

University Stakeholder Perceptions of NCAA Reclassification During the Transition Period: A Case Study of the University of North Alabama

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions that university administrators, athletic department staff, head coaches, college athletes and faculty hold regarding the reclassification process to National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I. This study examined the perceptions of stakeholders from the University of North Alabama, which reclassified from NCAA Division II to Division I from 2018 to 2022. Previous literature has examined the ramifications of NCAA reclassification. This includes the relationship between NCAA reclassification and the impact on academic performance, student recruitment, the psychological well-being on college athletes, and economic impact on athletic departments. This study attempts to add to previous research by focusing on the experiences of several types of stakeholders during the four-year reclassification period, where most studies have researched why institutions decided to reclassify or the long-term consequences. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 participants. Responses from the participants provided insight regarding how they thought different NCAA bylaws impacted the university and how athletic department resources were or should have been utilized. Next, the present study sought to learn about the impact of other NCAA Division I institutions located near the university, as well as the university's local community, and the transition period's impact on morale and the athletic department's identity. Overall, the current research intends to provide a better understanding of the transition period experience for the employees and athletes at institutions that reclassify to Division I in the future.

Keywords: college sport, intercollegiate sport governance, NCAA compliance, staffing, athletics, person-organization fit, NCAA policy

Reclassification is a highly relevant issue in current college athletics because eleven of the 364 institutions that compete in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Division I are currently reclassifying, or in a transition period, from another NCAA division (NCAA, n.d.a). In bylaw 20.7.3.5, the NCAA (2023a) describes reclassification to Division I as four-year process, where an institution must satisfy several requirements to become a full Division I member.

Previous scholarship suggested that the administrators at transitioning NCAA institutions generally feel their institutions could benefit from reclassifying for several reasons, such as increased exposure from their athletic programs, an enhanced academic reputation for their institution, and an increase in student applications and enrollment (Dwyer et al., 2010; Weaver, 2010; Williams et al., 2016). College athletic departments have faced recent and significant issues since several studies about NCAA reclassification have been published (Browndorf, 2021; Swanson & Smith, 2020). For instance, NCAA institutions have cut several athletic programs in lieu COVID-19 pandemic (Swanson & Smith, 2020). Further, there have been NCAA rule changes such as the ability of athletes to earn money from their name, image and likeness, as well as the increased freedom to transfer (Browndorf, 2021).

Additional insight about the perceptions of individuals who experienced the transition period could benefit various stakeholders throughout higher education for several reasons. First, university presidents and trustees, who historically have little to no experience with college athletics (Smith, 2011), can gain insight regarding the short-term impact that the transition period has on their athletic programs, as well as the athletes and employees of an institution. Second, when their institution chose to reclassify to NCAA Division I, athletic department administrators compared themselves to other NCAA institutions that already reclassified to Division I (Weaver, 2010); therefore, institutions may also want to better understand the day-to-day obstacles that other athletic departments who reclassified faced during the transition period. Third, athletics staff members may work at several institutions to progress in their careers (Dickman et al., 2021), so they may need to choose whether to work at an institution that is considering reclassifying or is in the transition period.

The present study details the reclassification of the University of North Alabama (UNA) from NCAA Division II to Division I, which occurred from the fall of 2018 to the fall of 2022 (Eubanks, 2022). It attempts to add to the literature on reclassification in a few ways. Although previous research has examined reclassification, the majority of other studies focused on institutions that have reclassified to an NCAA Division besides Division I (Mitchell & Barrett, 2022; Williams et al., 2016), or from Division I's Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) to the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS; Fowler et al., 2024; Goff et al., 2015; Roy et al., 2008). The study also seeks to focus on the four-year transition period instead of the long-term impact of reclassification. Additionally, this study includes the perceptions of a variety of university stakeholders, including college athletes, head coaches, athletic department staff, university administrators and faculty. Also, by selecting UNA as the subject for this case study, the researchers were able to examine how participants believed that the university's decision to reclassify several years after other institutions in the surrounding area impacted their athletic department during the transition period. Fi-

nally, the study examines how several stakeholders at UNA perceived the impact of reclassification on specific sports programs, instead of the whole athletic department or institution. The researchers address implications for institutions that may consider reclassification to NCAA Division I at the end of the study.

Literature Review

History of the NCAA's Divisional Structure

Before the NCAA's founding, individual institutions and athletic conferences governed college sport (Smith, 1988; Thelin, 1996). All participating member institutions competed under one "Pangaea-like" division, regardless of university characteristics such as the size of their student body (Doyle, 2017; Katz & Seifried, 2014). Notably, small liberal arts colleges could field athletic programs that remained competitive against larger public universities during the early 1900s; however, the continued commercial growth of college sport and university enrollments led to a more significant gap in resources between these types of institutions (Watkins, 2019). After World War II, public universities increased their competitive advantage over private colleges due to looser transfer regulations, the GI Bill, the expansion of athletic scholarships, and the rising gap in the cost of tuition (Kemper, 2009). As a result, presidents and faculty at these colleges questioned whether they had any substantial power in governing the NCAA (Kemper, 2020).

Several "small budget" institutions joined the NCAA during the 1950s and 1960s (Katz & Seifried, 2014), while regional public universities also began to gain an advantage in resources over private colleges (Kemper, 2020). Members of the NCAA eventually approved splitting institutions into two divisions; College and University, but did not create requirements for membership in either division. Member institutions could switch between both divisions on a yearly basis (Katz & Seifried, 2014). In 1973, the NCAA reorganized into Division I, II and III, which eventually allowed each division to create their own membership requirements and postseason opportunities (Katz & Seifried, 2014). In football, members of the NCAA further divided Division I into Division I-A and Division I-AA during 1978, with the football programs in both subdivisions competing in separate postseasons (Smith, 2001). During 2006, Division I-A was renamed to FBS while Division I-AA became FCS, with the football programs in both subdivisions competing in separate postseasons (Fort & Winfree, 2013). Currently, the NCAA allows institutions to "self-determine" which division they compete in, and as a result, institutions have the power to reclassify from one division to another (NCAA, 2022a).

The Differences among NCAA Divisions I and II

When considering reclassification from Division II to Division I, institutional stakeholders need to be aware that Division I regulations are typically stricter and require institutions to provide more resources. First, college athletes must meet minimum academic standards (NCAA, n.d.b). Division I institutions require a slightly higher grade point average (GPA) and total number of courses completed compared to Division II athletes. Further, for Division I athletes to remain academically eligible,

they must earn enough credit hours to maintain progress towards graduation, whereas Division II athletes must complete a minimum number of credit hours instead (NCAA, 2022a, 2022b). Second, the NCAA compels Division I institutions to have larger budgets, and spend more money on athletic scholarships, as well as other athlete centered services (NCAA, 2022a). Third, Division I institutions are required to sponsor a minimum of fourteen or sixteen teams compared to the ten required in Division II. Fourth, Division I institutions also have a slightly higher minimum and maximum number of athletic contests they can schedule (NCAA, 2022a, 2022b). Overall, it is highly likely that institutions who chose to reclassify from Division II to Division I must increase their spending.

Corresponding information from the 2019 NCAA GOALS study also provides evidence that the social experience of a Division I athlete is different. For example, Division I athletes reported spending five more hours each week on athletic activities in season than Division II athletes (NCAA Research Staff, 2019). Next, Division II male athletes (72%) reported increased difficulties balancing athletics and participating in extracurricular activities. (NCAA Research Staff, 2019). Similarly to how institutions must invest additional resources when reclassifying, NCAA GOALS data also suggested that the athletes at these institutions can expect to devote more time and emotional energy into athletics (NCAA Research Staff, 2019). Therefore, institutions must decide if the potential advantages of Division I membership outweigh any potentially negative impact on the experiences of their institution's athletes.

Reclassification Process and Requirements

To complete the transition to Division I, applicants must have been an active Division II member for the past five years, field a minimum number of teams and provide a minimum amount of funding for athletic scholarships. Also, the institution must receive an offer of membership by an active Division I multi-sport conference (NCAA, 2022a). Once an application has been approved by the sponsoring athletic conference, an institution must go through the aforementioned four-year reclassification process known as the transition period (NCAA, 2022a). During this transition period, institutions do not receive conference sport-based revenue distribution until after their third academic year as an active Division I member, although they can receive revenue from other funds (NCAA, 2022a). In addition, an institution is ineligible to compete in NCAA championship events during the transition period. As a result of these restrictions, institutions face an unusually challenging period where they must increase how much they invest in athletics without receiving some of the most significant benefits. The remainder of the literature review describes research showcasing the potential academic, psychological, and financial impact on institutions and athletes.

Academic Impact

One reason university administrators sought reclassification to NCAA Division I is based on the potential to improve their institution academically (Dwyer et al., 2010; Weaver, 2010). Previous research has indicated that administrators believe that

reclassification would help their institution attract more students, as well as higher quality students (Dwyer et al., 2010; Roy et al., 2008). Other studies have also examined this perception (Fowler et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2024; Tomasini, 2003; Watkins, 2017). Fowler et al. (2022), for instance, examined admissions data and found that there was a significant increase in the number of enrollment applications. Similarly, Williams et al. (2016) discovered NAIA institutions received an increase in applications from prospective undergraduate students after joining Division II. Jones (2014) found more mixed results when they examined freshmen applications to three universities that reclassified from FCS to FBS. Two public universities in Florida experienced a significant increase in admissions applications compared to similar institutions, however, a public university in Kentucky did not a change in admission applications (Jones, 2014). Next, it has been reported that moving away from the historical academic profile of an institution was a significant factor in reclassification decisions to NCAA Division I (Weaver, 2010). Such was the case with the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG) where Weaver (2010) found administrators used reclassification to reposition the university's reputation from a former college for women to a public research university.

Other research has found contrasting results. In a survey of current students and alumni of one university that reclassified to Division I, the results indicated that "both students and alumni appear not to connect the target institutions academics with their Division I athletic program" (Dwyer et al., 2010, p. 89). According to Tomasini (2003), universities who reclassified to Division I between the years of 1993 and 1999 experienced no increase in applications and undergraduate enrollment. In addition, a private college in an urban city in Alabama, Birmingham-Southern College, did not grow enrollment during the seven years that they competed in Division I (Watkins, 2017). Most recently, Taylor et al. (2024) discovered that institutions who reclassified from Division II to Division I did not gain a significant increase in student applications, compared to similar institutions that remained in Division II. Collectively, administrators who led their NCAA institution in reclassification to Division I have indicated they saw what they viewed as similar institutions achieve athletic success, and believed it could be replicated at their own institution (Dwyer et al., 2010; Watkins, 2017; Weaver, 2010). While benefits such as an increase in enrollment are possible, previous research provides evidence that this is not a certainty.

Beyond enrollment, additional studies have explored how reclassifying impacted the academic performance of college athletes and non-athletes. Regarding Academic Progress Rate (APR: Fowler et al. (2022) found that football programs experienced a decrease in APR scores after reclassifying from FCS to FBS. Yet, Fowler and co-authors (2022) also discovered that the GPAs of incoming first-year students were significantly improved. Overall, Fowler et al. (2022) concluded that "these findings indicate that there is a positive relationship with institutions transitioning from FCS to FBS and quality of students entering the general student population, while also having an initial negative relationship with football student-athletes and academic performance" (p. 16). Commenting on graduation rates, Frieder and Fulks (2007) noted they increased significantly for institutions that reclassified to Division I for

both the general student population and athletes. Kissinger et al. (2015) later found support for this finding. For example, in interviews with male athletic administrators and male basketball athletes at an institution that reclassified from Division II to Division I status, the athletes reported an increased emphasis on graduation and making “progress towards a degree” to remain eligible to compete in athletics (Kissinger et al., 2015).

Psychological Impact

Studies have also shown that the reclassification process has affected college athletes psychologically. For instance, Drayer and Wang (2008) discovered college football athletes competing for a university while it transitioned from Division II to Division I felt an increase in accountability and pressure moving to Division I, to the point where he perceived playing football as a job. Kissinger et al. (2015) also showed that athletes felt the pressure to succeed athletically because of the increased financial value of their athletic scholarships. Athletes also shared mixed feelings from other perspectives about their athletic experience. They enjoyed competing against more prestigious athletic programs, but also expressed disappointment because they were convinced that their institution missed the opportunity to win a national championship at the Division II level (Drayer & Wang, 2008). Yet, athletes reported that they believed that competing on a Division I team strengthened their athletic identity and their future opportunities to play professionally or coach (Kissinger et al., 2015).

More recently, Mitchell and Barrett (2022) examined the experiences of college athletes while their institution reclassified from Division III to Division II. The results indicated that athletes believed reclassification influenced their academic identity, athletic time commitment, availability of athletics scholarships, and the competitive environment. Athletes also indicated that with the transition there was a perceived shift from a ‘student first’ mentality to ‘athlete-student’. While reclassifying has potential benefits for athletic departments and the rest of an institution, the transition period itself may also be psychologically demanding for athletes. In addition to the psychological impact of reclassification faced by athletes, athletic departments can also experience a significant financial impact.

Financial Impact

University administrators, athletic department staff and faculty members at reclassifying institutions may anticipate that reclassification results in increased revenue for the athletic department, as well as the university (Dwyer et al., 2010). Frieder and Fulks (2007), however, portrayed reclassification as a financial drain to the athletics department. Their study found that on average, revenues for institutions that reclassified from Division II to Division I increased significantly after the reclassification, although they were outweighed by an increase in expenses. Goff and co-authors (2015) found that attendance at football games increased at institutions during their first five years of reclassifying from FCS to FBS, and Dwyer et al., (2010) discovered that students perceived themselves as more likely than alumni to

involve themselves with athletics through attending events and wearing university apparel when their university reclassified to Division I. Taylor and co-authors (2024) focused on the impact of reclassification from Division II to Division I on basketball related revenue, and determined that institutions who reclassified averaged an increase of \$1.24 million in revenue from that sport compared to similar Division II institutions that did not reclassify.

Despite these types of gains, Frieder and Fulks (2007) observed that the operating expenses at reclassifying institutions grew at an even greater rate. All eight institutions in their sample saw total expenses nearly double. Similarly, Orszag and Orszag (2005) determined that institutions that reclassified divisions did not experience significant financial returns. Moving from Division II to Division I resulted in a decrease in net operating revenue for every institution from which data was gathered, excluding institutional funding, state support, and student fees (Orszag & Orszag, 2005). This study also identified athletic scholarships, coaching salaries and team travel as the three largest areas where expenses increased. Although institutions also benefitted from increases in revenue such as alumni donations, ticket sales and NCAA/conference distributions, these appeared to be outweighed by increasing costs. Additional research found that reclassification from DI-AA to DI-A had a “modest, at best” impact on whether students and alumni planned to attend home football games or purchase university apparel (Roy et al., 2008, p. 23). More recently, Taylor and co-authors (2024) also found that athletic department expenses increased significantly, regardless of whether the institution sponsored a football program. Students who attended a university while it was in the process of reclassifying from FCS to FBS, and opposed the decision to reclassify, indicated that increased costs were the main reason for their disapproval (Barnhill et al., 2016). Therefore, the perceptions of financial challenges caused by reclassification could be one obstacle faced by institutions during their transition period.

Method

The setting for this study was the University of North Alabama (UNA), a regional public university with approximately 9,500 total students at the undergraduate and graduate level (UNA, n.d.). UNA is the oldest public university in Alabama (UNA, n.d.). UNA is located in the city of Florence (UNA, n.d.), which has a population of approximately 40,000 according to the United States (U.S) Department of Commerce (n.d.). The university reclassified from the NCAA Division II Gulf South Conference (GSC) to the NCAA Division I Atlantic Sun Conference during the fall of 2018 (Eubanks, 2022). At the Division II level, UNA achieved success in multiple sports (UNA Lions Athletics, n.d.). The football program won three straight national championships during the 1990s, while the men’s basketball team also won two national championships in 1979 and 1991. In women’s athletics, the volleyball program won a national championship in 2003, and the softball program won one in 2016. Men’s teams have also won a total of 29 GSC championships and appeared in 79 NCAA team playoffs, while women’s teams won 48 GSC championships also

appeared in 79 NCAA Division II team playoffs.

Participant Requirements and Criteria

Following IRB approval, the researchers interviewed participants currently and formerly affiliated with UNA about their experiences during the transition period. Participants included a combination of four total college athletes, five head coaches, seven athletic department staff members, the current university president and four tenured faculty members. Two former athletes also currently work as athletic department staff members. A total of nineteen participants were interviewed. Previous reclassification studies that examined the perceptions held by multiple university stakeholders (Barnhill et al., 2016; Dwyer et al., 2010; Weaver, 2010) justify the pursuit of the various perspectives of different individuals because perspectives can vary by their roles (Smith, 2011).

Multiple sampling methods were used to recruit participants based on their role at UNA. The researchers utilized purposive sampling to recruit the athletic department staff members and head coaches since this type of sampling is appropriate when “unique cases are required to provide especially informative data” (Skinner et al., 2021, p. 61). Staff members and coaches were contacted after confirming they worked at UNA for at least one full year while the university competed in Division II, as well as one full year in Division I. To recruit former staff and coaches, as well as the university president, the researchers utilized snowball sampling by initiating contact with the former athletic director at UNA. Snowball sampling is an accepted method of gaining access to a unique research population, which in this case was no longer available on the athletic department staff directory (Sharma, 2017). The second author also utilized snowball sampling to recruit current athletes that they did not know personally, but were recommended by other athletes they knew. To recruit faculty members, the first author reviewed a university press release to determine which faculty members served on UNA’s reclassification committee (Eubanks, 2022). Then, the authors recruited two faculty members who served on it, as well as two faculty members who did not. Only tenured faculty members were recruited because all taught for several years and have stronger job security compared to untenured faculty.

Procedure

After recruiting the participants, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews. The researchers changed which questions they asked based on the professional background of the participant, however, some of the questions were similar. In addition, the researchers drew on the literature to ask questions, such as whether the participants believed that reclassification impacted the institution’s enrollment during the transition period. The researchers also asked participants questions that were specific to their role at the institution. Once a final draft of the article was completed, the researchers gave the participants an opportunity to review their interview transcripts. In particular, the authors provided it to the university president and both the former and current athletic director since their identities

were essentially revealed in the results section and received confirmation that they approved of their comments being used in the study. To protect other participants, each participant is referred to as an “athletic department staff member” or “faculty member” or “college athlete” to avoid exposing their personal identity.

The researchers completed their interviews in-person. The length of interviews ranged from nineteen to forty-two minutes. Once the researchers completed the interviews, they coded the data and used a thematic analysis to describe the experiences of the participants during the transition period (Saldaña, 2013). Structural coding was utilized for the first cycle of coding data because it is suited for analyzing interview transcripts, as well as semi-structured data gathering protocols (Saldaña, 2013). Both researchers met and developed themes based on their initial review of the transcripts. The researchers then reread the transcripts and used pattern coding to determine which quotes from participants should be used to describe each theme (Saldaña, 2013).

Results

The researchers grouped comments from the study’s participants into five themes. These included: 1) The impact of NCAA regulations; 2) the relationship between occupation and perceptions of resource allocation; 3) the impact on athletic department identity; 4) whether the surrounding environment intensified the challenges of reclassification; and 5) the impact on morale. Overall, participants felt that the first, second and fourth themes were strongly related to specific sports, where the third and fifth themes were similar for all sports. The rest of this section explores sub-themes and elaborates on when participants offered perceptions that contrasted from the majority of the other participants.

The Impact of NCAA Regulations

Participants discussed the influence of governing bodies, or athletic conferences and the NCAA, during the transition period. The participants focused more heavily on the role of the NCAA. In this case, athletic department staff members ($n = 4$) and faculty members ($n = 4$) portrayed the academic regulations of the NCAA Division I academic regulations as a positive influence on the athletic department, but athletic department staff ($n = 6$) also identified the NCAA’s prohibition on postseason play as one of the most significant obstacles, especially in football.

For example, the university’s current athletic director, who worked for the NCAA earlier in his career, argued that the prohibition on postseason play should be tossed aside:

“I think not being able to play for championships, you know, that’s a downer, and even though we’ve gone through it, I’m a big supporter of removing that from NCAA legislation. I don’t think it’ll ever happen.”

The president of the university also viewed it as gradually making it difficult for athletic programs to recruit competitively during the latter half of reclassification:

“The wear and tear, you know, because what happens is those great Division II players, the best Division II players, they graduate and then you go through a couple of years is really hard to recruit because you can’t go to the postseason... So the hit for us that I really saw coming more in year one and two came later. And it’s only now that I think you start to see us turning the corner and getting back to filling those highly competitive programs.”

While all sports faced this obstacle, athletic department staff ($n = 4$) suggested that it was especially difficult for the football program since other teams on campus could compete in conference tournaments, but the football program’s conference had no championship game. One athletic department staff member noted that:

“Football didn’t have that right. So, like, they get a lot of profile, but they really had the hardest road because of that piece that they couldn’t win anything. They were going to play their 11 games and they were done.”

Although the participants viewed the NCAA’s restriction on postseason play as a hindrance, athletic department staff members ($n = 4$) and faculty members ($n = 4$) viewed Division I’s more stringent academic regulations as strengthening the culture of the athletic department’s focus towards academics. The president of the university specifically credited APR for incentivizing athletes to perform better academically, as well as motivating coaches to ensure the GPAs of their team’s improved:

“Our athletic department GPA is at its all-time high. And I don’t think that’s an accident either, you know, because you have APR. And so sport by sport, the coaches are under certain pressure. The players are under certain pressure. You know, one of the coaches talked with you guys about having your hours and, you know, outside. Yeah, study hall, everything. Right. And it’s because there is an academic standard for Division I that doesn’t even exist at Division II.”

An athletic department staff member pointed out that the NCAA Division I’s regulations made it necessary to hire more staff members to assist athletics academically:

“Growing our academic staff, you know, we got an academic advisor, we got an APR coordinator, and those were all key pieces to be supportive of the student-athlete.”

One athletic department staff member who also competed as an athlete at the university suggested that the NCAA’s regulations caused coaches to recruit athletes who were more high performing students:

“To me, number one, we got better student-athletes here. Yeah. And if you ask our FAR (faculty athletics representative), he will tell you, like the quality of student-athletes that we have at the Division I level is different than what we had at the Division II level, which helps faculty members in the classroom because you’re not dealing with as many, quote unquote, problem kids that, you know, you may have had before.”

Faculty members were the final group interviewed, and all four agreed that the university recruited more capable students to compete in athletics at UNA.

The COVID-19 pandemic occurred while the university reclassified to Division I. While far from shocking, it is important to note that two athletic department staff members suggested that the pandemic impacted NCAA regulations while UNA reclassified. While other participants ($n = 9$) simply pointed out that the pandemic made the transition more challenging, one athletic department staff member elaborated:

“Covid has impacted [NCAA] legislation tenfold right in and on a much faster scale than before. Right, because of a lot of rules, modernization has taken place. You know, some good, some challenging.”

The Relationship between Occupation and Resource Allocation

The efficiency and effectiveness of resources used by the athletic department were analyzed in several ways. Athletic department staff members ($n = 5$), as well as most of the coaches ($n = 4$), noted that they faced a higher workload during the transition period without increases in staffing.

One athletic department staff member claimed that:

“At the Division II level your staff is not going to be anywhere as big as we were at the Division I level. And so when we’re going through this transition, there’s a lot more responsibilities that are put on us because it’s a different level. And even with the transition, there’s a lot of work that goes through that. Like there’s so many reports of studies and everything that you have to do. And we pretty much had the same staff that we had and were Division II. And so now it’s just extra responsibilities, extra hours, more things that you have to do.”

Next, athletics staff ($n = 5$), coaches ($n = 4$) and former athletes ($n = 2$) shared mixed feelings about a decision to emphasize spending on athletic scholarships instead of increased staffing. A coach thought athletic scholarships should be prioritized:

“I think using the money on scholarships right off the bat gave us the chance. I mean, hey, soccer snuck into the conference tournament by the hair on their chin and then made the finals in year one. You know, basketball made it year two, got to have players to do that. Oh, I like the fact that we put money into it.”

An athletic department staff member, however, pointed out that:

“I would do staffing. And again, I hate harping on that because like this sounded like a neat idea. I mean, I don’t think I would have done it, but like, I didn’t know it would have failed this miserably, you know, not to say that we failed miserably, I didn’t know it would have been that unsuccessful. You know, it just was unsuccessful.”

Lastly, athletic department staff members ($n = 3$) and coaches ($n = 3$) noted that certain sports became a priority due to how resources were allocated. The athletic department staff observed that the basketball programs received priority in how resources were allocated. For example, the former athletic director shared that he decided that:

“The focus here is men’s basketball. We’re going to bring women’s basketball along with it. But in football, you’re not going to be fully funded in scholarships on day one. OK, the basketball programs are going to be fully funded and get the cost of attendance.”

Not surprisingly, one athletic department staff member felt that reclassification increased their workload in basketball much more than it did for other sports:

“And softball and those sports, a lot of it was the exact same with the exception of basketball. We were told that during the transition that basketball, especially for somewhat smaller schools, is going to drive the Division I bus and that because if you can make it to the NCAA tournament in basketball, you get a big payday and you get national exposure...If you’re the softball guy, you’re probably the volleyball guy, too, because they’re opposites. Spring and Fall. You know, that didn’t change a whole lot...But my basketball experience changed tremendously.”

Athletics staff members ($n = 5$) and faculty ($n = 3$) also acknowledged that faculty on campus feared that the increased expenses of joining Division I would harm the financial efficiency of the university, despite attempts by the athletic department to address this concern. One faculty member from the transition committee remembered that:

“I think that it was fear, especially because, administration was notably telling us how cash strapped we are. And we can’t have COLA (cost of living adjustment) raises, and the state government is giving us less money, that’s project 206, and we heard about that a lot. I think there was some fear, that great, that all the money was going to go to athletics. I do think that the athletic director at the time was very conscious of that, and that he said a lot [that] none of the money is going to come from the operating budget. It is all separate. Now, do people believe that? Probably not. But they did say that a lot.”

The Impact of Reclassification on Athletic Department Identity

Participants discussed how they perceived the impact on the athletic department’s identity and the university’s brand in their responses and most participants brought up at least one way they thought that the university benefited from increased prestige during the transition period ($n = 14$). Athletic department staff portrayed the reputation of the athletic department as changing from a historic powerhouse in a mid-level division to an aspiring competitor at the highest level ($n = 7$). These administrators described the team performance of several sports, not just football or basketball, as contributing to this change in reputation. One athletic department staff member framed both time periods as a positive:

“There are aspects of Division II that I miss because we were really a powerhouse in a bunch of different sports. But it’s very cool now to watch different sports become successful at the bigger level and get more national attention.”

Athletic department staff ($n = 4$) and faculty members ($n = 3$) viewed reclassification as an immediate driver of enrollment. One athletic department staff member clarified that they expected reclassification to help the university make a moderate increase:

“When you have that Division I label on you, I guess it you know, it makes your school look more attractive, well, we knew we didn’t want to be huge. You know, it was exciting to think that, you know, we could have a little bit higher in enrollment and draw attention, you know, to those kids that, you know, maybe don’t want a big Power Five school, but they don’t want a small school either.”

A few coaches ($n = 2$) also described reclassification as producing a novelty effect that wore off. For example, one thought that:

“I think the same thing with students. I think they initially were excited, but then they weren’t excited, if you’re not winning as much.”

A few athletic department staff members ($n = 3$) portrayed some of the local community’s members as skeptical of the decision to reclassify. One athletic department staff member in particular claimed it made it harder to fundraise in certain cases:

“During the transition, people are trying to say, are you actually going to be good enough...Can you compete? Do I really want to even invest my money in this in this program?”

Surrounding Environment Intensified the Challenges of Reclassification

Participants portrayed the surrounding environment as making it more challenging for UNA to stabilize itself as a Division I institution. Athletic department staff members ($n = 4$) compared themselves to several similar institutions who reclassified to Division I within the last few decades. They suggested that these institutions had an advantage over UNA simply from having established themselves as a Division I competitor earlier. For example, the university’s current athletic director provided a rhetorical question about one of the university’s conference opponents, based on their town population, enrollment and history of success in Division I:

“They probably have 12 to 15 years up on us in the transition. They look a lot like us, though, right?”

A few of the university’s coaches ($n = 3$) argued that the surrounding environment of the university’s geographic location impacted how well their team could perform at the Division I level. Interestingly, out of two head coaches of teams that were both outdoor and individual sports, one viewed the surrounding environment as an asset, but the other did not. One coach noted that the popularity of his sport at the recreational level where the university is located strengthened his program:

“We don’t have like a dedicated facility like they do [other teams in the conference], but we have really good golf courses.”

The two other coaches ($n = 2$) believed their surrounding environment harmed their ability to be successful because other conference opponents were in a superior location. The coach for one outdoor sport noted:

“We were the only school that did not have indoors (tennis courts) or was not located in Florida when we began this journey. So January, February, we’re going to be behind and our season conference tournament is the third week of April. So we got seven weeks of good weather.”

While participants were complementary of their surrounding community, athletic department staff ($n = 4$) and athletes ($n = 2$) all portrayed the university’s reclassification as economically beneficial to the surrounding community, more than the community as an asset to the athletic department’s reclassification.

“The biggest thing to me, is just knowing that it would draw more students to our area, which in return also is such a huge economic engine for the Shoals area. And I definitely think, you know, just in the short amount of time, I think we’ve seen them and obviously our enrollments increase. And all that is, you know, benefits our area.”

Impact on Morale

The vast majority of participants portrayed their experience in the university’s transition as a positive one. When asked how they initially felt about the university’s decision to reclassify, most ($n = 15$) participants indicated that they supported it with little to no reservations. How much or little time they planned to stay at the university, not their affiliation with a certain sport, impacted their morale. A former athlete and current athletic department staff member perceived the involvement of their university president as sign that the university transitioned at an opportune time:

“I knew who the president was here because he supported our events. Like we saw him there. We saw his wife, we saw his kids. They were very present. And that just kind of showed you that he was interested in athletics. He supported athletics and knew that we were good enough to take it to the next level. And when you have leadership like that, I think you can make any type of move that you that you want.”

The rest of the participants ($n = 4$) felt neutral. Out of these four, three were coaches and one was a former athlete. Despite their reservations, they shared parts of their experience about reclassification that they and their athletes enjoyed. For example, one coach and a former athlete reminisced about being overmatched in one competition:

“She said, oh, I won more matches in Division II my freshman year than I did in both years of Division I but it was still the best time. She loved going to Ole Miss and getting her brains beat out.”

Two of the coaches pointed out that how long they were into their careers influenced whether they were excited about participating in the transition. A head coach, who seemed the most opposed of all participants to reclassification, explained that they felt that way because their career was near the end. However, the coach was not necessarily opposed to reclassification for the entire university:

“I was having enough success. I wanted to end having success. So to be thrown into an environment that I didn’t know how difficult it was going to

be, so I wasn't too hooked about it, to be honest with you. So for me, if I was 20 years younger at the time, I might have had a different perspective."

Unlike the coaches, the only athlete who shared that they had mixed feelings suggested she was torn because reclassification occurred early in her playing career. Still, she thought that she enjoyed competing for the university during a unique time: "When you're a freshman coming in and you find out later the school's declaring Division I and it's a four-year waiting period, it's kind of kind of depressing. But then again, I was like, well, this is an exciting time because you're building the foundation and setting it for the newcomers."

Discussion/Conclusion

In semi-structured interviews with nineteen athletic department staff members, faculty members, college athletes, head coaches and a current university president, the participants discussed their perceptions of being involved with UNA during the transition period. The researchers observed that the participants typically praised the NCAA Division I's regulations because they contributed to the academic performance of their athletes but criticized the NCAA's postseason ban. Athletic department staff members and coaches also shared different perceptions on how resources should be allocated during the transition period. In addition, even without exceptional athletic success during the transition period, several participants believed simply joining Division I improved UNA's visibility, and also noted that the athletic department's reputation changed from a historic Division II powerhouse to aspiring to grow competitive in Division I. Being surrounded by several institutions who had already reclassified from Division II to Division I made the reclassification period more challenging, although the local city's climate was described as being an asset by one coach, but an obstacle by another. Finally, most of the participants in the study portrayed their experience as a generally positive one from a psychological standpoint.

The findings in Taylor et al. (2024) provide some insight regarding why the athletic department prioritized basketball instead of football. The study found that revenue from basketball programs at institutions that reclassified from Division II to Division I increased, but that football programs did not experience an increase in admissions applications compared to reclassifying institutions who did not field a football program. Therefore, although the university had reached the NCAA Division II football postseason twelve times in the last fifteen years, but only twice in both men's and women's basketball (UNA Lions Athletics, n.d.), the athletic department still chose to prioritize basketball when they allocated resources, which has provided more benefits than football to reclassifying (Taylor et al., 2024). With a fewer number of athletes and staff, it is cheaper and potentially easier to earn a return on investment in basketball than football for reclassifying institutions.

Participants consistently praised the NCAA's academic regulations for Division I, especially APR, and framed Division I as academically superior to Division

II. However, previous research has portrayed APR as more harmful to Division I institutions that have less resources (Kirkpatrick et al., 2014; Stokowski et al., 2017) and have reclassified to a higher level of competition (Fowler et al., 2022). Kirkpatrick et al. found that athletic department staff viewed APR as harmful to football and basketball programs at Division I institutions with less resources. Participants may have perceived APR as positively impacting the athletic department since the study focused on the reclassification period. They compared the academic performance of their athletes during the reclassification period to when the university competed in Division II, instead of how they performed compared to other Division I programs. Fowler et al. and co-authors (2022) also observed that the football programs at institutions who reclassified from FCS to FBS had lower APR scores. Unlike Fowler and co-authors (2022), who exclusively examined football, the participants focused on how APR impacted academic performance across several sports. Based on the perceptions of participants in this study, administrators should emphasize Division I's stronger academic regulations for all sports to any faculty and staff members on campus who are concerned about the academic impact of reclassifying.

Zero participants in the study expressed support for the NCAA's rule that bans institutions from NCAA postseason events during their transition period. Participants portrayed it as potentially the most significant barrier to achieving athletic success during the latter half of the transition period. One reason the participants may have been unanimously opposed to the NCAA's rule is that the men's basketball team lost in the finals of the conference tournament during the 2020-21 season. If the team had won, the NCAA rule would have prohibited them from playing in the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament (UNA Lions Athletics, 2021). The authors of this study are not implying that this is evidence that the rule should be abolished, since data from participants in athletic departments that competed against institutions while they reclassified could also be beneficial when evaluating the regulation. If athletic conferences at the NCAA Division I level want to consider inviting institutions from other divisions, they should allow those institutions to play in their conference tournaments during their transition period. Further, athletic conferences should advocate for a rule change at the NCAA level that could help these institutions field competitive programs at the Division I level more quickly. In the present study, a few participants believed that the postseason ban was more harmful in year three and four of the transition period. Subsequently, an option for the NCAA is to experiment with shortening the postseason ban from four years to two, similarly to what it does with football programs that reclassify from FCS to FBS (Schlabach, 2023).

One intriguing choice athletic department staff needed to make was whether to prioritize funding athletic scholarships or new staff positions. Coaches and athletes mostly supported funding athletic scholarships as much as possible, while all athletic department staff members preferred that new staff positions be created. A potential reason for these different viewpoints is that the athletic department staff members in this study all oversaw multiple teams, while the head coaches were responsible for the performance of their team. One coach claimed that prioritizing

athletic scholarships helped at least two other teams be successful in their conference tournament early in the transition period. Future athletic departments that reclassify and decide to prioritize either athletic scholarships or staffing should consider which group of individuals that they prefer to appease. Coach and athletic department staff retention is one area to consider. A few participants in the study from both groups worked multiple decades for UNA, while others were early in their careers. If an athletic department wants to prioritize retaining staff members, they should consider investing in more staff positions during the transition period to reduce the workload of existing staff members. If the athletic department is more concerned with retaining coaches, however, one way to do so might be to allow them to offer as many athletic scholarships as is affordable and allowed by NCAA rules.

One factor related to the surrounding environment is that participants discussed was how several similar institutions had a “head start” on the Division I process by reclassifying years earlier. A few participants noted that UNA considered reclassifying in the 1990s and believed that waiting allowed these competing institutions to develop a competitive advantage. It is difficult to determine how true this possibility is, but it is feasible that negative impacts of reclassification have been compounded for institutions as the number of members in NCAA Division I has increased. Therefore, if it seems likely that an institution will reclassify to Division I at some point, the argument could be made that the institution should do so if it can reclassify before other prospective Division I members in their geographic footprint. Despite that UNA’s athletic department chose to prioritize success in basketball during the transition period, a combination of their history of success in football and being surrounded by Division I football programs may have influenced UNA to reclassify. All eight of the other institutions in the state of Alabama that belong to NCAA Division I field football programs, while only three of the seven Division II institutions in Alabama have football (NCAA, n.d.a).

Finally, although previous research discussed how NCAA reclassification had a negative psychological impact on college athletes (Drayer & Wang, 2008; Kissenger et al., 2015; Mitchell & Barrett, 2022), almost all of the athletes, athletic department staff, coaches and faculty in the study perceived the positives of reclassifying as outweighing the negatives. In addition, many of the participants held relatively complex views towards both the positives and negatives of Division II and I, versus expressing a one-sided approval of either division. Even the one participant who expressed a preference for Division II identified some positive aspects of competing at the Division I level. University administrators could hold reservations about reclassifying based on how willing their current stakeholders are to reclassify. Participants appeared to cope with discouraging aspects of the transition by focusing on the positive aspects, such as the notoriety of their competitors or playing a role in a historic time period for the university. While this sentiment could certainly vary from institution to institution, this study provides evidence that stakeholders throughout campus will choose to adapt if an institution reclassifies.

One limitation of the study is the time frame of when the data was collected. One reason the researchers selected UNA as a case study is that the participants had

recently experienced the transition period, and as a result, they might be able to recall their experiences more easily than anyone involved with a transition period several years ago. These perceptions could change over time. With team performance in particular, the participants argued that circumstances of the transition period had a significant impact. Once an institution has competed at the Division I level for several years, athletic departments staff, coaches and administrators could start to make conclusions about their institution's long-term potential at that level. In addition, other outcomes such as undergraduate enrollment or fundraising could be more easily evaluated with more years of data. As the chief financial officer of another recent NCAA Division I member who reclassified declared "The success or failure of our DI move will be measured 15 years from now" (Borzi, 2023, para. 7). Longitudinal research about the perceptions of university stakeholders at institutions that reclassified, or research that investigated perceptions of stakeholders that worked for several years at an institution that reclassified, could provide additional insight for the leaders at other institutions that are considering reclassification.

A few other limits to the study involved the participants. The researchers attempted to obtain faculty members both with and without sports related backgrounds by interviewing two members who served on the transition team and two who did not. All four faculty members, however, made it clear that they enjoyed competing in sports while they grew up, identified as sports fans and shared that they occasionally attend UNA games. While they understood criticisms made by other faculty members, faculty with no sports background may have been able to provide more context about why some faculty members were critical of UNA's reclassification. Second, the researchers interviewed a variety of athletic department staff members, and intentionally did not interview more than one employee from a specific area such as marketing, compliance or ticket sales. Since an associate athletic director in compliance was interviewed, and this administrator also oversaw athletic academic support, no employee who dedicated all of their workload towards academic support was interviewed. Athletic academic counselors could have provided more context about the academic experiences of college athletes during the transition period. Lastly, former athletic department staff members and coaches were more willing to be critical of UNA and reclassification than current athletic department employees, although almost all of them either approved or were neutral towards reclassification. While the researchers made it clear that athletic department staff members would remain anonymous, current staff members may have felt more emotionally attached to the university. Obtaining current and former stakeholders in future research about NCAA reclassification may help researchers uncover a wider variety of insights.

Academic, financial, and psychological aspects of NCAA reclassification have already been explored by previous research (Drayer & Wang, 2008; Dwyer et al., 2010; Fowler et al., 2022; Tomasini, 2003). Still, there is still room for additional research. First, it was clear that stakeholders at UNA viewed the postseason ban for institutions in the transition period as a negative. A historical analysis of this NCAA rule, or research regarding how current administrators at institutions who have not recently reclassified perceive the rule, could provide more insight. An additional

area that could be examined in more depth is the academic impact of reclassification on college athletes. Previous research has examined the relationship between GPA, graduation rate, APR scores and reclassification, and future research could examine how it is related to the major selection of athletes, as well as the impact on other habits such as total hours spent per week on academics, or the relationship between college choice factors for athletes who were recruited to compete in a certain NCAA division before their institution reclassified, compared to while they reclassified. Also, more research about faculty perceptions of reclassification could be completed. UNA's faculty portrayed other faculty members as critical of the decision to reclassify, however, all four faculty members supported the decision. In addition, none these four faculty members taught in a sport, exercise or business-related field. Additional research could explore beyond the sentiment that athletics drains a university financially to provide more insight about how faculty perceive reclassification. Another area that could be investigated in more depth is the sport specific impact of reclassification. Several participants portrayed football as a sport that struggled with the transition more than the rest of the athletic department, despite UNA's football program's impressive history at the Division II level. Future research could investigate ways for football programs to reclassify more seamlessly.

Overall, most of the participants perceived their experience with NCAA reclassification as a positive one. While there are several considerations to evaluate for leaders of institutions that may reclassify, UNA's athletic department staff, university administrators, athletes and faculty perceived that the transition period presented challenges, but they did not outweigh the benefits of reclassifying.

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