) caution against confining the application of Maslach's Multidimensional Theory of Burnout solely to the workplace, highlighting the potential impact of external stressors. For college sport communicators grappling with work-life balance issues, it becomes crucial to recognize stressors originating beyond the confines of their professional roles. However, integrating the Multidimensional Theory of Burnout into the examination of burnout among college sport communicators proves advantageous, particularly in addressing the complex interplay between work-related and external stressors in shaping their experiences of burnout. By acknowledging and addressing these multifaceted dimensions of burnout, interventions and support mechanisms can be tailored more effectively to mitigate burnout and promote well-being among college sport communicators.

College Sport Communicators: The Professional Association

Across college athletics, professional associations help address such concerns by providing community, continuing education, and engaging in advocacy efforts (e.g., National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics, College Athletic Trainers Society). College Sport Communicators (CSC), formerly known as College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA), was created in 1957 to support its member CACs in college sport. CSC is led by an executive board of directors, who work toward CSC's two-fold mission which is stated as:

> 1. Assist communications and public relations professionals at all collegiate levels with professional development and continuing education, helping its members deal in a strategic and effective manner with the various issues, challenges and opportunities that exist within the fast-paced and ever-changing collegiate communications environment.

2.   Play a significant leadership and resource role within the overall collegiate athletics enterprise, thus helping other management groups and their respective memberships deal with the set of communications-based issues that is the most complex and challenging in history (College Sport Communicators, n.d.a, para. 7).

As stated in the primary mission of the CSC, the organization was established to help its members (current on-campus CACs who are active dues-paying members) work through challenges on campus. Although CSC advocates for more than 4,000 members, their advocacy efforts' effectiveness should be evaluated. For example, previous research suggests CSC could better its efforts by providing members with graphic design templates to help communicators shorten time spent on tasks (Elliott et al., 2023). With this stated mission, the leaders of the organization may have the insight to provide researchers with the information needed to help find practices that could help CACs working on campus.

Within their athletic department, CACs often feel unheard in strategic decision-making (Moore, 2011). When CACs feel unheard, it can result in decreased job satisfaction, reduced motivation, and lowered morale. This can, in turn, affect their overall job performance and commitment to the organization. Athletic departments often have hierarchies, with coaches and administrators holding significant authority. The structure may lead to CACs' voices being marginalized or ignored, particularly when their views conflict with those of higher-ranking individuals. Additionally, coaches and administrators may not fully appreciate the complexities and challenges of the CAC role, resulting in a lack of understanding and respect for the CACs' expertise and contributions. CACs are typically responsible for a wide range of tasks, including media relations, content creation, crisis management, and more. A broad job scope may lead to overwork and the inability to advocate for their needs and concerns. Therefore, in addition to continued evaluation of CSC's efforts, ways in which athletic department administrators can facilitate better work environments for CACs warrants exploration.

The Current Study

Employee turnover continues to be a pervasive issue within college athletics (Taylor et al., 2022). Therefore, NCAA member institutions must evaluate ways to improve employee satisfaction and retain staff across departments. Previous studies have explored the ways in which CACs feel overworked and undervalued (Brewer, 2000; Elliott et al., 2023; Moore, 2011; Stoldt, 2013). Additionally, research has demonstrated ways in which governing bodies can better the experiences of CACs (Elliott et al., 2023). However, further exploration is necessary to help identify solutions to alleviate communications professionals' concerns (Sanderson, 2023). The present study explores potential avenues to better sport communications operations within college athletic departments from the vantage point of CSC leadership. The purpose of this paper is multi-faceted. The aim is to provide an update on the most

pertinent CAC job tasks and the associated challenges, provide suggestions to avoid burnout, and discern methods in which athletic departments and the CSC professional association can each work to improve communicators' job satisfaction.

Research Questions

As such, this research is important for advancing our understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and best practices within the realm of college sport communication through the perspectives of CSC leadership to improve the profession and promote a more supportive and effective environment for those dedicated to college sport communication. Based in the Multidimensional Theory of Burnout, it is understood that uncertainty in job roles may lead to job burnout (Maslach, 2003). Further, it is imperative to denote precursors to burnout and find strategies to alleviate burnout (Allen, 2019; Jang et al., 2023). As such, the following research questions guided our study:

> **RQ1:** Which tasks do CSC board members perceive as being the most relevant for today's college sport communicators?
> **RQ2:** What causes CSC burnout and how can feelings of burnout be alleviated?
> **RQ3:** What are the ways in which the CSC organization and athletic department administrators can best support college sport communicators?

Method

As the responsibilities of CACs continue to evolve, it is essential to capture the perspectives of CSC leadership to identify the current challenges and opportunities inherent in the CAC position. We employ a qualitative approach to this study to attain a nuanced understanding of current perspectives on the CAC position through interviews with CSC leadership. Semi-structured interviews with CSC executive board leaders were conducted in Fall 2022. CSC leaders were identified on the association website directory and were invited to participate in this study via email.

Study Participants
CSC leadership is comprised of a national staff, an executive board of directors, an advisory council, and committee chairs. According to the CSC website (College Sport Communicators, n.d.b), the national staff positions are filled by individuals who are not associated with an institution and do not currently serve as a CAC. The remainder of the leadership roles on the CSC leadership team are elected positions comprised of individuals who work in communications in some capacity (e.g., an athletic department, conference office, bowl game). The description of the CSC executive board is included below:

> College Sports Communicators Executive Board of Directors is comprised of elected officer positions (President, 1st Vice President, 2nd Vice Presi-

dent, 3rd Vice President, immediate Past President, At-Large Representatives and a Secretary). These athletics communications leaders, along with a five-member staff (Executive Director, Associate Executive Director, Director of Professional Development & External Affairs, Director of Membership Engagement and Director of Creative Services) compose the organization's leadership group (College Sport Communicators, n.d.a, para. 8). Furthermore, the advisory council is comprised of seven individuals who serve as cabinet chairs, representing each NCAA Division, NAIA, Two-Year Institutions, Canadian Institutions, and past presidents. Lastly, the committee chairs represent a plethora of CSC initiatives. Some examples of committee chair positions include serving on young professionals, advocacy, diversity and inclusion, goodwill and wellness, or membership recognition committees. National staff members were not included in this study because this research sought the perspectives of those in leadership and the industry. Ultimately, 31 CSC executive board, advisory council, or committee chairs were invited to partake in the study

After providing informed consent, a total of 10 participants agreed to be part of the study. A majority of the participants identified as men (n = 7). The participants' industry experience ranged between seven and 40 years ($M = 20.6$ years). To ensure confidentiality, the research team decided not to include the Division of participants.

Data Collection

Our data includes 10 semi-structured interviews with CSC leadership who represented college sport communication professionals across different divisions. The research team created an eight-question interview guide prior to beginning the interviews. The interview guide (Appendix A) addressed each research question. The interviews were conducted through video conferencing software (i.e., Zoom and Webex) over the Fall of 2022. The interviews ranged between 31 and 61 minutes in duration, with the average interview lasting 47 minutes. After completion of the interviews, the researchers transcribed the interviews. The transcribed interviews were stored on a password-protected university-issued computer in Word document form. The base interview questions were informed by previous research on communicator perceptions of their job (Elliott et al., 2023) and aligned with the present research questions. Interview questions centered on current perspectives on the CAC position, identifying any issues perceived at the campus level and the influence of these issues; understanding the roles and responsibilities deemed essential for CACs, as well as those that may not be suitable; and recommendations for improving the CAC position, including potential adjustments to job descriptions. Additionally, the participants were asked for the advice CSC leaders would offer to both campus administrators and other fellow CACs.

Coding Procedures and Data Analysis

In the absence of prior research on this organization and profession, we employed an inductive approach to examine the evolution of this group's role in addressing complex communication issues within the dynamic collegiate communi-

cations environment. Interview transcriptions and documents about CSC leaders' experiences were coded using a codebook. First, each researcher individually coded the data to generate categories and themes. These analyses yielded a descriptive inventory of the board perceptions of the complexities and challenges in the field of college athletic communication. Subsequently, the research team engaged in a peer debriefing session to discuss the findings and generated themes (Spall, 1998). The interview transcriptions were then recoded by one member of the research team based on the newly agreed upon codebook, employing analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002) to minimize site effect bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 266).

Positionality

Prior to discussing the findings, it is imperative to address the positionality of the research team, as it affects the research process. Notably, each member of the research team has worked within college athletics. The lead author served in the governance structure at the conference office level within the NCAA membership. Another research team member served college sport communicators at the conference office level. One research team member worked in sports information for four years at two institutions at the Division I level. As such, the team's experiences in the field have shaped the interest in this line of research.

Findings

This study addresses the complex and challenging communication issues within the fast-paced collegiate communications environment. We consolidate this exploration into a chronological process by first identifying complexities and challenges in college sports communication, then assessing their impact on personnel and the strategies to help prevent adverse outcomes and discovering best practices to enhance effectiveness and support structures in the field. We elaborate on our findings concerning each of these steps below.

Complexities and Challenges within the Profession

The first research question (RQ1) aims to understand the perspective of CSC board members on the tasks most relevant for today's college sport communicators. It delves into identifying key responsibilities or activities considered significant in the current landscape of collegiate sports communication. Additionally, RQ1 seeks to uncover challenges associated with completing these tasks within the existing athletic department environment.

Defining the Role

In the discussion of the day-to-day tasks, the data indicated a CAC's role heavily involves work related to social media. One participant noted, "social media has kind of taken over our landscape." The data provided by the participants indicated social media feeds the increasing immediacy of work CACs are expected to produce. It is important that the data indicates creating content for social media takes a chunk of

the CAC's day as there is a need to continually produce content.

Although tasks appear to be added to the CSC role, participants indicated they are still expected to complete more traditional roles. Data suggests roles CACs serve in the athletic department relate to new age roles, traditional roles, and roles passed on to CACs and may be unrelated to sports communication. New age roles discussed by participants include social media, website management, graphic design, video, live streaming, and operating as your own media agency. The traditional roles included statistics, serving as a historian for the athletic department, community relations, and crisis communications. The passed-on roles include game management and half-time entertainment, staffing, gameday operation roles, and setting up on gameday. All of the tasks mentioned by CSC board members are provided in Table 1 below. In summary, one participant said,

> So, I think in the year 2022, the sports information profession has evolved to not only include traditional sport information duties, but also the duties that I call athletic communications duties. So, in addition to keeping stats and archiving, we also have to control social media accounts, do graphic design, and maintain websites. Sometimes like, I know in my role, I have to do a lot of public relations and marketing things.

Another participant light-heartedly stated the addition of tasks with the following,

> It's funny here, we kind of have a list of things on our office door as a joke like 'All the different duties as assigned' that we have today. You're like, 'How is this actually in my job description?' And it's like, 'Do I really have the bandwidth to be doing these things?' It's all those things that I feel fall down the chain because you are this avenue for people's programs to get exposure. So sometimes people think that all of those duties and roles are on your lap.

Task Fit in the Athletic Department Environment

In addition to discerning the pertinent tasks for today's CACs, the research team sought to understand the challenges associated with completing these tasks. There was a heavy emphasis on the taxing work environment experienced by CACs. Specifically, one of the participants indicated the immediacy of work because of the increased prevalence of social media, which leads to a taxing work environment. The participant stated, "The biggest roles are dealing with the immediacy of our business." One participant indicated that to be successful in the working environment, a CAC should be "excited about change because it's changing constantly so someone who is okay with change and able adapt."

Participants also discussed their relationships with administrators. Both positive and negative interactions were discussed in addition to the impact on the work environment. Overall, data suggests CSCs feel administrators should consider any impact on the CAC prior to making decisions. Most importantly, administrators are integral in creating a supportive and understanding culture for communications personnel. For instance, one participant stated: "You know, most of them [administrators] have never walked in our shoes. So they [administrators] don't know what we're doing on a daily basis." Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating, "I

think it's a little bit harder because I think a lot of times, we were just trying to educate [the administrators] like, this is what our job is."

In terms of coaching, it is important to cultivate a working relationship with the coaching staff. This means understanding the coaches' communication style and ensuring the coach understands your job and role with their team. One participant demonstrated the value of the coaching relationship with the following statement, "you have to build those relationships with those coaches, you have to work with them, you need information, you need to get information. They obviously need to know you, because they need to trust you." Ultimately, these internal relationships impact the communicators' experience in their working environment. One participant summarized this point by stating:

> Like I said earlier, if you're in an athletic department that is supportive of athletic communications and sports information, it's great. If you're in [a department], where it's not, it's not great. I think a lot of it is department based. I wish all departments could be wonderful and support us CACs, but I know that's not a thing because of experiences.

RQ1 explored the perspective of CSC board members on tasks relevant to today's professionals in the collegiate sports communication profession. The data indicates that a CAC's role heavily involves social media work, creating content as a significant part of their daily tasks due to the increasing immediacy of work in response to social media demands. The discussion also reveals that CACs are expected to fulfill both new age and traditional roles, such as social media management, website maintenance, graphic design, video creation, and more traditional roles like statistics, archival work, and community relations. Furthermore, the section explores the challenges associated with completing these tasks, emphasizing the taxing work environment influenced by the immediacy of work, frequent changes, and the impact of relationships with administrators and coaching staff on the CAC's working environment. Overall, the findings help identify pertinent tasks for CACs and illuminate their challenges in the current athletic department environment.

Table 1.
CAC's Tasks

CAC Tasks
Statistics
Website management
Record keeping
Writing stories and press releases
Promoting the athletic department
Creating video content
Graphic design
Communication with coaches
Working with marketing and public relation departments on campus
Production/Streaming

Impact on Members

CSC is a professional association made up of dues-paying CACs who oversee on-campus athletic communication departments. The absence of clearly defined key responsibilities or activities in collegiate sports communication is a significant concern, as it can contribute to burnout among professionals in the field. Without clear guidelines, individuals may face decreased job satisfaction, reduced motivation, and lowered morale (Jenks & Hardin, 2017). RQ2 explores the factors leading to burnout among CAC members, seeking to understand the root causes of burnout within the college sports communication profession. It also aims to identify strategies and interventions for alleviating feelings of burnout among CAC professionals.

Reasons for Burnout

Participants provided data related to why burnout is present in the CAC profession. The data suggests the uncertainty of the CAC job duties can lead to burnout as CACs are asked to complete tasks outside the scope of communication. Specifically, a common discussion emerged around CACs hired to perform traditional functions now required to learn and use skills outside of their training. These new skills include learning how to use and keep up with graphic design and creating videos. For example, a CAC who was hired to cover statistics is now being required to take photographs at games and create graphics for the story and social media platforms. Additionally, data suggests the increased tasks assigned to CACs do not necessarily come with increased resources or compensation even though there is an increased time commitment placed on the CAC.

Suggestions to Prevent Burnout

Although CACs provided data related to burnout, suggestions to prevent burnout emerged in the data provided by participants. One of the most suggested practices to prevent burnout is taking time off. One participant noted CACs should "not only advocate for yourself to step away, but then to actually do it." Data suggests although CACs acknowledge they should take time off, it is hard to find the time to take a break, especially during the academic year.

Another common discussion that emerged from the data was CACs taking on extra tasks not included in their job description. Data suggests CACs cannot give their all if they become burned out. The data suggests CACs should not just be a 'yes man' but should advocate for themselves. Participants suggested CACs avoid a hero complex when given the opportunity to complete more tasks for the athletic department. The data suggests many additional tasks placed on CACs relate to athletic administration and coaches wanting to "keep up with the Joneses." Related to the extra tasks placed on the CAC's plate, data suggested CACs should not be shy about asking for resources. One participant noted, "don't be shy about going to your leadership and telling them what you need but don't just go in there complaining". Data suggests CACs should not just complain but show their value to the athletic department. For example, CACs should indicate their involvement in the money brought into the athletic department through fundraising campaigns developed through social

media and streaming. One participant posed the question, "So, how can we try and actually make change, instead of people just complaining all the time on Twitter and Facebook about it?" The data suggests there is a need for CACs to find solutions to the causes of burnout they face.

Finally, data suggests CACs should focus on why they are in the profession to avoid burnout. Data from the participants indicated many of the participants got involved in the role due to a love of sports, connections with student-athletes and coaches, and friendships with other CSCs. Data suggests attention should move toward building relationships with student-athletes and coaches to improve the work environment for CACs, especially related to developing positive working relationships. Table 2 below includes suggestions from the data on preventing burnout.

Table 2.
Suggestions to Prevent Burnout (CAC to CAC)

Suggestions to Prevent Burnout (CAC to CAC)
Build relationships with student-athletes.
Don't be shy to tell leadership what you need.
Do not focus on complaining, but offering ideas/solutions.
Be open to solutions from others.
Build relationships with coaches to know their preferred communication style.
Be creative when looking for improvements in the role .

The section above discusses the significant concern of burnout in collegiate sports communication due to the absence of clearly defined key responsibilities. RQ2 explores the factors leading to burnout among CACs, focusing on uncertainties in the job title and the increased tasks assigned without corresponding resources or compensation. Participants shared reasons for burnout, including the expectation to acquire new skills outside their training and the challenge of finding time for breaks during the academic year. Suggestions to prevent burnout include advocating for time off, avoiding a "hero complex", seeking necessary resources, and focusing on the initial motivations for entering the profession, such as a love of sports and building positive relationships with student-athletes and coaches.

Support Strategies

The lack of clearly defined key responsibilities or activities in the current landscape of collegiate sports communication poses a risk of burnout and underscores the critical necessity for implementing support strategies. The purpose of RQ3 was to discern ways in which the CSC professional association and athletic department administrators could best support the profession. A table of all suggestions is provided

at the end of the discussion. This section seeks to provide practical support strategies that can enhance the well-being and working conditions of professionals in the college sports communication field.

Support from College Sport Communicators Professional Association

From a College Sport Communicators association perspective, data suggests CACs could be more supported by an increase in collaboration with NACDA. Data suggested workshops or committees could be developed to help support CACs. The participants in the study indicated there should be an increased value placed on having all administrators and CACs in one place during NACDA. One participant said, "Take advantage of the fact that you have all these administrators in this one place. How can you get these two groups together to really try and like, level with one another about where both sides are there?"

Additionally, data that emerged from the discussion with participants indicated the CSC association could do more to promote member initiatives, giving others the opportunity to see what CACs are doing to better the profession. One interesting note that appeared in the data indicated CACs need to be members of CAC to have a voice. CAC could do more to demonstrate the value of membership with the association. The increased value could lead to more athletic administrators on campus supporting the membership for their CAC.

Support from Athletic Department Administrators

In terms of how athletic department administrators can best support CACs, the data suggests there should be increased education on what a CAC does in their daily role. Participants even called for athletic administrators to "walk a day in their shoes" to understand the daily demands placed on the role. Suggestions to increase education on the role of the CAC include creating a guide for coaches indicating what they can ask from CACs. Participants indicate a guide could narrow the demands placed on CACs from the coaching staff. Additionally, athletic administrators should consider the demand placed on CSCs prior to approving game schedules. The data provided by participants suggests CACs are given tasks without administrators understanding the increased work demand. Similarly, the data also suggests there is a call from the CAC profession to give CACs a senior-level title. One participant in the study noted,

> they [athletic department employees] don't look at them [CACs] as an administrator, and instead of being an CAC overseeing communications, we are an administrator in the athletic department.

Although the data suggests CACs should be given a senior-level title, there is an indication that CACs should also receive necessary training related to leadership as they already perform administrative roles. One participant noted, "give them [CACs] the tools to do their job. Whether it's education, whether it's classes, whether it's resources. So that they [CACs] can move into the role of the leader of the department."

Additionally, the data suggests that more comprehensive job descriptions and disclosing the salary for CACs early in the search process can help CACs make

more informed decisions before taking on the position. Data suggests that there are ways to make a CAC feel appreciated that go beyond a salary increase. Data from the participants included a discussion of ways administrators can make CACs feel appreciated that do not add a cost to the department. Public recognition was a consistent way provided by participants as a free way to show CACs they are valued in the athletic department.

Once CACs are hired, data suggests administrators can support CACs by creating a culture that better supports work/life balance. Examples of an improved work/life balance provided by participants include allowing CACs to work from home and providing CACs with a day off if they work a seven-day week or long days.

Table 3.
Suggestions to Support the Profession

Suggestions to Help Support the Profession
Role of Administrators
Evaluate the goals of your athletic department and do not make demands which are more closely aligned with different athletic departments.
Define roles/create a guide for coaches (and others) indicating what they can ask from CACs.
Provide more comprehensive job descriptions and disclose the salary the position early in the search process.
Increase education on what an CAC does in their daily role.
Make CACs feel appreciated (e.g., tools to better complete their job, appreciation).
Consider the demand placed on CACs prior to approving game schedules.
Role of College Sport Communicators
Increase collaboration with NACDA.
Create workshops or committees for all CAC roles (new-age, traditional, and passed-on).
Create leadership workshops.
Promote member initiatives, giving the opportunity for others to see what CACs are doing.
Do more to demonstrate the value of membership with the association to administrators - and do so consistently.

In addressing the research question about supporting CACs, the study identifies critical strategies for both the CSC association and athletic department administrators. The data suggests the CSC association could enhance support by fostering collaboration with NACDA, creating workshops or committees for CACs, and promoting member initiatives to showcase their contributions. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on demonstrating the value of CSC membership and providing CACs with a senior-level title, coupled with necessary leadership training. Athletic department

administrators are encouraged to gain a deeper understanding of the daily demands on CACs, considering the creation of guides for coaches, comprehensive job descriptions, and early disclosure of salaries. The study also highlights the significance of non-monetary gestures, such as public recognition, in making CACs feel appreciated. Additionally, creating a supportive work/life balance culture, including opportunities to work from home and occasional days off, emerges as a crucial aspect of support for CACs.

Discussion

In the context of college athletics, the issue of employee turnover persists, as highlighted in recent research conducted by Huml & Taylor (2022), and affects departments like academic support (Gellock & Dwyer, 2023) and athletic communications. Previous research found high-ranking administrators, such as those with associate, deputy, and athletic director titles, tend to have stable positions with low turnover rates (Huml et al., 2021). In contrast, employees lower in the organizational hierarchy experience significant turnover (Weight et al., 2021). It is worth noting that burnout costs organizations in terms of decreased job satisfaction, reduced motivation, and lowered morale (Jenks & Hardin, 2017), which may hinder work performance and ultimately lead to employee turnover. Further, increased employee turnover rates tend to decrease organizational performance (Park & Shaw, 2013). Therefore, limiting employee turnover across job titles must be a top-level concern for administrators within college athletic departments to ensure employees perform at their highest level and provide the best experiences for athletes and fans. Recognizing burnout as a shared challenge, which can be mitigated by athletic departments and professional associations, emphasizes the urgency of developing effective strategies to enhance job satisfaction, reduce turnover, and safeguard individuals' physical and mental health within the intricate web of college athletics.

In the context of the Multidimensional Theory of Burnout, Maslach (2003) highlights a critical perspective: while many interventions for burnout focus on individual-centered approaches, such as removing or training individual workers, research indicates situational and organizational factors play a more significant role in burnout. This underscores the importance of considering broader institutional contexts in addressing burnout among CACs.

Given the diverse array of governing bodies associated with CACs, including College Sport Communicator leadership, Conference Offices, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association, it becomes essential to recognize the universal prevalence of burnout among CACs. Instead of solely relying on individual interventions, there is merit in extending discussions to encompass organizational factors influencing the experiences of individuals in CAC roles. By adopting a holistic approach that addresses systemic challenges within athletic departments and broader organizational structures, stakeholders can foster environments conducive to mitigating burnout and promoting well-being among CACs.

Theoretical Contributions

The current study supports the Multidimensional Theory of Burnout (Maslach, 2003). Each of the three dimensions (exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy) were demonstrated in the findings. Exhaustion may occur as there is uncertainty in the job role. Cynicism can emerge due to difficult workplace relationships (Maslach, 2003). The findings suggest the relationships CACs have with those in their athletic department is critical to their success and job satisfaction. Further, several CSC leadership members denoted how the role has changed overtime. Therefore, several of the skill sets needed are new. As such, CSC leadership demonstrated inefficacy could be a problem for CACs, particularly if they are not given the necessary tools. Further, inefficacy can emerge due to not having access to critical information (Maslach, 2003). Because CACs continue to struggle to become administrators, this may contribute to feelings of inefficacy.

By examining the college sport communication industry through the perspectives of CSC leadership, this study extends the current literature on burnout within college athletics by specifically focusing on the unique challenges faced by CACs. If not addressed, burnout becomes a critical factor influencing individuals to leave their positions within athletic departments, contributing to higher turnover rates. Consequently, if high turnover within communications roles occurs, athletic departments will find it increasingly difficult to share their message and brand to broader publics and ensure brand consistency. Specifically, the current study found the demanding nature of the CAC jobs, coupled with uncertainty in the assigned duties and increased responsibilities without increased support, may result in feelings of being under-appreciated and overworked, which can contribute to burnout among CACs, ultimately leading to turnover. This study extends Gellock & Dwyer's (2023) finding on job burnout and turnover within athletic departments by focusing on CACs. By concentrating on a specific role within the athletic department, the study provides nuanced information that can further inform strategies to mitigate burnout and reduce turnover in this professional context.

Unlike recent studies (Gellock & Dwyer, 2023; Huml et al., 2023; Huml et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2022), which drew from broad and diverse samples of athletic employees, this research uniquely focuses on the specific challenges experienced by CACs. It explores these challenges through the lens of a purposefully selected group of CSC leaders, offering valuable insights and actionable suggestions tailored to their preferences for addressing burnout, as recommended by Dixon (2023). Against this backdrop, the present study is distinctive because it captures the perspectives of CSC leadership to identify the current complexities and challenges that cause burnout inherent in the CAC position. Unlike other positions within the athletic department that might have more established and defined roles, CACs, especially with the changing dynamics in the industry, find themselves navigating a broader range of responsibilities. This includes incorporating creative elements and titles beyond traditional sports information (Elliott et al., 2023), which has been given limited attention in previous academic sport management research. This exploration looked to the perspective of executive board members of the CSC to

give a clearer definition and understanding of CAC's responsibilities in a field undergoing significant transformation. This has not been thoroughly explored in previous academic sport management research. This exploration is conducted from the perspective of the CSC executive board members. The paper aims to advance strategies that can be collaboratively adopted by employees, athletic departments, and the CAC to enhance communicators' job satisfaction, ultimately resulting in reduced burnout.

Practical Applications

As NCAA member institutions aim to elevate employee satisfaction and devise retention strategies spanning different departments, focusing on the unique challenges faced by communication professionals in college sports becomes imperative. Previous studies have shed light on the prevalent feelings of being overwhelmed and undervalued among communication experts within collegiate sports (Brewer, 2000; Elliott et al., 2023; Moore, 2011; Stoldt, 2013). While there have been strides in comprehending ways in which governing bodies can enhance their experiences (Elliott et al., 2023), there is an urgent call for more extensive exploration to identify effective remedies for reducing turnover in this domain (Sanderson, 2023). As such, this work suggests collective effort from employees, athletic departments, and the CAC is imperative to improve job satisfaction among communication professionals.

Individually, communicators must learn to advocate for themselves, demonstrate their value, and find ways to make their self-care a priority, which are similar to Allen's (2019) discussion of fitness professionals' remedies to burnout. However, the athletic department is instrumental in ensuring CACs do not experience exhaustion, cynicism, or inefficacy. Athletic departments can help reduce CAC exhaustion by better understanding the role of communicators, which could be done through shadow days. Further, a guide should be created to help discourage coaches and others in the athletic department from tasking the communicators with out-of-scope work. By addressing the identified pain points, such as workload and recognition issues, athletic departments can create a more conducive work environment. The present study uncovers that the relationships with those within the department can impact professionals' tenure and satisfaction. Creating a supportive work environment, recognizing contributions, and implementing strategies to prevent cynicism is crucial in mitigating job burnout and subsequent turnover. Lastly, providing training, professional development opportunities, and an administrative role may improve CACs' feelings of inefficacy. Decreased efficacy can result in better overall performance.

Similarly, as an advocate for communication professionals, the CSC can play a crucial role in voicing concerns and facilitating solutions on a broader scale. As such, CSC should be consistent in their advocacy efforts, mediate the relationship between communicators and administrators, and create leadership or self-advocacy training for communicators.

Previous research (Battenfield & Kent, 2007; Hardin & McClung, 2002; Stoldt, 2013; Whiteside, 2014) has identified challenges within the athletic communication industry; however, this study adds a holistic perspective and offers practical rec-

ommendations for departmental and industry-level improvements. By addressing communication professionals' concerns and challenges in a holistic manner, NCAA member institutions can create an environment that encourages longevity and growth within the field. The present study offers insights into the ways in which collaborative efforts between employees, athletic departments, and the CSC can lead to meaningful improvements in communicators' job satisfaction and reduce employee turnover. By addressing issues of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, while proposing tangible solutions, the study provides unique insights that can inform effective strategies for the evolving landscape of college athletic communication. In doing so, this research contributes to the overarching goal of reducing turnover and ensuring a stable, motivated, and effective communication workforce within the realm of college athletics.

Limitations and Suggestion for Future Research

The present study was exploratory in nature as the researchers intended to use the perspectives and experiences provided by the participants to gain a better understanding of how to improve satisfaction and reduce the turnover rate of CACs working on NCAA member institution campuses. Although the results include a perspective from participants who have an aerial perspective of the communication department on NCAA member institution campuses, this study was limited to data provided by ten participants. Further quantitative research using a wider participant pool with a survey instrument framed by the results provided in this study could enhance current knowledge of specific variables that may impact CAC's feelings of satisfaction in their current roles on campus. For example, future studies can include an analysis of a CAC's previous sport participation, years of experience in the role, or the CAC's relationship with coaches, staff, and student-athletes at the institution to predict job satisfaction. Analyzing specific indicators of an individual employed as a CAC during the hiring phase may help athletic administrators hire employees who will be more satisfied in the job and reduce turnover rates for the position.

Additionally, the current study included only the perspective of those working in a leadership capacity with the College Sport Communicators association. Although the perspective provides a critical lens into the world of a CAC, the work of those working in a leadership capacity to support CACs may not include a holistic view of the issues presented to administrators working in intercollegiate athletics. Specifically, a consideration of fiscal management concerns or the workload of other employees working in the department. An analysis of the perspective of those responsible for management and hiring within the athletic department, possibly the perspective of athletic directors, may provide additional data that could lead to predicting specific variables that could impact the work satisfaction of those working in the CAC role on campus. Lastly, as institutions implement various tactics to improve communicators' job satisfaction, the effectiveness of those offerings should be tested.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

1. How would you describe the role of the CAC within the sports landscape?
    1. How has the role changed, if at all, within recent years?
2. From your role in a leadership position with CSC, are there any issues you see with the current perspective of the CAC position on campus?
    1. If yes, what do you believe influences the issues?
    2. What role has CSC played in addressing these issues?
    3. Are there any issues that might be specific to certain divisions within the NCAA?
3. From your perspective, what are roles or responsibilities should be included for CACs?
4. Do you believe there are any roles or responsibilities that should NOT be included for CACS?
5. From your perspective as a leader of CSC, what can be done to improve the CAC position?
6. Do you have recommendations for a model CAC job description on campus?
7. What advice would you give to campus administrators to help support their CAC?
8. What advice would you give to CACs (current or future) about their role?