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Mission Impossible: Maintaining Higher Education's Purpose in an Age of College Sports Revenue Sharing Through a Student-Athlete Holistic Developmental Framework

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Amidst recent legislative changes that have transformed and further commercialized the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I (DI) college sports industry, researchers and institutions have begun to emphasize the importance of student-athlete holistic development. This shift toward holistic development attempts to counteract claims that the college sports system prioritizes athletic success at the expense of student-athletes' holistic development. Existing theories help institutions understand the factors that contribute to student-athlete holistic development, particularly for Black student-athletes (BSAs) playing at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The purpose of this paper is to expand existing frameworks by exploring the role that institutional culture and mission play in student-athletes' holistic development using grounded theory. Semi-structured interviews with 20 Black former DI football and women's basketball players and 12 DI football and women's basketball coaches revealed three primary themes: 1) goals influence high-impact practice (HIP) participation, 2) HIPs occur outside of athletics, and 3) messaging reflects institutional values. The findings present implications for PWIs looking to improve retention and belonging of their BSAs through an emerging theoretical framework.

Keywords: holistic development, Division I, grounded theory, high-impact practices, Black student-athletes

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National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) college sports have undergone a significant transformation in recent years, driven by the advent of name, image, likeness (NIL) and the transfer portal (The College Student, 2024). The commercialized sports industry, already plagued by scandals (Harper & Donnor, 2017) and calls for educational reform from institutions and policymakers (Comeaux, 2013), faced new challenges as student-athletes gained the freedom to monetize their athletic abilities and abandon teams when the highest bidder called. Additional legislative changes permitting institutions to pay student-athletes directly (The College Student, 2024) threaten to make relationships with their institution more transactional, pushing them further away from the university's educational mission.

Multiple theoretical frameworks have been developed to counteract the commercialized DI athletics system by emphasizing the student-athletes' holistic development. Some frameworks focus on social and academic integration (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011), racial identities (Cooper, 2016), and educationally purposeful activities (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022; Kuh et al., 2006). These models provide valuable insight into enhancing the student-athlete experience, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. However, the practical application of these models is inconsistent with the realities of the current DI college sport system. Successfully implementing these frameworks requires additional time from coaches and student-athletes, which they do not have.

As institutions begin sharing revenue with student-athletes for the first time in college sports history, the pressure on coaches and athletes to succeed athletically will undoubtedly increase at the expense of the student-athletes' educational outcomes (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Historically, these outcomes have been worse for Black student-athletes (BSAs), who are overrepresented on the DI profit-generating teams of football and basketball, particularly male BSAs (The Drake Group, 2021). To combat the exploitation of BSAs, whose athletic skills earn millions for their universities (The Drake Group, 2021), a new theoretical approach is needed to help institutions navigate the evolving landscape and ensure the successful holistic development of athletes.

Using data from qualitative research and institutional mission statements, and incorporating elements of existing theoretical frameworks, this paper proposes an integrated model of holistic development for BSAs that acknowledges the institution's responsibility, which extends beyond merely providing academic support to athletes and financial support to coaches. The article begins with a review of relevant literature and guiding frameworks. Next, I will present the methods, findings, and discussion of the research on DI coaches and former BSAs. The paper concludes with an overview of the proposed conceptual framework and practical implications for institutions.

Literature Review

Black Student-Athlete Experiences

For decades, researchers have criticized the commercialized DI sports culture for exploiting BSAs by overemphasizing their athletic identities while failing to sup-

port them holistically (Comeaux, 2018; The Drake Group, 2021; Howe, 2020; Howe & Johnston-Guerrero, 2021; Singer, 2016). Without proper mentoring and academic support, the laser focus on athletic goals can be challenging for some BSAs who enroll in college academically unprepared (Singer, 2016). The athletic culture encourages coaches and athletic staff to prioritize athletics over academics, creating a climate that sets low academic expectations (Ofoegbu, 2023) and exposes BSAs to "dumb jock" stereotypes from classmates and faculty (Singer, 2016, p. 1074).

Male BSAs, in particular, are socialized into their athletic identities at a young age (Howe, 2020), leading some to deprioritize academics and view a college scholarship as a path to a professional sports career (Singer, 2016). Other male BSAs share a counternarrative of achieving academically in college despite lacking support in an exploitative environment (Hogan, 2024; Howe & Johnston-Guerrero, 2021; Singer, 2016) by filtering out negative influences and rejecting stereotypes (Fuller et al., 2020). Regardless of their academic backgrounds, male BSAs often feel misunderstood or judged by White teammates and coaches (Melendez, 2008). Consistent microaggressions from the campus and local community at a predominantly White institution (PWI)[1] negatively impacts BSAs' academic outcomes and mental well-being (Melendez, 2008). The lack of diversity among faculty and classmates also creates "a racially hostile environment" in class (Beamon, 2014, p. 128).

Female BSAs often possess strong academic identities, pushed by their families to pursue challenging educational opportunities in college (Cooper et al., 2016). Despite strong academic backgrounds, their intersectional identities expose them to stereotypes about being academically inferior and "intimidating" by classmates, leading to isolation (Cooper et al., 2016, p. 124). Belonging is essential for retention and successful academic outcomes (Francique, 2018), but many female BSAs struggle to find community among White teammates (Ofoegbu, 2023). Rather than receiving support for their racial and gender identities from coaches, female BSAs experience control and surveillance (Ofoegbu, 2023).

Researchers identify specific factors that contribute to BSAs' holistic development, including positive faculty interactions (Carter-Francique et al., 2015), mentoring programs (Bimper, 2017), supportive coaching relationships (Ofoegbu, 2023), a diverse athletic staff (Bernhard, 2014; Howe & Johnston-Guerrero, 2021), and opportunities to control their narratives (Herman, 2023). NIL is one way that BSAs "capitalize on their narratives" (Herman, 2023, p. 123), while sister circles enable female BSAs "to reconstruct stories of empowerment that operate as counternarratives to the controlling images and false narratives that exist in historically White institutions" (Ferguson, 2023, p. 136). Without these supports, BSAs may struggle to reach their holistic potential in an exploitative environment (Hogan, 2024).

[1] For the purpose of this paper, the term predominantly White institution (PWI) refers to the NCAA DI institutions with student populations that are majority White.

Current DI College Sports Challenges

For decades, the NCAA has emphasized the educational aspects of the student-athlete experience to avoid classifying athletes as university employees (Southall & Weiler, 2014). The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) considers athletes employees if institutions control them in exchange for financial compensation (Southall & Weiler, 2014). In 2014, the Northwestern football team successfully petitioned the NLRB for the right to unionize (Northwestern Football, 2015). Although the NLRB ultimately overturned their initial decision (Northwestern Football, 2015), the historic ruling paved the way for future student-athletes looking to engage in collective bargaining with their institutions (The College Student, 2024).

In 2019, the NCAA lost its decades-long control over student-athlete amateurism when California became the first state to permit student-athletes to earn money off their NIL with its *Fair Pay to Play Act* (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). Two years later, the Supreme Court in *Alston v. NCAA* ruled the NCAA had violated antitrust laws by restricting scholarships and other "education-related compensation" given to athletes, leading to the adoption of the NCAA's first NIL policy (Stephenson, 2022, p. 1). NIL policies were welcome news for researchers who criticized DI institutions and the NCAA for exploiting BSAs (Cooper et al., 2017; The Drake Group, 2021), as well as student-athletes who felt less financially motivated to leave school early for a professional career (Poulin, 2023). However, NIL posed new challenges as institutions confronted potentially questionable recruitment activities of NIL collectives (Poulin, 2023) and athletes attempted to navigate new policies and tap into their monetary potential with limited institutional support (Corr et al., 2023).

Changes to the NCAA's transfer legislation exacerbated the effects of NIL on college sports. Before 2021, student-athletes were required to redshirt when transferring to a new institution, but legislative changes simplified the process with the transfer portal (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024) and permitted eligible athletes to transfer as many times as they desired (Division I Council, 2024). The massive influx of student-athletes into the transfer portal created chaos for college coaches who were forced to recruit their own players to prevent them from transferring (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). At the same time, the portal allowed student-athletes to take control over their athletic experiences by pursuing more favorable playing conditions at another school (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). Unfortunately, some athletes make the wrong decision to enter the portal and risk losing their scholarship if they are not recruited by another institution (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024).

Other transformative changes related to paying college athletes occurred in 2024, with the Dartmouth NLRB ruling, *Johnson v. NCAA* lawsuit, and *House v. NCAA* settlement (The College Student, 2024). Shortly after the NLRB determined Dartmouth men's basketball could unionize as university employees (The College Student, 2024), the *Johnson* ruling stated all student-athletes "could potentially be classified as employees" (Stockman & Sykes, 2025, para. 7). The *House* settlement, implemented in July 2025, requires the NCAA to pay former student-athletes who were denied the chance to profit from their NIL and current student-athletes through

a revenue-sharing plan (The College Student, 2024). Although not technically considered employees under the revenue-sharing agreement, paying athletes directly for their athletic skills threatens to undermine their educational experience as institutions and coaches seek to maximize their return on investment. If the plaintiffs in *Johnson* continue to find success in the courts, it will not be long before all student-athletes are considered employees of their institutions, further altering the student-athlete experience (The College Student, 2024).

Existing Frameworks

Although these policy changes are welcome news for student-athletes who want more autonomy in making transfer decisions and earning money for their athletic skills (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024), they will make their relationships with coaches more transactional (Poulin, 2023). To maintain the focus on student-athletes' academic goals in the age of NIL and revenue-sharing, institutions need a framework for understanding how to help student-athletes reach their potential holistically. The conceptual models discussed in this section serve as guiding frameworks for an integrated theory of BSA holistic development.

Student Engagement in Educationally Purposeful Activities

Preparation for an evolving society after college requires an expanded definition of student success that incorporates their engagement in educational activities that develop the necessary qualities to succeed (Kuh, 2008). Kuh's (2008) student engagement model suggests participation in educationally purposeful activities contributes to cross-cultural interactions, higher grades, retention, and degree attainment for all students, and these gains are more pronounced for students from underserved populations. Educationally purposeful activities include many forms of active learning practices, but Kuh (2008) identified the following 10 high-impact practices (HIPs) as those that are most effective at contributing to retention and engagement: common intellectual experiences, writing-intensive courses, learning communities, first-year seminars, collaborative projects, global learning, internships, community service, undergraduate research experiences (UREs), and capstone courses.

The extant research on the benefits of HIPs for student-athletes has been growing in recent years (Comeaux et al., 2011; Gayle & Hu, 2009), although research on their participation in UREs is limited. Comeaux et al. (2011) found developing friendships with other athletes who value education, interacting with faculty, and engaging in HIPs that help nurture academic talents positively impact student-athletes' experiences and first-year athletes' academic self-concept. Student-athletes who engage in undergraduate research benefit from a sense of community (Comeaux et al., 2017), mentorship from faculty (Gooch, 2020; Jensen et al., 2022; Rubin et al., 2020; Saucier et al., 2020), and the development of essential skills needed for their careers (DeVita et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2020; Gooch, 2020). Gayle and Hu (2009) identified demographic differences in student-athletes' interactions with peers, as high-profile sport athletes and male athletes were less likely to engage with peers outside of their teams.

Implementing HIPs in an athletic department setting is challenging due to the unique academic experiences of student-athletes (Ishaq & Bass, 2019), which limit their engagement in student organizations (Gayle & Hu, 2009). These challenges may be greater at DI institutions, where student-athletes have lower levels of engagement in educationally purposeful activities compared to their Division III peers (Umbach et al., 2006). Participating in undergraduate research is difficult for student-athletes because of athletic schedules (Rubin et al., 2020; Saucier et al., 2020; Shirley et al., 2024), limited awareness of available opportunities (Hall et al., 2020; Shirley et al., 2024), and lack of support from coaches (Hall et al., 2020; Saucier et al., 2020), "who can ultimately have the final say on HIP participation" (Ishaq & Bass, 2019, p. 188).

When coaches demonstrate their support for participation in HIPs by selecting a team community service activity, it results in a greater level of time commitment to the activity among student-athletes (Huml et al., 2017). Ishaq and Bass (2019) find most HIPs are implemented by the university with little consideration of student-athletes' schedules, highlighting a lack of collaboration between athletic departments and the university administration. The research on student-athlete involvement in HIPs demonstrates the need for institutional leaders to communicate to athletic staff, coaches, and administrators that participation in HIPs, such as UREs, is encouraged and valued, and to support this message with the necessary resources to ensure the successful implementation of HIPs in athletics.

Drawing on Kuh et al.'s (2006) framework on HIPs, Braunstein-Minkove et al. (2022) explored the relationship between leadership qualities and the willingness of coaches or athletic staff to support student-athlete participation in HIPs. Although the researchers identified messaging, resources, and relationships as key elements in the successful implementation of HIPs in athletic departments, changing the culture around the importance of HIPs requires a coach or athletic leader who values holistic athlete development (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022). When coaches care about BSAs' holistic development, they graduate with a greater sense of belonging than those who feel they are only there to play sports "in a color blind college sports system that valued their athletic skill over their other identities" (Hogan, 2024, p. 273).

Organizational Theory

Organizational theory provides a framework for understanding how well an institution's mission aligns with its educational practices (Kuh et al., 2006). The most effective universities increase student retention, engagement, and educational outcomes by implementing their missions to educate all students through academic programs (Kuh et al., 2006). Complementary programs, such as high-quality, educationally purposeful activities mentioned in the previous section, help further the institution's educational mission of ensuring student success (Kuh et al., 2006).

In addition to institutional missions, organizational culture also encompasses the history, shared beliefs, traditions, and non-academic aspects of the university that contribute to its prestige, such as the success of its athletics program (Governance in the twenty-first-century university, 2003). Organizational culture interacts with

external forces, such as the media, athletic conferences, and corporate sponsors, to influence a university's athletic culture (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Institutions with high-profile athletic programs face competing priorities among institutional leaders, as faculty prioritize academic success on one hand and coaches prioritize athletic performance on the other (Kelley et al., 2023). Although coaches are educators with the power to impact student-athletes' educational experiences (Weight et al., 2015), the pressure to prioritize wins over academic success undermines their ability to carry out the institution's academic mission (Kelley et al., 2023).

Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) investigated the effects of institutional culture on the experiences of DI football players, finding the culture prioritized athletics over academics and encouraged coaches and athletic staff to set low expectations for athletes to maintain their eligibility. Despite consistent messages to recruits and current athletes about the university's commitment to academic success, researchers note a disconnect between the institution's academic mission and the athletic culture (Hogan, 2025; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). The head football coach role is akin to "owning a publicly-traded company, where often it's about satisfying the stockholders in the short term rather than nurturing the product" (Hill, 2012, para. 24). This quote reflects the nature of the DI sports culture that rewards athletic success with multimillion dollar coaching contracts, while offering nominal incentives to improve academic performance (Finley & Fountain, 2010). Coaches of profit-generating sports like football and men's and women's basketball are more likely than other coaches to be fired because of their win-loss record, with no consideration of their team's academic performance (Johnson et al., 2023). Holding coaches accountable for the academic success of their athletes requires a culture shift and an institutional commitment to prioritize financial incentives for educational outcomes, not just wins on the field (Finley & Fountain, 2010).

Holistic Models for Student-Athlete Success

American popular culture has glorified the athletic achievements of college and professional athletes, leading to an overemphasis on athletic pursuits among Black youths and an underemphasis on academic goals (Harrison et al., 2010). Researchers have attempted to reframe the social and cultural stereotypes of BSAs through theoretical frameworks that emphasize their academic achievements (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Cooper, 2016). Harrison et al.'s (2010) Scholar-Baller paradigm suggests engaging BSAs in the classroom requires motivating them through a culturally sensitive curriculum that incorporates popular culture and incentive systems. When BSAs reach Scholar-Baller status by earning a 3.0 GPA, their achievement is recognized with a trademarked ThinkMan or ThinkWoman logo they can wear with pride on their uniforms, communicating a message to society that they are more than just athletes (Harrison et al., 2010).

Extending Harrison's (2002) Scholar-Baller curriculum, Comeaux and Harrison (2011) developed a Conceptual Model of Academic Success for student-athletes to understand how different factors affect the academic success of DI student-athletes. The researchers' culturally inclusive conceptual model describes how a student's

precollege characteristics, such as individual attributes, educational preparation, and family background, influence the various commitments students have related to academic goals, athletic goals, and their institution as a whole. The institution's social and academic systems are vital to integrating the student-athlete in these areas (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Several factors that influence social integration include relationships with peers and faculty, athletic and coaching demands, campus racial climate, and institutional policies (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Academic factors impacting integration include their grade and overall intellectual development (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). These factors influence the student-athlete's initial commitments to the institution, their chosen sport, and academic goals, ultimately contributing to overall academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Building upon critical race theory (CRT), Cooper and Cooper's (2015) strategic responsiveness to interest convergence (SRIC) theory elucidates how male BSAs empower themselves to develop holistically within the exploitative college sports system at a DI PWI. BSAs demonstrate SRIC by recognizing inequities exist, feeling empowered to change their outcomes, and taking actions to develop holistically (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Drawing upon SRIC, Cooper et al. (2019) find BSAs who participate in a culturally relevant holistic development program gain numerous benefits, including self-confidence, mentorship, career preparation, cultural empowerment, and a safe space among peers who share their experiences.

Cooper (2016) draws upon SRIC, CRT, and Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) framework to develop a holistic success model for male BSAs called Excellence Beyond Athletics (EBA). EBA is an anti-deficit model that highlights the strengths of male BSAs and empowers them to succeed outside of athletics (Cooper, 2016). The model asserts holistic development requires the right conditions, relationships, and expectations, encompassing six principles related to identity, social engagement, mentorship, academic success, career goals, and time management. These empowerment strategies should be part of a larger initiative to reform the various educational, cultural, and college sport systems that exploit male BSAs (Cooper, 2016). Unlike prior theories of student-athlete holistic development, EBA focuses on the male BSA experience and emphasizes the importance of engagement in educationally purposeful activities to their successful holistic development.

This paper contributes to the extant literature on BSA holistic development by exploring the following research questions from the perspective of former BSAs and coaches from DI PWIs:

1. What guides decisions relating to BSAs' engagement in HIPs?
2. What are the challenges for BSAs participating in HIPs?
3. What role does the institution play in supporting the holistic development of BSAs?
4. Do existing theoretical frameworks help to understand the experiences of DI BSAs participating in HIPs?

Method

When existing theories do not accurately explain the phenomenon under investigation, it necessitates a method that allows new concepts to develop during the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). I employed Grounded Theory (GT) with the constant comparative method because it allowed me to code and analyze the data simultaneously, without being confined by existing theoretical frameworks (Kolb, 2012). Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed GT in response to criticisms from quantitative researchers who believed qualitative research methods lacked rigor and validity, unlike traditional, unbiased quantitative methods (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Glaser and Strauss argued simultaneous data collection and analysis leading to theory generation contributed to GT's quality (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Numerous researchers have utilized and adapted Glaser and Strauss's (1967) traditional GT method for various disciplines and epistemologies (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Strauss and Corbin (1998) adapted GT using a symbolic interactionist paradigm to understand how people make meaning of social interactions (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Charmaz (2012) further developed GT using a constructivist paradigm, which allows the researcher and participants to work together to construct the meaning of their experiences (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Regardless of their paradigms, grounded theorists follow similar research processes that include concurrent data collection and analysis, coding, memoing, theoretical sampling, constant comparative analysis, and theory generation (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The sections below outline the data collection and analysis processes, my positionality and research paradigm, and the steps to ensure trustworthiness.

Participants

To fully understand student-athlete engagement in HIPs, I sought to explore the opportunities and challenges from the perspectives of former athletes and coaches at DI institutions, where the commercialization and pressure to win are the highest of the NCAA's three divisions. I also wanted to focus on profit-generating sports like football and women's basketball because of the push by institutions to prioritize athletics over academics for student-athletes in these high-profile sports (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Consistent with a GT research design, "representativeness of concepts, not of persons, is crucial" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 9). Therefore, to meet the sampling criteria, the BSAs must have graduated from a PWI and participated in either DI football or women's basketball, and the coaches must have worked as head or assistant coaches in DI football or women's basketball at PWIs. Given the dynamics of the relationships between BSAs and White coaches identified in the literature, I intentionally recruited coaches of different racial backgrounds to explore the strategies that White coaches use to support BSAs.

To ensure a diversity of experiences, I also wanted to recruit participants who played or coached in either of two DI football subdivisions: the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) or the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS). In the sport of football, DI institutions are divided into subdivisions based on the level of football

they sponsor, so FBS schools compete in the College Football Playoff, FCS schools compete in the NCAA-sponsored championship, and the remaining DI schools do not sponsor a football team (Our Division I Story, n.d.). Although all subdivisions are considered DI, FBS schools are generally larger and more competitive schools with higher operating budgets (Helms, 2024). Since there are no subdivisions in sports other than football, I recruited former DI women's basketball players and coaches from institutions that compete in the most competitive and lucrative Power 4 (P4) conferences, which comprise only FBS schools, and those that compete in non-Power (non-P4) conferences (Malloy, 2025) to explore how differences in institutional resources may impact BSAs' experiences.

I used purposive homogeneous sampling to identify former student-athletes and coaches who shared characteristics essential to answering the proposed research questions (Tracy, 2020). My background as a former DI athletics administrator enabled me to connect with potential interview participants, and snowball sampling expanded the sample to other participants, ensuring some variation within the sample (Ritchie et al., 2014). The final sample includes 20 Black former football and women's basketball student-athletes (see Table 1) and 12 football and women's basketball coaches (see Table 2). The coaching sample is predominantly White (n = 8), with only one Black head coach. This is not surprising given Black coaches hold about 9% of football and 19% of women's basketball head coaching positions (Lapchick, 2022). Since this research was also part of a more extensive dissertation study focusing on BSAs' sense of belonging, all BSAs in this study played at PWIs.

The coaches represent eight DI schools, and the BSAs represent 14 DI schools. Although six BSAs attended the same university where four coaches worked, only two of the athletes overlapped with one coach. A total of 19 distinct universities are represented in this study. For privacy reasons, I did not reveal the identities of the athletes and coaches to the participants who attended or worked at the same schools.

Table 1
Participant Data – Black Student-Athletes

Pseudonym	Age	Sport	Major	Career	NCAA Level
Alyssa	28	W. Bkb	Political science, pre-law	Paralegal manager	P4
Ayanna	27	W. Bkb	Psychology	Pursuing law enforcement	Non-P4
Brandi	26	W. Bkb	Health science	Graduate student	Non-P4
Cory	28	Football	Finance	Higher education administrator	FBS
Darnell	34	Football	Human development and kinesiology	Higher education administrator	FCS

Devon	28	Football	Finance	Investments/ acquisitions analyst	FBS
Jada	25	W. Bkb	Business and entrepreneurship	Senior account coordinator	P4
Keisha	35	W. Bkb	Social sciences	Organizational development & equity strategist	Non-P4
Kendra	27	W. Bkb	Health and rehabilitation sciences	Healthcare consultant	Non-P4
Kendrick	28	Football	Sociology	Higher education administrator	FBS
Leonard	39	Football	History	College football coach	FBS
Marquis	36	Football	Economics	Operations	FCS
Reggie	25	Football	Psychology	Corporate paralegal	FCS
Sierra	25	W. Bkb	Liberal studies	Professional athlete	Non-P4
Tasha	26	W. Bkb	Geology	EPA contractor	P4
Trey	26	Football	Economics and communication	Management consultant	FBS
Tyrone	32	Football	Exercise science	Doctoral student	FBS
Zachary	28	Football	Communication	Technical specialist	FBS
Zara	31	W. Bkb	Sociology	Professional athlete	P4
Zoe	33	W. Bkb	Labor employment relations and communications	HR business partner	P4

Table 2
Participant Data - Coaches

Pseudonym	Sex	Race	Most Recent Coaching Role	NCAA Level	Years Coaching	Retired?
Amanda	Female	White	Head Women's Basketball	FCS	30-40	Yes
Amber	Female	Black	Assistant Women's Basketball	FCS	5-10	No
David	Male	White	Assistant Football	FBS	20-30	No
Jason	Male	Black	Assistant Football	FBS	5-10	No
Linda	Female	White	Head Women's Basketball	FCS	30-40	No
Luke	Male	White	Assistant Football	FCS	<5	No
Mark	Male	White	Head Football	FBS	30-40	No
Rachel	Female	White	Head Women's Basketball	FCS	20-30	Yes
Scott	Male	White	Assistant Football	FBS	5-10	No
Stacey	Female	Black	Head Women's Basketball	FCS	10-20	No
Susan	Female	White	Head Women's Basketball	FBS	20-30	No
Vincent	Male	Black	Assistant Football	FBS	5-10	Yes

Data Collection

Data collection took place in 2023 and 2024, following receipt of Institutional Review Board approval. Interviews are a standard method for investigating the phenomenon in GT, so I conducted semi-structured interviews with all participants (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). After making initial contact with the participants and obtaining confirmation of their participation in the study through a Qualtrics survey, I scheduled in-depth interviews with each participant via Zoom. Each participant took part in one interview lasting between 60-90 minutes.

Although interview protocols differed among former athletes and coaches, similar questions explored how BSAs were supported holistically from the perspectives of each interviewee. Sample questions for the athletes included: "How would you describe your relationship with your coach?" "What was your college experience beyond athletics and the classroom?" "Do you feel your college and athletic department staff supported your mental health?" "Can you talk about the support you received for academics?" "Describe your experience as a Black student at a PWI." Sample questions to coaches included: "How do you help to create a sense of belonging for Black student-athletes on your team?" "As a White coach, how do you support your Black athletes?" "Do you feel properly trained to handle mental health issues that may arise with your student-athletes?" "In what ways do you engage in holistic education with your athletes, individually and as a team?"

Data Analysis

As the GT approach dictates, I began analyzing the data from the interviews to help identify areas that needed further exploration in subsequent interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I manually transcribed each interview transcript before continuing

with data analysis. The first analytical step in GT involves reducing the data into manageable categories using a three-phase coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The first phase, open coding, requires breaking down the interview data into smaller groupings and assigning conceptual labels to the phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Examples of categories and subcategories I created during this phase include "coaching support," "mentoring relationship," "holistic activities," and "support for identities."

The second phase, axial coding, allowed me to identify patterns across initial codes through constant comparison and inductive and deductive thinking (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). It is essential during this phase to understand the various contexts that lead to the categories created during the first coding round, as well as the consequences of the events. Using the category of "mentoring relationship" as an example, axial coding allowed me to explore the factors that enabled some BSAs to develop mentoring relationships at their PWIs, and how those relationships or the absence of those relationships impacted their experiences.

The final coding phase, selective coding, involves identifying a central theme or category from all the codes and patterns developed in the initial coding stages (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This final coding stage explains the phenomenon under investigation by consolidating the ideas generated in the first two stages. It became clear during this process the core theme of the research was the BSAs' successful holistic development depended on what the athletes, coaches, and institutions valued and how it was communicated through policies and practices.

Once I determined the core theme of the interview data, I initiated the second step of grounded theory analysis, known as theoretical sampling. This step enabled me to test the concepts generated during the coding stage by expanding the sample and analyzing additional cases until data saturation was achieved (Kolb, 2012). This step was essential for studying the phenomenon of holistic coaching from multiple perspectives, as it involved interviewing coaches and student-athletes. The constant comparative method enabled me to identify differences across race, gender, conference type, and coaching position.

A final step in the analysis process involved reviewing the websites of all 19 universities represented in this sample. This step was necessary for understanding the context within which the athletes competed and the coaches worked by analyzing each institution's mission statement. I identified relevant words and phrases within the mission statement and compared them to the other schools to determine the common themes, which are presented in the findings below.

Positionality

As a White woman conducting research with Black participants, I understood the potential for bias in the research process. My experiences as a faculty member teaching BSAs and a former DI compliance coordinator may contribute to preconceived assumptions about coaching relationships and BSAs' academic experiences. Although my experiences helped to recruit and develop rapport with participants, I needed to be conscious of how my racial background shaped my perception of the

participants as well as the interpretation of their responses (Milner, 2007).

This awareness required approaching the research process with a thorough understanding of BSAs' and Black coaches' experiences in the existing literature and a constructivist paradigm that allowed them to share their first-person perspectives (Tracy, 2020). It also required giving participants the space to share their lived experiences in a process of "engaged reflection and representation," that allowed me to work with them in understanding the meaning behind their experiences (Milner, 2007, p. 396). I tried to stay reflexive to demonstrate acknowledgment of potential bias in the research process through constant reflection about my positionality (Kolb, 2012). Another essential step in protecting the participants' voices was communicating with each participant after the interview to confirm the accuracy of their statements through actions to ensure trustworthiness listed below.

Trustworthiness

To improve the quality of the research, I took several steps to improve trustworthiness, such as theoretical sampling in conjunction with the constant comparative method (Kolb, 2012). Theoretical sampling is the process of expanding the sample until achieving saturation (Kolb, 2012). For each group of interview participants, I continued adding cases until no novel information was learned from the former BSAs and coaches. The constant comparative method allowed me to present a negative case analysis, which helped mitigate bias by representing the outliers in the analysis (Kolb, 2012). It also facilitated data triangulation by conducting interviews with male and female athletes and coaches to identify patterns and differences among the groups. Finally, I used member checking by sharing copies of the transcripts and a summary of research findings with interview participants to ensure accuracy. All participants confirmed by email the interview data accurately reflected their experiences, and one participant offered a suggestion for additional questions to ask in subsequent interviews related to college choice. To improve trustworthiness in the data collection and analysis processes, future research should include additional researchers who share similar backgrounds as the interview participants.

Findings

Three primary themes emerged from the interviews with coaches and former BSAs. The themes included 1) goals influence HIP participation, 2) HIPs occur outside of athletics, and 3) messaging reflects institutional values. The themes are presented below.

Goals Influence HIP Participation

The first and second research questions examined the factors influencing decisions regarding student-athlete engagement in HIPs and the barriers to their participation. The interviews revealed a common theme across all participants: decisions were guided by their individual goals regarding what they hoped to achieve, either as athletes or coaches, which often created challenges for the athletes.

Athletes' Perceptions

Personal goals drove all the student-athletes (*n=20*) to attain a college degree, and they recognized their athletic participation was the means to that end. Even when athletes wanted to get involved outside of their sport, the time constraints of being a DI athlete often made it impossible. Tyrone (Black male, FCS football) explained, "As far as extracurricular activities go, football was my extracurricular activity. There was nothing else." Kendra (Black female, non-P4 women's basketball) echoed Tyrone's comment:

> When it came to other things that regular students, if you will, knew about, I feel like we either, one, heard it kind of secondhand, or two, never heard about it 'cause we couldn't really participate in those things.

Zachary (Black male, FBS football) and Ayanna (Black female, non-P4 women's basketball) believed their coaches' primary goals were to win games, contributing to BSA's inability to develop non-athletic identities. Zachary explained:

> You have coaches that are depending on you to win and keep their jobs. You know, a lot of resources at this institution that you really have no means of tapping into. So, I think that's kind of the thing that you kind of struggle with.

Ayanna added, "They're on us 24/7 about winning or losing, … or becoming a better player. So, it don't really leave a lot of room to think about … what you want to do."

The women's basketball players differed from the football players because their participation depended more on the coaches' support. For example, Zoe (Black female, P4 women's basketball) said her coach wasn't interested in developing her outside of basketball at her first school. After transferring, she recalled how her new coach was "putting me in position of leadership, having me read leadership books during the summer." Alyssa (Black female, P4 women's basketball) described getting support for HIPs because her coach knew her academics would raise the team's GPA. Although his goal was self-serving, she appreciated the flexibility with her schedule to do her internship.

> Even my head coach, as much as he sucked, when I told him I got an internship, he was like, just go do lifts early. … So, he let me go do that, which he didn't have to do. I think they really wanted me to be successful in terms of the academic side of basketball.

Not all women's basketball players got the coaches' support for HIPs. Keisha's (Black female, non-P4 women's basketball) coach prohibited the players from engaging in extracurricular activities like the Black Student Union. She recalled, "I think that's where I realized this is business. And this is not family. … This is not the place for me. But what I really just wanted to do was graduate."

For the men, it was not the coaches' influence but the level of play. Students at FCS schools, like Reggie, Marquis, and Darnell, had more opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities than FBS athletes. Driven by his goal to attend law school, Reggie worked a part-time job and two internships, one at a legal aid firm. Marquis believed his university was "super supportive of … extracurriculars, like the

time was there." Although it was still DI, Darnell believed being at an FCS school allowed him to get involved in many things, such as running his own television program on campus. "I had a little TV show. ... I'm not patting myself on the back, but I was pretty popular when I was in school."

Coaches' Perceptions

All coaches interviewed for this study (n = 12) considered themselves educators committed to their goal of being holistic coaches for their athletes. Luke (White male, FCS football) defined holistic coaching as "treating a person as more than just a number, and you're treating them as [an] actual individual." The coaches achieved this through team-sponsored activities, including community service, guest speakers, and bonding exercises. Rachel (White female, non-P4 women's basketball) incorporated yoga, mental skills training, trips to the museum, movies, "all sorts of like little quirky things that I think, yeah, touched on kind of mind, body, spirit." Linda (White female, non-P4 women's basketball) added, "I do believe in being able to be part of the bigger community. So, we work hard to have that as part of our experience to get involved."

There were differences across conference levels regarding the pressure the coaches felt, which limited many FBS coaches' ability to provide holistic development. Unlike the experiences of Luke, Rachel, and Linda, who coached in non-P4 schools, Vincent (Black male, FBS football) found the pressures in the FBS more restrictive. He explained, "I can preach about the internal goals or the internal things … the growth and the maturation of the players, but that's not what matters. It's the number of wins and losses - the only thing that matters." Susan (White female, P4 women's basketball) concurred with Vincent and recalled how the coach before her got fired despite his commitment to holistic education:

> You know, you don't win … you're not going to keep your job very long. … The guy that was here before me was one of the nicest guys on the planet … meaning he really bought into everything that you're supposed to be a holistic coach.

Drawing on Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) Conceptual Model of Academic Success helps to understand how the BSAs' background and individual goals contributed to their attitudes towards their athletic experiences. As the theory suggests, all BSAs were committed to their athletic goals because sports helped them achieve their academic goals to earn a college degree. However, this theory does not account for the educationally purposeful opportunities that athletes sacrifice due to their athletic commitments. As BSAs like Kendra, Tyrone, Zachary, and Ayanna asserted, the DI sports system prevented them from participating in beneficial activities that would develop their non-athletic identities. Many BSAs in the current study were not able to develop holistically because they were either unaware of opportunities or were restricted from participating by their coaches. As discussed in the next section, some BSAs were empowered to identify opportunities for holistic development outside of athletics, an empowerment strategy supported by Cooper's (2016) EBA framework.

HIPs Occur Outside of Athletics

The third research question examined the role of institutions in supporting the holistic development of student-athletes. Despite accounts from the coaches indicating they engaged in holistic development activities with their student-athletes, most BSAs reported if holistic development occurred, it happened outside of the athletic department.

Athletes' Perceptions

Only three of the 20 BSAs, Leonard (Black male, FBS football), Kendrick (Black male, FBS football), and Zoe, had opportunities to participate in team-directed HIPs, such as community service and leadership activities, that allowed them to develop their non-athletic identities. Kendrick described his experience with Athletes in Action, "We compete with frats, like frats and student-athletes come together to, like, for a good cause."

Some BSAs (n = 5) got involved in racial affinity groups on campus that validated their racial identities and gave them a sense of community at PWIs. Although Trey (Black male, FBS football) felt football "took a lot away from extracurriculars," he found time to participate in the Christian ministry, racial affinity groups, and diversity education through the school's intercultural center. Other BSAs were fortunate to find faculty members or academic advisors interested in supporting their academic and career development. Alyssa described the impact her law professor had on her college experience and career outcomes:

> That first summer that I interned with him, I loved it. Like some people will be like, "Oh, got to go work." No, I'd be like, "Can't wait to go work." … I'd wake up early in the summer and lift so I can just go spend the entire day with [Law Professor].

Tasha (Black female, non-P4 women's basketball) was the only BSA who participated in undergraduate research with a faculty member. She described her research experience with a geology professor, "We had a relationship, obviously, in the school setting and in my … research, but he was extremely supportive of just me personally."

A few BSAs recalled developing relationships with faculty through office hours, an activity that was sometimes encouraged by their coaching staff. Zoe's coaches encouraged interactions with faculty and told her, "It's nice to have your professors come to the game. They want us to invite them to the games." Brandi (Black female, non-P4 women's basketball) developed a close relationship with one biochemistry professor, whom the coach encouraged her to invite to the professor appreciation game. Keisha recalled how her coach connected her with "professors who were like, like-minded. And, you know, they got me really engaged in a way that made academics less passive."

Unfortunately, many BSAs interviewed for this study did not find opportunities for holistic development, either within or outside of athletics. Ayanna believed it was due to faculty perceptions of BSAs, "Some professors like loved us, and some of them was like not really a fan." Jada (Black female, P4 women's basketball) agreed

with Ayanna about faculty perception, adding, "Specifically for women's basketball. There was this kind of stigmatism of, because we traveled so much and missed class that we didn't care, and if we were struggling, it was our fault."

Others, like Zara (Black female, P4 women's basketball), did not have people in athletics looking out for their best interests. She recalled:

> What I ended up realizing was that the athletic department, their focus is to … make sure everyone's eligible. … Sometimes, there are just a handful of students where there's no goals for them. … I felt like no one was dreaming anything for me.

Cory (Black male, FBS football) explained how he did not realize what he missed out on until football was over:

> I missed out on, you know, some of the great things that students do to find themselves. … Injury for me was, it was both good and bad. It allowed me to look at myself more holistically and not just as a football player.

Coaches' Perceptions

Whether they coached at FBS or FCS schools, all 12 coaches were committed to their student-athletes' holistic development. However, they had different perceptions about what constituted "holistic". Rachel believed holistic growth "wasn't just like individual holistic transformation, growth, whatever, it was teamwork. And so, we just did a lot to try to get our women just really collaborating and playing together." Other coaches like David (White male, FBS football) felt holistic development happens when coaches prepare athletes to enter the real world. He recalled his discussions with the athletes, "There's the way you kind of communicate in the locker room with each other, and then there's the way that you communicate outside the real world, and they're, they're not the same."

Mark (White male, FBS football) brought in guest speakers and required his team to do community service. He discussed the importance of fulfilling the promise he made to recruits and their families about holistic development:

> We tell these parents when we recruit these young men, like, "Hey, when they leave here, they're going to be more of a whole person than when they came in. They're going to be developed in a lot of different ways."

Although all coaches in the study believed supporting the athletes' racial and gender identities was essential to building trust and developing the whole person, there were notable differences in how coaches from different racial identities approached supporting their BSAs. The White coaches, such as Amanda (White female, non-P4 women's basketball) and Linda, attempted to diversify their coaching staffs and draw on campus resources like the intercultural centers. The Black coaches in the study believed it started with being authentic. As a Black female, Stacey (Black female, non-P4 women's basketball) explained:

> I hope that me being myself gives them the freedom … the ticket to really be themselves and … led by, you know, people that look like them and talk like them and, you know, come from the same areas that they come from.

Amber (Black female, non-P4 basketball) added, "The biggest thing is like, you know, essentially being relatable and allowing them to know like I was in your position at a point in time, like I understand, and I get it and you know, you're not alone."

Although focused on male BSAs, Cooper's (2016) EBA model describes the conditions and relationships necessary for holistic development. This model helps to explain how some BSAs, such as Trey, Alyssa, and Tasha found academic success and holistic development through relationships with faculty and staff outside of athletics who valued their other identities. The coaches believed they created the right conditions, relationships, and expectations that set their athletes up for success. BSAs like Jada, Ayanna, and Zara did not benefit from people on campus committed to their holistic success, reflecting the institutional culture that prioritized athletic success over fulfilling its academic mission. This culture is discussed in the next section.

Messaging Reflects Institutional Values

This theme addresses the last research question that explores whether existing theoretical frameworks help to understand the experiences of DI student-athletes participating in HIPs. As this theme suggests, institutions communicate their values through the messages student-athletes receive from coaches, athletic staff, and faculty. These messages are powerful due to their impact on the student-athlete experience, yet they are often missing from most existing theoretical frameworks, which imply student-athletes have control over their participation in HIPs and coaches have control over the values prioritized by their institution.

Athletes' Perceptions

At Devon's (Black male, FBS football) school, it was clear football was prioritized above everything else, impacting his ability to develop his non-athletic identities or pursue his academic goals. He explained:

> Most things on the campus like kind of revolve around … football. … They say, if you decide that you want to be an engineer, then you're just not going to play football because you can't practice and go to class at the same time.

Tyrone added, "The reality of the situation, the reason that you're there on scholarship is because of your athletic ability and what you can provide for the university from the stance of athletics." Sierra (Black female, non-P4 basketball) also believed the institution did not value her for anything more than her athletic skills. She remembered how the head coach stopped supporting her when she started to struggle:

> While he was recruiting me, we talked pretty much every day. … I'm a freshman … and I'm like, I'm just struggling. … He just moved on. … I think, once I got there, he didn't want a relationship with me.

Some BSAs, like Keisha, Alyssa, Jada, and Reggie, believed their PWI needed to do more to support their Black athletes holistically. Reggie explained:

> You need to stop recruiting people from the inner city if you're not going to support them. … There should be literally a roadmap of how can you explore and develop yourself and see who you are outside of your sport.

At Marquis's FCS university, the message he received was that the school wants everyone, including student-athletes, to succeed. He explained, "They want me to succeed. They don't want to kick you out." Like Marquis, Leonard also believed his university's mission was carried out in athletics:

> [University] had a unique mandate on us and why we were all successful because we all care. … The community service aspect of giving to be more … than just be football players … oozes through everything at the university.

Coaches' Perceptions

Most coaches (n = 9) discussed the challenges of balancing the student-athletes' holistic needs with the pressures to win in DI sports. The conflicting messages promoting athletic success and student-athlete development were indicative of the commercialized DI sports culture that pushed coaches to prioritize athletics over academics. Susan described how her institution expected her to recruit good people, help the athletes thrive, and "if I don't do this next part of my job, I will be fired … I have to win games." Scott (White male, FBS football) explained how NIL and the transfer portal make relationships more transactional, "You come here because we paid you more, not because you care about this degree or you care about the relationship with this coach."

Amanda discussed how student-athletes are less resilient, contributing to coaching challenges:

> As soon as I don't like how you coach me, I'm going in the portal, and I'm going to get a better deal or a better role on a team. And it's a nightmare, and I don't know why the NCAA is allowing this. I think it's ruining college sports.

Jason (Black male, FBS football) agreed, adding:

> Kids can basically transfer school to school. … "I'm going to the next school that gives me a million dollars." And maybe the true education factor of what college was supposed to be is gone. I think that's the detriment.

The coaches at FCS schools believed the messaging from institutions was more supportive of holistic coaching because athletics were less prioritized. Amber described, "The understanding is like, they're here to get an education and to be here athletically." Stacey added:

> I think there's … a transformational experience compared to, you know, what is looking like a transactional experience at a lot of other places. … There's an investment piece here, so they feel the investment that … we make in them from a coaching standpoint.

Organizational theory (Kuh et al., 2006) provides a good framework for understanding how institutions implement their missions through the messages the BSAs and coaches received. When the BSAs, such as Marquis and Leonard, felt the university

cared about the academic success of all its students, including athletes, it led to greater retention, academic outcomes, and belonging. Those who believed their institutions valued their athletic identities, such as Devon and Sierra, often transferred or graduated from their institution with little sense of belonging.

Not surprisingly, an analysis of the mission statements from the participants' institutions revealed a universal theme related to the institutions' emphasis on education, which was reflected by words such as "learn/learning" (n = 15), "knowledge" (n = 10), and "critical thinking" (n = 8). Other common terms, such as "leader" (n = 13), "service" (n = 13), "community" (n = 13), and "research" (n = 12), are represented in the word cloud in Figure 1. Only one of the mission statements used the term "holistic" and none of the 19 mission statements made reference to athletics, sports, or physical excellence.

Conceptual frameworks by Comeaux and Harrison (2011) and Cooper (2016) emphasize the need to change the institutional culture that prioritizes athletics over academics, thereby incentivizing coaches to prioritize their athletes' academic success. When coaches like Amber and Stacey felt an institutional investment in the student-athletes' academic and holistic development, they felt more freedom to engage in those activities with their teams. Conversely, when coaches like Susan knew their jobs were at risk if they did not win or the college sports system prioritized athletic success over academics, the transactional relationships that resulted left no room for holistic development.

Figure 1
Mission Statement Word Cloud

Discussion

This research makes a significant contribution to the literature for several reasons. First, the findings offer diverse perspectives on holistic development through

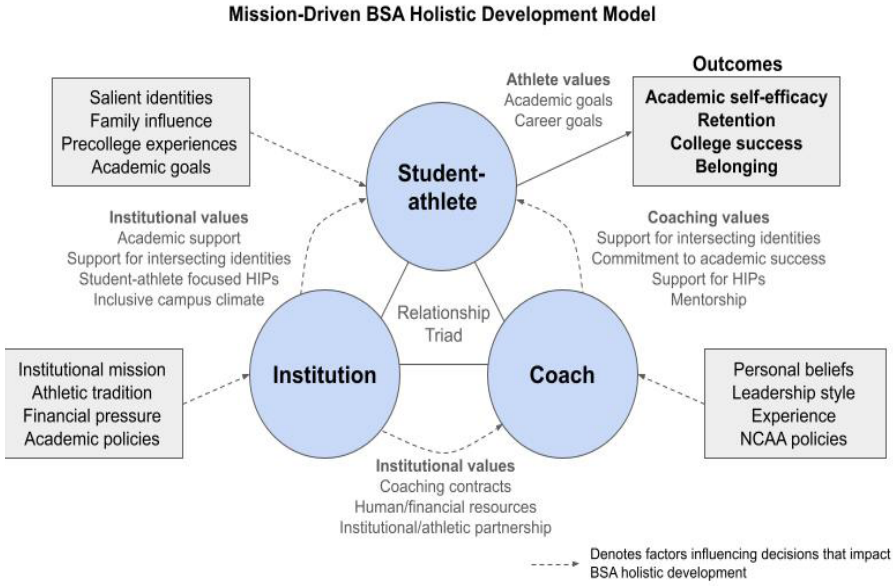
interviews with a robust sample of coaches and former athletes. Second, the comparative analysis across sport, race, gender, and conference levels provides a nuanced understanding of the different challenges the athletes and coaches experienced. Third, grounded theory enables me to develop an emerging framework for holistic development that centers the influence of institutional culture and missions in discussions on student-athletes' and coaches' experiences. The proposed theory is strengthened through analysis of the institutions' mission statements. Finally, researching male and female BSAs expands upon prior holistic development frameworks that have focused only on male athletes.

Theoretical Implications

The themes presented in the findings are discussed below through an integrated Mission-Driven BSA Holistic Development Model (Figure 2). This section outlines the elements of the model using data from the interviews and incorporating prior frameworks on student-athlete development.

Figure 2

Mission-Driven BSA Holistic Development Model



Institutional Values

The first part of the holistic development model addresses the institution's role in student-athletes' holistic development. The proposed holistic development model supports and extends existing holistic development frameworks (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Cooper, 2016; Cooper & Cooper, 2015) by highlighting the influen-

tial role institutional culture and mission play in the holistic development of BSAs. The institutional values presented in this model represent the institutional decisions and practices that support BSAs' holistic development, whereas institutional commitments in Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) conceptual model refer to the level of dedication student-athletes have to achieve academically. Various factors influence institutional decisions that may impact BSAs' holistic development, including institutional mission, athletic tradition, financial pressure, and academic policies. Some authors have noted a disconnect between the mission and athletic culture in DI sports, which prioritizes athletic success over student-athletes' academic goals (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016).

There are numerous ways institutions communicate their values and priorities to their BSAs and coaches. Cooper's (2016) EBA approach suggests institutions should provide the right conditions (e.g., campus climate, racial affinity groups), relationships (e.g., faculty mentors), and expectations (e.g., setting high academic goals) to help set male BSAs up for success. Comeaux and Harrison (2011) emphasize the significance of campus climate, institutional decisions, and faculty interactions on BSA experiences. While both models discuss engagement in educationally purposeful activities as essential components of social integration and suggest the right climates for supporting student-athlete academic success, they do not address the significant influence of the university's mission and athletic culture on the BSA experience.

The mission statement analysis revealed a universal emphasis on education among the 19 institutions, yet this commitment to learning and knowledge was not experienced by many athlete and coach participants who believed athletics took priority over academics. Comments by Devon, Tyrone, and Sierra reflected the realities of participating at a DI institution where a strong athletic culture supersedes the academic mission. For these students, opportunities for academic and social integration were severely limited, regardless of their motivation. Other BSAs, like Marquis and Leonard, experienced opportunities for social and academic integration because their institution's mission was carried out in the athletic program.

The BSAs in the third theme reported institutions communicated their priorities through the academic support they received from faculty, opportunities for holistic development, and an inclusive campus climate. Some BSAs felt their institution effectively integrated its strong academic tradition and commitment to community service into the athletic program, communicating that the institution valued them for more than their athletic identities. This commitment to community was represented in the mission statements of 13 of the 19 institutions, including those where Marquis and Leonard played. The proposed framework extends prior frameworks by emphasizing the implementation of student-athlete-focused HIPs that take into consideration their unique schedules. One example of an HIP is a credit-bearing student-athlete research program that takes place in the summer months to accommodate athletes' schedules.

Additionally, other BSAs believed their institutions valued their racial, ethnic, and religious identities by providing opportunities to join racial affinity and ministry organizations. These findings demonstrate how institutions can successfully carry

out their mission to educate all students through effective programs and policies (Kuh et al., 2006), supporting Cooper's (2016) second holistic development principle related to social engagement. Consistent with prior research (Hogan, 2024; Kuh, 2008), BSAs who participated in HIPs, such as internships and community service, felt greater engagement and belonging than those without these opportunities. Although an outlier in this study, the BSA who participated in undergraduate research benefited from faculty mentorship (Gooch, 2020; Jensen et al., 2022; Rubin et al., 2020; Saucier et al., 2020) and a sense of community (Comeaux et al., 2017). Interestingly, 12 of the 19 mission statements referenced a commitment to research, but the findings of this study revealed research was not prioritized in its athletic programs since Tasha was the only BSA who participated in research.

Conversely, other athlete participants felt faculty stigma about BSAs (Singer, 2016) and the prioritization of their athletic success over academic goals was indicative of the school's commitment to its athletic tradition rather than a commitment to its student-athletes, despite the fact that excellence in athletics was not included in any institutional mission statement. Many BSAs and coaches in the current study felt the disconnect between promises made to recruits about academic opportunities and the reality that institutions prioritized athletic success over everything else (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). As represented by coaches' comments in the third theme, institutions communicated their values to coaches through the financial and staffing support they received to succeed in their roles, as well as the pressure they felt from their coaching contracts to win at all costs (Finley & Fountain, 2010; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). This finding supports Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) conceptual framework that acknowledges how coaching demands in the commercialized sport culture influence student-athletes' social integration and engagement in educationally purposeful activities. The findings from the current study extend prior frameworks (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Cooper, 2016) by revealing differences between conference levels, as non-P4 coaches felt greater support from the institution to carry out their holistic development goals with their athletes than P4 coaches. If institutions change how they evaluate coaching success by prioritizing BSA academic success, they communicate to coaches they value their roles as educators (Weight et al., 2015).

Support for BSAs' racial identity was essential to their holistic development at PWIs. In addition to the racial affinity groups mentioned above, institutions communicated this support through a more diverse coaching staff, where their Black coaches provided opportunities for authentic conversations with someone who shared their background (Bernhard, 2014). However, not all BSAs received this message from their PWIs, as some participants recalled feeling no support from coaches or faculty who held stigmas about Black athletes (Comeaux, 2018; Ofoegbu, 2023). The mission statement analysis showed half of the institutions mentioned diversity and inclusion in their institutional missions. Despite the fact that Ayanna's university was a minority serving institution with a commitment to equity and diversity in its mission statement, she experienced stereotypes from faculty about Black athletes.

Extending prior frameworks (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Cooper, 2016), the proposed conceptual framework suggests institutions need to support the intersect-

ing identities of all BSAs, which may include providing opportunities for religious expression and diversifying the athletic staff with more female and Black coaches. Consistent with the literature (Lapchick, 2022), most BSAs in this study ($n = 16$) had White head coaches. This finding underscores the need for institutions to properly train their coaching staffs on how to support BSAs on their teams so microaggressions and racial discrimination do not occur.

Coaching Values

The second part of the theoretical model addresses coaches' commitment to holistic development. Their decisions regarding holistic development were influenced by their personal beliefs (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2024), leadership styles (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022), and the current sports culture (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016), which includes NCAA policies. The coaches in this study demonstrated their value for holistic development by supporting their student-athletes' participation in HIPs on campus (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022) and incorporating student-athlete development programs into their schedules. Some coaches demonstrated their commitment to academic success by encouraging BSAs to interact with faculty, an educationally purposeful activity with potential mentors that positively impacted their experiences (Comeaux et al., 2011) and helped them achieve social integration in the university (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). When coaches supported the BSAs' participation in HIPs on campus, it demonstrated how much they valued their holistic development (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022), leading to a greater sense of belonging at their PWIs (Hogan, 2024). This finding extends Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) conceptual model that discussed the influence of a coach's academic commitment on a student-athlete's success, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds.

Coaches employed various methods to develop their athletes holistically, depending on their individual definitions. As discussed in the second theme, some coaches contributed to career development through guest speakers, such as former BSAs who understood the lived experiences of current BSAs, an activity consistent with Cooper's (2016) fifth EBA principle related to career aspirations. When coaches intentionally diversified their staff and got their team involved with the intercultural center on campus, they communicated to their BSAs they valued their identities, an essential component of the proposed model. Other coaches prioritized community involvement as a team-building activity to motivate athlete participation, supporting prior research (Huml et al., 2017), or attempting to develop them in other ways that prepared them for the real world to become more effective leaders (Weight et al., 2015).

The coaches believed their roles included being a mentor to their athletes by modeling positive behavior, and the coaches of color emphasized the importance of being authentic for their BSAs. Mentorship is a key commitment in the proposed holistic development model due to the significant influence coaches have over their athletes. Providing mentorship requires support and commitment from the institutions, a concept that supports Cooper's (2016) third holistic development principle. Regardless of the age or experience of the coach, all coaches interviewed for this

study felt they were educators first (Weight et al., 2015), and they communicated that to recruits and their families through their efforts to develop the whole person.

Not all BSAs in the study believed their coaches valued holistic development. Some BSAs faced barriers to participation in HIPs because of pushback from their coaches, who restricted their time in non-athletic activities (Hall et al., 2020; Ishaq & Bass, 2019; Saucier et al., 2020). These coaches may not have valued holistic development (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022) or may have felt pressured by the DI athletic culture that encouraged coaches to prioritize athletics over holistic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Finley & Fountain, 2010; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Johnson et al., 2023; Kelley et al., 2023). The mission statement analysis showed only one school specifically mentioned holistic development, while other schools referenced a commitment to personal/formative growth (n = 5) or transformation (n = 2). These findings suggest other institutions may not prioritize holistic development, resulting in athletic programs and coaches who do not support it.

Despite their commitment to being holistic educators for their athletes, coaches in this study felt restricted in their ability to successfully fulfill this role because of changing NCAA policies, such as NIL and the transfer portal, which made their relationships with student-athletes more transactional (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024; Poulin, 2023). In addition, many coaches discussed the realities of coaching within a commercialized system that incentivized athletic success, as they knew their jobs were at stake if they did not win (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Cooper, 2016; Johnson et al., 2023). However, contrary to the findings in Finley and Fountain's (2010) research, the coaches in this study felt accountable for their athletes' academic success. Their commitment to academic success without financial incentives is most likely due to their personal values and leadership styles, two factors that influence decision making in the proposed holistic development model.

Although existing frameworks (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Cooper, 2016) acknowledge the impact of the college sports culture on coaches' roles, they do not address how institutional missions influence coaching decisions through the support coaches receive. This model extends prior conceptual frameworks (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011) by centering the influence of college coaches on BSAs' holistic development outcomes and acknowledging the challenges they face in the current college sports landscape. Coaches like Amber and Stacey felt supported by their FCS institutions in their efforts to holistically develop their athletes because there was less pressure to prioritize athletic outcomes than their FBS counterparts like Scott and Susan. Supporting the fourth holistic development principle in Cooper's (2016) EBA approach, the proposed holistic development model suggests institutions incentivize coaches to prioritize the academic achievements of athletes and partner with them to implement programs that support their holistic development. Valuing and rewarding coaches for their roles as educators may be more effective and feasible for institutional leaders than micromanaging their practice schedules and threatening institutional penalties for noncompliance, as suggested by Cooper's (2016) model.

Athlete Values

The final part of the theoretical model aligns with existing frameworks that suggest athletes' backgrounds, individual goals, and the opportunities made available to them influence how much they value holistic development (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Cooper, 2016). However, what differentiates the proposed model from existing theories is the emphasis on institutional mission and how it affects the opportunities BSAs have for holistic development. Cooper's (2016) EBA framework suggests the culture of FBS schools contributes to heightened athletic identities. Although interviews with BSAs affirmed how sport culture contributes to their athletic identity, they also showed how institutional values and missions can supersede culture to have a positive impact on their holistic development. Despite participating at FBS institutions with strong athletic traditions, Kendrick, Leonard, and Zoe were encouraged to develop their non-athletic identities through school-sponsored community engagement initiatives and other HIPs. All three of their universities emphasize community or public service in their mission statements.

All BSAs were committed to getting an education, but their precollege experiences, salient identities, and academic goals influenced decisions they made about engagement in holistic development activities. Many reported not being aware of opportunities on campus that developed their non-athletic identities (Hall et al., 2020; Shirley et al., 2024). As discussed in the first theme, BSAs from both sports reported feeling their options were limited because their coaches were focused on winning (Hall et al., 2020; Saucier et al., 2020). Differences existed across sports, as the women's basketball players received less support from their coaches to participate than the football players.

Athletes with more salient academic identities entered college with academic and career goals that motivated them to pursue internships, research, and other HIPs that contributed to their holistic success (Cooper et al., 2016; Ishaq & Bass, 2019). Supporting prior research (Fuller et al., 2020; Herman, 2023; Howe & Johnston-Guerrero, 2021; Singer, 2016), these BSAs told a counter story about excelling academically in environments that often prioritized their athletic success over their educational goals. There were differences across conference levels, as the BSAs who competed at non-P4 schools had more opportunities to participate in HIPs than those playing at P4 schools, which prioritized athletics more than the less competitive non-P4 schools. Conversely, BSAs with more salient athletic identities and goals for a professional sports career were less likely to participate in activities that developed them holistically because their focus was on staying eligible to compete (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Howe, 2020). This difference across competition levels supports the research by Umbach et al. (2006), who found DI athletes were less likely to engage in educationally purposeful activities than athletes in less competitive divisions. Without coaches or faculty who valued their holistic development, some BSAs transferred to other schools in the hope of finding a better opportunity or graduated from college without a sense of belonging (Hogan, 2024).

Interestingly, the BSAs' status as a starter and the number of games they played did not seem to influence their participation in HIPs. Although being a major contrib-

utor to a team could potentially pose a barrier to participation in non-athletic related activities on campus, this was not the case for Zoe, Tasha, and Darnell, but it was for other starters like Devon and Keisha who were not actively engaged outside of their sport. Conversely, some BSAs who did not start or play in many games, such as Ayanna, Tyrone, and Kendra, did not feel their athletic commitment allowed extra time to participate in HIPs, yet other nonstarters, such as Alyssa and Reggie, found ways to balance their athletic schedules with internships. As mentioned above, these findings are likely due to the salience of the BSAs' athletic and academic identities, support from their coaches, and the competitive level of the conference in which they competed.

Practical Implications

The findings have practical implications for DI institutions committed to holistically developing their student-athletes. Although the interviews took place with former BSAs, this theory can be applied to student-athletes from all backgrounds. Since the DI sports culture limits coaches' ability to invest time in holistic development activities, institutions must implement HIPs outside of athletics with consideration for the student-athletes' schedules. Given the difficulties student-athletes already face in balancing their athletic and academic schedules, institutions should organize HIPs that count for academic credit, rather than making them voluntary. Undergraduate research is one of the most effective HIPs due to its positive impact on the academic and social-emotional outcomes of underrepresented students (Schwartz, 2012). By coordinating a credit-bearing research program for student-athletes, institutions would provide access to HIPs that athletes would not otherwise have, demonstrating to their student-athletes they are valued for more than their athletic abilities, and successfully carry out their mission of educating all students.

In addition, institutions need to prioritize academic and holistic success by partnering with coaches and the athletic department on activities that support BSAs' holistic development. Existing frameworks (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Cooper, 2016) acknowledge the coach's influence on student-athlete academic experiences, but they do not address the environment within which coaches work that severely limits their ability to develop their athletes holistically. Whether it is the constantly changing policies related to NIL, the transfer portal, or revenue sharing, or the escalating pressure to win by their institutions, DI coaches face enormous challenges in the current sports landscape. Institutions should include incentives in coaches' contracts that reward them for the non-athletic achievements of their athletes, such as high GPAs, participation in internships, community service hours, research conference presentations, or other HIPs. Given coaches in this study felt pressure to prioritize athletics to retain their jobs, institutions should also evaluate coaches by considering the holistic development of their athletes, rather than focusing solely on wins and losses.

Finally, athletic leaders should invest resources in planning HIPs for all their athletes. Some sports like football that have player development staff may do a better

job than other sports in connecting current athletes with alumni who can help with career development. Athletic departments should ensure all athletes have opportunities for career development, leadership activities, mentoring programs with faculty and alums, and team-building community service. If athletic leaders coordinate these activities, it takes the pressure off coaches, particularly those with fewer resources, and sends a message to the athletes that the institution cares about their holistic development at a time when college athletics is becoming more transactional.

Limitations

The research should be interpreted in light of a couple of limitations. First, I restricted the sample of athletes to BSAs. Since student-athletes of color will have diverse experiences depending on their unique identities, the experiences of the BSAs in this research cannot be generalized to student-athletes from other racial and ethnic identities. However, the model proposed in this study may be applied more broadly to underrepresented student-athletes because it focuses on supporting their unique identities, creating inclusive climates, and supporting participation in HIPs that benefit all students of color. Future research should test this model with student-athletes from diverse racial backgrounds to determine its relevance to their experiences.

A second limitation is the use of former BSAs rather than current BSAs, who could relate to the impact of new policies such as NIL. Although most athletes in the study did not experience NIL and the transfer portal, their experiences speak to the transactional nature of DI sports, something that has only intensified in the changing landscape. In addition, including former athletes in the research allowed me to understand their full college experiences from recruitment through graduation, something I would not have been able to capture with current athletes. Future research could explore perceptions of holistic development from the perspectives of current BSAs or recent graduates who experienced NIL.

Conclusion

Existing frameworks have aided our understanding of how BSAs thrive when given access to HIPs and people who develop their non-athletic identities. Yet, these frameworks do not address the current college sport landscape, which is making the athlete-coach relationship more transactional, intensifying pressure on college coaches, and driving many decisions that impact BSAs' holistic development. The DI sports culture in the U.S. has long been criticized for prioritizing the financial benefits of its high-profile student-athletes over their academic goals. Although institutions claim to educate all their students through their mission, and coaches communicate this message to recruits and their families, the DI sports culture often negatively impacts BSAs' academic and holistic experiences at PWIs. Regardless of BSAs' academic and career aspirations or their coaches' philosophies regarding holistic development, the high-stakes, commercialized DI environment places diamond handcuffs on coaches whose jobs depend on winning, limiting their ability to

develop their athletes off the field. If institutions are truly committed to their academic mission, they must demonstrate to their student-athletes, particularly their BSAs, that the mission also applies to them.

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