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Longitudinal Analysis of Head Coach Employee Turnover of Women's NCAA D-I Teams

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Existing research documents the percentage of women head coaches of women's intercollegiate sport teams which has remained stagnant for over 30 years, barriers women face, and women's intentions, aspirations, and decisions to leave coaching. The purpose of this study was to longitudinally examine head coach occupational trends and employee turnover of a select group of women's teams within elite intercollegiate conferences. Data on head coach gender, age, and attribution given for employee turnover was collected between the 2012-2013 and 2020-2021 academic years. Based on the data, gender and age-related employee turnover patterns emerged. Men are more likely to obtain coaching positions regardless of reason for separation and twice as likely to be employed at the same level and position than women. Women enter at a younger age and voluntarily leave head coaching positions at higher rates than men. Data herein will help illuminate patterns of gender discrimination experienced by women sport coaches.

Keywords: occupational transition, sport, coaching, gender, age

Since the inception of Title IX, the percentage of women head coaches of women's sports has declined drastically. Specifically, the percentage dropped from over 90% in 1974 to 43% in 2014 (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014), and has remained remarkably stagnant for over a decade (LaVoi & Boucher, 2020). As sport and gender equity scholars argue how to understand this decline, one must understand the persistence and history of male power, male dominance, and male leadership ingrained in sport culture (Kane, 2016; Knoppers, 1989). In the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) a majority of all head coach and athletics director (AD) positions are held by men, who typically hire a majority of men (Boucher, 2019; Lapchick et al., 2020). Many male ADs blame women for the under-representation of women as coaches, while female ADs cite structural issues for the origin of stagnation (Kane & LaVoi, 2018), a persistent finding over decades (Acosta & Carpenter, 1988). Work-family conflict for women coaches is one attribution shared by men and women ADs, which has become a common blaming narrative. What is missing and gets

erased is that men also experience work-family conflict but this is rarely mentioned. Few male ADs, arguably gender allies (Heffernan, 2018), recruit, hire, and retain a majority of women head coaches for their women's teams intentionally and unapologetically in an attempt to unstick the stagnation (LaVoi & Wasend, 2018).

In the current study longitudinal data of head coach employee turnover within women's teams at the NCAA D-I level was examined to add unique insights into head coach turnover patterns across multiple variables. Although several authors have examined turnover and turnover intentions among coaches (Cunningham et al., 2019; Wells & Peachey, 2011; Ryan & Sagas, 2009), this study is the first to examine turnover patterns of intercollegiate sport coaches longitudinally. Data will provide a more complete and nuanced picture of the NCAA occupational and organizational landscape within women's athletics that can be used to confirm or dispel narratives, identify and illuminate gendered patterns of discrimination, and create systems change.

Literature Review

Employee Turnover in the United States

Employee turnover is when an employee separates from the organization for any reason such as resigning, being fired, taking a new job, or retiring, and is replaced by someone new (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). Employee turnover is an unavoidable reality in every workplace. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2013-2021) the average annual rate of employee separation over the last eight years across all industries was 43.9%; one-third of those employees involuntarily separated. Employee separation steadily increased every year until 2020, when it jumped to 57% due to the COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). However, no matter the year, reason, or separation rate, employee turnover does not come without cost.

Although variable by industry and company, the average cost of replacing an employee is estimated to be 21% of that employee's annual salary (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). Replacement costs are attributed to a combination of variables such as exit interviews, severance, advertisements for the job opening, interviewing candidates, background verification, and new employee training and onboarding (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). Turnover related costs to the employer also accrue in a variety of indirect ways such as lost productivity from the exiting employee, reduced quality of work during the transition period, and potential loss of business or clients during the turnover process (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). Because of the extremely high employee separation rate and costs associated with employee turnover, studying turnover patterns are important to create stable workplaces and reduce costs.

Meta-analyses indicated the most salient predictor of employee turnover was low organizational commitment and job satisfaction—the less committed and satisfied an employee, the more likely they are to leave or be fired (Griffeth et al., 2000). Job design and environmental factors like autonomy and control, job content, and job demands did not significantly predict employee turnover and reasons for turn-

over still varied greatly between jobs and populations (Griffeth et al., 2000). The specific job and population examined in the current study are head coaches of women's teams at the NCAA Division-I level. What is known about occupational turnover of sport coaches is summarized next.

Sport Coach Employee Turnover

Employee turnover in sport coaching is important to examine due to the organizational and human costs involved (Humphreys et al., 2016; Knoppers, 1989; Raedeke et al., 2002). Employee turnover herein is used to encompass both organizational (coaching, but at different institution/organization) and occupational (no longer coaching) turnover both of which incur costs. For example, the cost of losing potential recruits and damaging relationships with current players (Ryan & Sagas, 2009) and impacts to a program's reputation, attendance, and fundraising (Pierce et al., 2017) are unique costs of head coach turnover for athletic departments to manage. Subsequently, researchers have examined coach turnover intention to understand how to mitigate and minimize voluntary turnover (Cunningham & Sagas, 2003; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Darvin, 2020; Raedeke et al., 2002; Ryan & Sagas, 2009).

Recently, Darvin (2020) interviewed former NCAA women assistant coaches about their experiences and reasons for voluntary occupational turnover which included the toxic culture of recruiting, destructive leadership styles of the head coach, burnout, and work-family conflict (WFC). Work-family conflict involves issues such as missing a family event for a game or behaving negatively at home due to a bad practice or contest loss and is a commonly cited reason for coach turnover (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Work-family conflict is a broad umbrella of common women-blaming narratives in sport coaching (LaVoi, 2016) that perpetuate gender bias and stereotypes. In short, these 'family' of narratives purport that women experience more WFC and thus leave coaching positions sooner and more often than men (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Kane & LaVoi, 2018). Blaming narratives persist despite data which confirmed no significant WFC gender differences—male and female coaches with children reported similar conflicts, career and organizational commitment, and satisfaction (Graham & Dixon, 2014, 2017; Schenewark & Dixon, 2012). Athletic administrators in intercollegiate sports often perpetuate blaming women for the lack of women, to rationalize unjust recruitment and hiring practices (Kane & LaVoi, 2018; Staurowsky et al., 2017), and perpetuate gender inequalities (Cunningham et al., 2019). Unfortunately, blaming narratives are likely internalized by women which limit and impact career decision making and the trajectory of women coaches.

The most significant knowledge to date on the multilevel factors of occupational turnover, gender, and coaching is a 2019 meta-analysis conducted by Cunningham and colleagues. The key and statistically significant findings of their meta-analysis included: women had higher occupational turnover and turnover intentions than did men; women were younger than men and worked in coaching for a shorter period of time; and women identified more barriers to enter and stay in coaching than men (Cunningham et al., 2019). Thus, as stated by Cunningham and colleagues, "occu-

pational turnover is likely embedded in the coaching profession, and not limited to a particular organization on context" (2019, p. 69). Their meta-analysis helped forward understanding of gender difference in occupational turnover decisions. The current paper also fills gaps in scholarly inquiry related to employee (i.e., both occupational and organizational) turnover by examining trends by gender over time.

The multilevel systemic barriers of bias, discrimination, and mistreatment of women coaches is well documented and influences entry into, experience throughout, and desire to leave coaching (Burton & LaVoi, 2016; Cunningham et al., 2019; Darvin, 2020; LaVoi, 2016; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Recent data highlighted nuance related to women coaches' age, gender, and racial bias. Data indicated that women of color held coaching positions for less time (3 years on average) and took one year longer to reach a head coaching position than white male peers (Larsen & Clayton, 2019). Hollomon (2016) noted women of color often do not apply for sport leadership positions due to perceived barriers. However, intersectional analysis of occupational turnover is limited.

Significance of the Study

The current study is significant for numerous reasons. Longitudinal examination of head coach turnover patterns of women's intercollegiate teams is non-existent. Data herein add to the type of empirical data available to analyze coach turnover, as data type is limited (Cunningham et al., 2019) and most is cross-sectional. Second, it provides a baseline for the employee turnover rate of head coaches, and documents if those rates differ by sport, institution, conference, gender, and age. Analyses and application of data can help change, confirm, or dispel common blaming narratives about women coaches. For example, it is a common belief among women's sport advocates that women coaches who are fired do not get 'second chances' at a similar competitive level or position, an opportunity thought to be commonly afforded to male colleagues. Data herein will provide evidence of support or non-support this belief. Longitudinal data can illuminate if patterns of gender and/or age discrimination of head coaches of women's sport teams exists or emerged over time.

Given that a large majority of all women are located in head coach positions of women's teams, results may have important implications for recruiting, hiring, and retaining women. Examination of turnover patterns of the most lucrative, powerful, and visible head coaching positions in women's intercollegiate sports may provide additional insight into the gendered nature of the organizational structure which privileges men. As Cunningham and colleagues contended, "over time, small gender differences in career choices, such as turnover, can accumulate to create sizeable effects," and lead to a "supply-side shortage of women in coaching" (2019, p. 63, 68). Scholars and practitioners alike search for answers to the 'leaky pipeline' of women in sport coaching, and therefore understanding the origin and extent of turnover is warranted.

The current paper complements and extends data on employee turnover of NCAA intercollegiate sport coaches. Much of existing literature has focused on in-

tentions, aspirations, or decisions to leave the coaching occupation (Cunningham et al., 2019; Darvin, 2020), not the actual turnover rate, trends, or resultant employment of a specific coaching population. The current study also fulfills the call to include more intersectional analysis of coaches and how aspects of identity relate to and can uncover patterns of discrimination within occupational turnover (Cunningham et al., 2019; LaVoi, 2016), by analyzing age with gender. Little is known about age discrimination patterns in sport coaching and this study included analysis of age of outgoing and incoming coaches.

These data also specifically document the nuanced patterns of head coach turnover rates by conference, sport, and institution within the "Select 7" NCAA D-I conferences. The Select 7 include: The Power 5 – Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big 12, Big Ten, Pacific 12 (Pac-12), Southeastern Conference (SEC) – plus the Big East, and the American Athletic Conference (AAC). Data will shine a light on which organizational cultures may value and support women, and which do not. Explicit examination of the institutional attribution given (whether voluntary or involuntary) to coach turnover by gender of the coach is also explored. Perhaps most importantly the current occupational status of the outgoing coaches is included which provides insightful data pertaining to who gets rehired or not, and at what level and occupational role. Lastly, scholars have argued the degree to which, and factors that influence, gender differences in occupational turnover, and questions remain unanswered (Cunningham et al., 2019). The simultaneous examination of occupational patterns of men and women coaches of women's teams will provide a more complete picture of the occupational landscape of NCAA women's athletics. The overarching purpose of this study was to add to empirical data by confirming or refuting gender differences in occupational turnover of sport coaches.

The following research questions guided the current study:

1. What is the rate of Select 7 head coach turnover by year and longitudinally over time?
    a. Does employee turnover differ by gender, sport, conference, and institution?
2. Do age-related turnover patterns exist between male and female coaches in the Select 7?
3. What are the institutional reasons given for head coach turnover, and are there differences in prevalence and origin (reason given) of turnover between male and female coaches in the Select 7?
4. What is the current occupational status of former Select 7 head coaches of women's teams?

Method

Between the 2012-2013 and 2020-2021 academic years, a research team tracked and documented the occupational trajectories of head coaches of women's teams in a select group of athletic conferences (Boucher et al., 2021; LaVoi, 2013). The original

athletic conferences in the first year of study included: The Power 5 conferences plus the Big East. In 2014, the AAC was included following the realignment from the Big East. Wichita State was added to the dataset in 2017 following their introduction into the AAC.

For the current study, a longitudinal dataset comprised of data over eight years was examined which included all head coaches of women's teams for schools in the aforementioned seven athletic conferences. The dataset included variables pertaining to head coaches who experienced occupational turnover (outgoing) and the head coaches who replaced the outgoing head coach (incoming). A coding key was developed by the primary researcher to collect information to answer the research questions and is available upon request. Institutional Review Board approval was not warranted as all data were publicly accessible. The coding key included demographic variables of the outgoing and incoming coaches such as turnover year, conference, institution, sport, first and last name, and age. The following variables of outgoing coaches were collected included coaching change reason, current coaching status, coaching level, institution or program, and coaching position.

In January 2021, data were collected by examination of online coaching biographies for each coach who experienced turnover (if available) from their current institutional online coach biography (if still coaching), LinkedIn accounts, or online news articles, to determine current occupational status. Coach age was determined by undergraduate graduation year listed in the coach's online coaching biography or personal LinkedIn account. This is an imperfect measure as some coaches may have graduated at a younger or older age, yet this method helped the research team standardize the data in an efficient manner. Future research utilizing age should confirm age or date of birth with coaches when feasible.

Turnover was categorized by four dichotomous 'gender change pairs': an outgoing man was replaced by an incoming woman (male-female), a man was replaced by a man (male-male), a woman was replaced by a man (female-male), and a woman was replaced by a woman (female-female). The origin of coach turnover, or the attribution given for the outgoing coach's departure, was gleaned through official institutional press releases. Institutional reason for turnover was coded into one of four themes: Retired, Institutional Decision (e.g., fired, contract not renewed), Coach Decision (coach left on their own accord, resigned, took another coaching job, left coaching), and Other (e.g., died, no reason could be found, team/coach suspended at time of data collection). The official institutional press release was used for the source of turnover, rather than fan blogs, Op-eds, or newspaper articles to provide a consistent and credible informational source. Frequency distributions, crosstabs, and *t*-tests were used to calculate and analyze the data using the IBM SPSS Statistics Processor.

Results

Over the eight years of this longitudinal study, 2013-14 through 2020-2021 academic years, a total of 7660 (n = 3164, 41.3% women; n = 4496, 58.7% men) head coaching positions comprised the coaching staffs for women's NCAA Division I

teams at 86 institutions, 23 sports, and seven conferences (Table 1). Although the total number of coaches in the sample year-by-year varied slightly due to conference realignments or program or position eliminations or additions, a majority of the head coach positions were held by men. While the percentage of women remained low, this data point increased slightly for the last seven years.

Table 1
Longitudinal Percentage of Head Coaches of NCAA D-I Women's Teams by Gender and Academic Year

	All Head Coaches				
	Total Positions	Female		Male	
Year	*N*	*n*	%	*n*	%
2013-14*	883	350	39.6	533	60.4
2014-15**	969	390	40.2	579	59.8
2015-16	967	397	41.1	570	58.9
2016-17	964	397	41.2	567	58.8
2017-18***	970	402	41.4	568	58.6
2018-19	971	406	41.8	565	58.2
2019-20	972	411	42.3	561	57.7
2020-21	964	411	42.6	553	57.4
Total Sample	7660	3164	41.3	4496	58.7

*Note. *First year coach occupational turnover was collected; **Sample increased due to conference realignments and adding the American Conference. ***Sample increased due to entrance of Wichita State.*

Longitudinal Coach Turnover by Variable

Frequency distributions were conducted to determine patterns of the overall rate of coach turnover by year, conference, sport, and institution. Based on the longitudinal data over eight years, a total of 665 of 7660 head coaches experienced organizational or occupational turnover which calculated to an average employee turnover rate of 8.7% each year (Table 2). Over eight years a majority (58.7%) of incoming

head coaches hired were men. Outgoing men were replaced most frequently by other men (40.3%) and outgoing women replaced by incoming men (female-male) was the most infrequent occurrence (16.8%).

By Year

The 2018-19 academic year exhibited the highest rate (12.9%) and 2020-21 the lowest rate (5.7%) of head coach turnover. The average rate of turnover for women coaches (258 of 3164; 8.2%) was slightly lower than for men (407 of 4496; 9.1%). See Table 2.

By Conference

The AAC evidenced the highest turnover rate for all coaches (74 cases of a possible 759; 9.8%) and the highest turnover rate for women coaches (42.3%) (Table 3). The Big East (69 cases of a possible 850; 8.1%) and SEC (94 cases of possible 1254; 7.5%) had the lowest rates of total coach turnover by conference. The SEC recorded the lowest rate for women (25.5%). Notably, the Big East and the SEC had similar rates of overall coach turnover, but the SEC turnover rate for women (25.5%) was significantly lower than the Big East (42%).

By Sport

The sports with the highest (alpine skiing, water polo, beach volleyball, nordic skiing) and lowest (equestrian, squash, triathlon) coach turnover rates were emerging NCAA sports or sports not commonly offered/sponsored at NCAA institutions (See Table 4). Cross country (12.4%) and soccer (6.7%), offered at nearly every NCAA D-I institution and therefore very common, were the sports with the highest and lowest rate of overall coach turnover respectively. Sports with the highest and lowest turnover rates for women were sports that have very few (alpine skiing, water polo) or a majority of women (field hockey, lacrosse, equestrian, golf) head coaches within the respective sports.

By Institution

Georgetown had the highest overall organizational turnover rate for men and women coaches (19 of 103 18.4%) and Baylor had the lowest (2 of 75, 2.7%) over eight years. Appendix A is available by request for full results of all institutions. On average over eight years, institutions experienced approximately one head coach position turnover each year. Houston had the highest rate (26.3%) of organizational turnover for women and five institutions had no (0%) women head coaches turnover across eight years (Arkansas, Xavier, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Creighton). When high/low rates of turnover for women are looked at in combination with the overall percentage of women head coaches at that institution over time, a story of institutional culture possibly emerges. For example, Houston had a high turnover rate for women (26.3%) but employed very few women (19 of 70, 27.1%) over eight years. Kentucky had zero (0%) women coaches turnover and similar to Houston also employed very few women (16 of 96, 16.7%). Conversely, Oklahoma had zero women coaches turnover but a majority of their head coaches were women (48 of 80, 60%).

Table 2

Longitudinal Employee Turnover Numbers, Percentages, and Rates of Head Coaches of NCAA D-I Women's Teams by Gender and Academic Year

Year of Study	Academic YEAR	Outgoing-Incoming Coach Gender Change Pair								Total Coaches	Total Coach Turnover	
		Male-Male		**Female-Male**		**Male-Female**		**Female-Female**				
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*N*	*n*	*%*
1	2013-14	35	52.2	15	22.4	10	14.9	7	10.4	883	67	7.6
2	2014-15	41	49.4	9	10.8	15	18.1	18	21.7	969	83	8.6
3	2015-16	26	34.7	13	17.3	21	28.0	15	20.0	967	75	7.8
4	2016-17	27	38.6	10	14.3	12	17.1	21	30.0	964	70	7.3
5	2017-18	40	45.5	13	14.8	17	19.3	18	20.5	970	88	9.1
6	2018-19	43	34.4	24	19.2	28	22.4	30	24.0	971	125	12.9
7	2019-20	38	37.3	17	16.7	22	21.6	25	24.5	972	102	10.5
8	2020-21	18	32.7	11	20.0	14	25.5	11	20.0	964	55	5.7
	TURNOVER TOTAL	***268***	***40.3***	***112***	***16.8***	***139***	***20.9***	***145***	***21.8***		***665***	***8.7***
	SAMPLE TOTAL	*Total Males 4496*				*Total Females 3164*				***7660***		
		Total Males Hired				*Total Females Hired*						
		n		*%*		*n*		*%*				
		380		*57.1*		*284*		*42.9*				

Note. One position left unfilled at time of data collection and not part of the outgoing-incoming coach gender change pair.

Table 3

Highest to Lowest Longitudinal Rate of Head Coach Turnover by Conference and Gender

	Coach Turnover					
	Total Coach Turnover	Women HC		Men HC	Conf Total^	Coach Turnover Rate Over Time
Conference	*N*	*n*	%- turnover rate	*n*	*N*	%
AAC*	74	35	**47.3**	39	759	9.8
Pac-12	117	45	**38.5**	72	1204	9.7
ACC	125	47	**37.6**	78	1349	9.3
Big 10	122	51	**41.8**	71	1453	8.4
Big 12	64	27	**42.1**	37	791	8.1
Big East	69	29	**42.0**	40	850	8.1
SEC	94	24	**25.5**	70	1254	7.5

Note. ^Conf total calculated by adding up total # of women's teams for each conference x eight years. Total Coach Turnover Rate= total coach turnover/Conf ^ Total

**AAC was added to sample during the 2014 - 2015 academic year, accounts for lower total*

Table 4

Highest to Lowest Longitudinal Rate of Head Coach Turnover by Sport and Gender

	Coach Turnover					
	Total Coach Turnover	Women HC		Men HC	Sport Total^	Coach Turnover Rate Over Time
Sport	*N*	*n*	%-rate turnover	*n*	*N*	%
Alpine Skiing	4	0	0.0	4	25	16.0
Water Polo	9	0	0.0	9	63	14.3
Beach Volley-ball	14	6	42.9	8	108	13.0
Nordic Skiing	2	1	50.0	1	16	12.5
Cross Country Run	83	20	24.1	63	679	12.2
Diving	53	6	11.3	47	459	11.5
Volleyball	68	25	36.8	43	664	10.2
Softball	54	36	66.7	18	562	9.6
Gymnastics	26	15	57.7	11	275	9.5
Basketball	63	38	60.3	25	678	9.3
Tennis	61	32	52.5	29	674	9.1

Table 4 , continued

Swimming	42	6	14.3	36	503	8.3
Ice Hockey	5	2	40.0	3	64	7.8
Rifle	5	3	60.0	2	64	7.8
Crew/Rowing	24	7	29.2	17	313	7.7
Track	47	7	14.9	40	659	7.1
Fencing	6	1	16.7	5	88	6.8
Soccer	44	7	15.9	37	665	6.6
Field Hockey	10	10	100.0	0	184	5.4
Golf	31	23	74.2	8	593	5.2
Lacrosse	11	11	100.0	0	230	4.8
Bowling	1	0	0.0	1	23	4.3
Equestrian	2	2	100.0	0	66	3.0
Squash	0	0	0.0	0	1	0.0
Triathlon	0	0	0.0	0	4	0.0

Note. ^Sport Total calculated by added up total # of women's teams for each sport x eight years

Analysis of Age

Descriptive statistics were run to determine the age of outgoing and incoming coaches.

Outgoing Coaches

At the time of data collection coach age could not be discerned for seven coaches and were excluded from the following analysis ($N = 658$). The mean age for all outgoing coaches was 47.5 with a range from 24-75 years old (Table 5). On average, women experienced employee turnover 5.3 years earlier and at a younger age ($M_{age} = 44.21, \pm 9.03$) than men ($M_{age} = 49.52, \pm 10.84$), which was statistically significant [$t(613.48) = -6.81, p < 0.001$].

Incoming Coaches

The mean age for all incoming coaches was 39.4 with a range from 23-70 years old (Table 5). On average, women were hired at a younger age ($M_{age} = 37.07, \pm 7.42$) than men ($M_{age} = 41.13, \pm 8.91$), which was statistically significant [$t(651.19) = -6.38$, $p < 0.001$]. The age of the youngest incoming female and male incoming coaches were the same (age = 23), while the age of the oldest incoming female (age = 60) varied from the oldest incoming male coach (age = 70).

Table 5

Longitudinal Mean Age Comparison by Gender of Outgoing and Incoming Head Coaches

	Female					Male					
	n	Min Age	Max Age	*M*	*SD*	*n*	Min Age	Max Age	*M*	*SD*	*t*
Outgoing	257	24	69	44.21	9.03	406	24	75	49.52	10.84	-6.81*
Incoming	284	23	60	37.07	7.42	375	23	70	41.13	8.91	-6.38*

Note. *$p < 0.001$

Employee Turnover by Gender Change Pair by Age

As noted earlier, over eight years a majority of incoming head coach hires were men.

Paired sample *t* tests were used to determine if significant differences were present between the average age of an outgoing coach and the incoming coach who replaced them by gender. Results revealed when outgoing female coaches were replaced by men (female-male gender change pair), the most infrequent occurrence, no significant difference between outgoing and incoming age existed (Table 6). In all

other gender change pairs (male-female, female-female, male-male) statistically significant age differences between outgoing and incoming coaches were observed. The largest age differential (~13 year difference) was evidenced when a younger female replaced an outgoing older male.

Table 6
Mean Age Comparisons by Coach Gender Change Pair

		Outgoing		Incoming			
Change Pair	*N*	M_{age}	SD_{age}	M_{age}	SD_{age}	$M_{difference}$	*t*
Male-Female	139	50.78	11.07	36.91	7.89	13.87	12.92*
Female-Female	145	44.35	9.12	37.23	6.96	7.12	9.04*
Male-Male	264	48.92	10.26	41.07	9.19	7.85	9.44*
Female-Male	109	44.08	8.75	41.24	8.33	2.84	2.60

Note. *$p < 0.001$

Institutional Attribution for Coach Turnover

To examine and discern patterns in the origin and institutional reasons provided for coach organizational turnover, reasons were coded and subsequently condensed into four themes: Retired, Institutional Decision (e.g., fired, contract not renewed), Coach Decision (coach left on their own accord, resigned, took another coaching job, left coaching), and Other (e.g., died, no reason could be found, team/coach suspended at time of data collection). The official institutional press release was used for the source of occupational turnover, rather than fan blogs, Op-eds, or newspaper articles to provide a consistent and credible informational source.

Overall, Coach Decision was the most common reason and accounted for nearly half of all coach turnover attributions (46.9%), followed by Institutional Decision (22%), and Retirement (14%) (Table 7). Comparatively, women evidenced a higher rate of Coach Decision (voluntary) and Institutional Decision (involuntary) reasons than men, and men retired at a higher rate than women. Chi-square analysis revealed it was more likely that women experienced occupational turnover due to their own decision or institutional decision [$\chi^2(3, N = 655) = 9.13$, $p = 0.03$] compared to men, although the association was only weakly associated (Cramer's $V = 0.12$). Interestingly retirement was given as the reason for organizational turnover for 93 coaches, yet when current occupational status at the time of data collection was obtained, only

76 remained retired. Therefore, some coaches (n = 17) either came out of retirement or didn't retire as the official press release stated.

Of the 146 coaches in this sample in which an Institutional Decision ended their tenure, a very small group (n = 7, 2 women, 5 men) were coaching the same level, conference status, and occupational role (i.e., NCAA D-I, Select 7 conferences, Head Coach). If fired, men were twice as likely to be employed at the same occupational level, status, and in the same role compared to women, although this was not a common occurrence (7 of 665, 1.1%) for any coaches in this sample who were fired.

Table 7
Longitudinal Distribution of Institutional Reason for Employee Turnover by Outgoing Coach Gender

	Women		Men		Total	
Position	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Retired	27	10.5	66	16.2	93	14.0
Institutional Decision	64	24.8	82	20.1	146	22.0
Coach Decision	131	50.8	181	44.5	312	46.9
Others	36	14.0	78	19.2	114	17.1

Current Occupational Status of Outgoing Coaches

Frequency distributions were conducted to determine the current occupational status of outgoing coaches, and how many were currently coaching and at what level and position as of January 2021. Occupational status of some (44, n = 16 women, 28 men) coaches could not be found; some had retired (76, n =18 women, 58 men), and two coaches (one male, one female) were deceased, and subsequently removed from analyses. The sample size used was (N = 543). For all coaches with a known occupational status, a majority (61.3%) were coaching at time of data collection at various competitive levels (Table 8). A gendered analysis revealed a larger percentage of men with a known occupational status (66.9%) were currently coaching compared to women (53.4%), and chi-square analysis revealed men were statistically more likely to be coaching than women [$\chi^2(1, N = 543) = 10.1, p = .001$].

Table 8
Current Occupational Status of Outgoing Head Coaches with Known Status by Gender

		Coaching		Not Coaching	
Coach Gender	*N*	*n*	%	*n*	%
Female	223	119	53.4	104	46.6
Male	320	214	66.9	106	33.1
TOTAL	*543*	*333*	*61.3*	*210*	*38.7*

Current Competitive Level of Coaching

For coaches with known occupational status (n = 333) who were coaching at time of data collection, a majority were men (64.3%), and a majority of all coaches, men and women, coached at the NCAA D-I level (71.2%) (Table 9). The remainder coached across levels from youth to professional. Based on the data, eight coaches had moved 'up' to coach at the national team level—the only competitive level where women coached at a higher percentage (1.5%) than men (0.9%).

Table 9
Outgoing Coaches Who Are Currently Coaching by Competitive Level and Gender

	Women		Men		Total	
Competitive Level	*n*	%	*n*	%	*N*	%
NCAA D-I	84	25.2	153	45.9	237	71.2
NCAA D-II	2	0.6	9	2.7	11	3.3
NCAA D-III	4	1.2	11	3.3	15	4.5
NAIA/JUCO	1	0.3	3	0.9	4	1.2
High School/Club/Youth	19	5.7	31	9.3	50	15.0
National Level	5	1.5	3	0.9	8	2.4
Professional/Semi Pro	4	1.2	4	1.2	8	2.4
Total Sample	***119***	***35.7***	***214***	***64.3***	***333***	***100***

Current Occupational Role and Level

Of those 333 coaches currently coaching across all competitive levels a majority (72.8%) were head coaches, and the remainder occupied associate, assistant, or volunteer coaching positions (See Table 10). Six were coaching as camp directors or listed as a generic 'coach' and were not included herein. Men outnumbered women at every position with the exception of associate head coach. Of those who continued to coach, a small percentage of all the original outgoing head coaches over eight years (96 of 665, 14.4%) remained head coaches at Select 7 institutions (Table 11). The rate at which men (9.3%) were currently employed as Select 7 head coaches was near double the rate compared to women (5.1%, $n = 34$) (Table 11). A small number ($n = 19$, 14 women, 5 men) of former head coaches transitioned into athletic administration, and 51 former coaches started their own business or sport camp (women = 24, 47.1%). While all the coaches in the sample started as head coaches of women's teams, after experiencing occupational turnover, over half of the men ($n = 36$) were coaching men either on men's teams or co-ed teams. No women ($n = 0$) were coaching on men's teams and very few ($n = 4$) were coaching co-ed teams (Table 12).

Table 10

Outgoing Coaches Currently Coaching at all Levels by Position and Gender

Position	Women		Men		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Head Coach	83	25.4	155	47.4	238	72.8
Associate Head Coach	13	4.0	10	3.1	23	7.0
Assistant Coach	17	5.2	38	11.6	55	16.8
Volunteer Coach	4	1.2	7	2.1	11	3.4
Total Sample	***117***	**35.8**	***210***	**64.2**	***327***	***100***

Table 11
Outgoing Coaches Currently Coaching by Role, Level and Gender

	Women		Men		*Total Number Coaching*	Total Turnover Sample	Percent Coaching	Percent Women Coaching	Percent Men Coaching
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	*N*	%	%	%
Current Coach	119	35.7	214	64.3	333	665	50.1	17.9	32.2
NCAA D-I Coach	84	35.4	153	64.6	237	665	35.6	12.6	23.0
Select 7 Coach	58	38.2	94	61.8	152	665	22.9	8.7	14.1
Select 7 Head Coach	34	35.4	62	64.6	96	665	14.4	5.1	9.3

Table 12
Outgoing Head Coaches Who Currently Hold Head Coaching Positions by Gender of Team by Head Coach Gender

		Female		Male		Male & Female	
Coach Gender	*N*	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Female	34	30	88.2	0	0.00	4	11.8
Male	62	26	41.9	14	22.6	22	35.5
Total Sample	96	56	58.3	14	14.6	26	27.1

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine and document employee turnover patterns of head coaches of NCAA D-I women's teams to determine if gendered patterns existed, emerged, or were prevalent over time. Employee turnover encompassed both organizational (still coaching, but at different institution/organization) and occupational (no longer coaching) turnover. The purpose did not include examination of the experiences of coaches' occupational turnover, multilevel barriers or supports that influence turnover, career ambitions or career intentions—data that is well documented elsewhere. The actual occupational trajectories of head coaches at the most elite and well-paid level of intercollegiate women's sport were examined. The research questions guided the study and results will be illuminated in comparison to existing literature in detail below.

Overall, compared to the average employee turnover rate in the United States which hovers around 44% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013-2021), head coaches of NCAA D-I institutions in Select 7 conferences have a *much lower average rate* (9%) of turnover by year and over time. This is perhaps both surprising and not surprising. Surprising because the employee turnover rate of sport coaches is significantly lower than other employee categories outside of the sport industry. It may not be surprising because these particular head coaching positions are some of the most well paid, resourced, visible, desirable, and powerful coaching positions in intercollegiate athletes, second only to head coaching positions on the men's side. Therefore, coaches who secure these coveted positions likely do not relinquish them unless they retire, leave for a more lucrative, prestigious, or desirable position, or their employment is terminated. The data indicates that a comparatively lower turnover rate means relatively lower employee turnover-related costs for athletic departments including program, recruiting, fundraising, attendance, and reputational continuity (Pierce et al., 2017; Ryan & Sagas, 2009). However, some athletic departments had above average turnover rates for all their coaches, and some particularly for women. For

example, at Houston women head coaches of women's teams comprised a small percentage (15%) of women but experienced occupational turnover at near double the rate (29%). Conversely, Oklahoma employed the most women over eight years (60%) yet observed zero women turnover. Inclusive and supportive workplaces are attractive to job seekers (Madera et al., 2018), and therefore organizational climate is a business imperative as well as crucial for recruiting new, and retaining existing, talent.

One of the greatest targets of opportunity to hire women is when men retire (LaVoi et al., 2019) and this data showed men are retiring but also illuminated that when men secure NCAA D-I Select 7 head coach position of women's teams, they are more likely to be older, be retained, choose to stay in coaching longer than women, and are therefore older when they retire. Existing data indicated that women coaches are younger and leave earlier than men (Cunningham & Sagas, 2003; Reade et al., 2009), and data in this study affirmed those findings—incoming and outgoing women head coaches were significantly younger than men. The low rate of occupational turnover in 2020-21 was not surprising given the volatile landscape of college sport due to COVID-19. Coaches were less likely to make career moves in an already uncertain job market, yet also more chose to retire in greater numbers than in past years.

Turnover rates did vary widely between sports, conferences, and institutions. It is imperative to examine employee turnover patterns by sport, institution, or conference over time.

For example, the University of Michigan can boast a low turnover rate compared to peer institutions. According to conventional wisdom, Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) and publicly available salary data, it is known Michigan pays coaches well. Do high wages lead to stability and retention in coaching staff composition? Or is it the culture of the institution that keeps coaches staid? Additional insight into support factors that retain coaches would add greatly to understanding the current landscape of collegiate athletics. If institutions want to recruit and retain the best coaches *and* have a coaching staff for women's teams that resembles same identity role models for the athletes they serve, ADs would do well to understand why coaches accept or refuse job offers at their institution, and why coaches stay or leave instead of turning to trite and persistent blame the women narratives (Acosta & Carpenter, 1988; Kane & LaVoi, 2018; LaVoi, 2016). As evidenced by the data, some schools have higher rates of turnover than the average in the sample, and in turn ADs have the opportunity to hire numerous head coaches for women's teams. Job seekers should pay attention to the data trends.

The data is clear, institutions that experienced employee turnover of outgoing coaches of either gender, hired a male coach a majority of the time over eight years. Indeed, men replaced men most frequently, but notably women replaced by women was the second most common outcome followed closely by men replaced by women. The least likely outcome was a man replacing a woman coach which provides a small indication that eventually the trend may become to hire a majority of women for head coach positions of women's teams. Until hiring practices and trends change,

the underrepresentation of women head coaches will persist. Although the least likely outcome was a woman being replaced by a man, that alone is not sufficient to move the needle upward in any significant way. On average, the percentage of women head coaches in Select 7 institutions increased at a rate of 0.3% per year. At that dismally slow rate, it will take ~25 years to reach 50% and 159 years to reach pre-Title IX levels (over 90%) of women head coaches of women's teams for intercollegiate sport (Boucher et al., 2021). Each male coach hired is a missed opportunity by an AD to help move the needle upward, unstick the stagnation, and improve the occupational landscape for current and future women coaches.

Age and Gendered Employee Turnover Trends

Significant differences were observed between the ages of outgoing and incoming coaches and between male and female coaches. The average age of incoming women was significantly lower than incoming men. The age gap was most disparate when an incoming woman replaced an outgoing man. Entering a high-level and visible head coach position—which entails great levels of scrutiny and surveillance—at a younger age implies a possibility of having accrued less experience that may set women up for failure. Conversely as stated previously, if an older male retires, ADs may capitalize on retirement as an opportunity to hire an up-and-coming younger woman. Additional research is needed to determine ADs' perceived barriers to hiring younger women for head coaching positions, and the supports young women need throughout career stages and development to succeed and stay in the game (LaVoi & Boucher, 2021). What is the age range where the greatest number of women leave the coaching pipeline and what reasons do women give as to their departure? This knowledge can in turn help provide support, and inform resource allocation as well as policy development. Additional research is warranted.

Women also experienced employee turnover at a significantly younger age than the men in the sample. Based on the data women head coaches are hired at a significantly younger age, arguably with less experience than older incoming male coaches. Given that women face more barriers and are afforded less support than male colleagues due to the gendered system of sport that privileges men (Kane, 2016), women may be at risk for failure, burnout, or other negative psychosocial outcomes which causes them to leave coaching at a much younger age. For example, Cunningham and colleagues (2019) argued that significant age differences between female and male coaches may be the result of macro-level barriers of advancement, versus micro-level organizational factors. Macro-level barriers include discriminatory laws, cultural norms, and systemic bias (Cunningham et al., 2019; Kane, 2016; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Another study documented that women of color held coaching positions for less time (3 years on average) and took one year longer to reach a head coaching position than their white male peers (Larsen & Clayton, 2019). Future research and interventions should target macro-level issues with an intersectional lens, to improve rates of hiring and retention of all women coaches. Much work remains.

The Coaching Carousel

One narrative we sought to confirm or dispel pertained to the notion that women who are fired are less likely to be rehired than their male counterparts. What we found was men *are* more likely to obtain coaching positions than women. The most striking finding was men were twice as likely to be employed at the same level and position than were women, and this was also true when men were fired.

Institutionally Sanctioned Reasons for Employee Turnover

The most common reason for employee head coach turnover in this sample, based on institutional press releases, was attributed to coach autonomy—meaning the coach left voluntarily, resigned, or took another job. What this data did not capture is 'the story behind the story'. Some coaches may be given the opportunity to resign, rather than be fired, therefore it is likely the prevalence of coach autonomous (voluntary) decision to leave was inflated by forced ultimatums. Data on employee turnover from the coach's perspective in needed. The average rate of involuntary dismissal across industries is about 25% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013-2021) and this sample was lower than that benchmark. Previous literature indicated a significant gender effect of coach turnover in that women had higher turnover intentions than men (Cunningham & Sagas, 2002; Cunningham et al., 2003; Cunningham & Sagas, 2007). The findings that women head coaches in this study voluntarily left at higher rates than men and several women transitioned into administrative roles or entrepreneurial ventures, raises further questions. Why are career pathways outside of coaching more appealing to some women? Why are women head coaches in lucrative positions choosing to leave for other careers? The answer to these questions holds practical wisdom for solving the stagnation and attrition problems for women coaches. More knowledge is needed to ascertain the factors behind the organizational cultures that retain women. Darvin (2020) found assistant female coaches voluntarily left for many interpersonal and occupational reasons but those reasons in this sample are unknown. Previous research documented the 'push-pull' of factors for coaches, such opportunity to earn a higher income (pull) or having school age children (push) as reasons behind voluntary separation (Wicker et al., 2018). In this study the reasons and factors behind voluntary separation were unknown. Future research is warranted.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study while longitudinal, is quantitative and descriptive, and results only allow for viewing associations and patterns, not making causal conclusions. Future research should expand and include qualitative studies to determine 1) employee turnover from the perspective of the coach, including ascertaining reasons for voluntary separation; 2) in-depth case study analysis of athletic department culture; 3) examination of factors for migration of coaches to a non-coaching job; and 4) inclusion of additional intersectional identity factors, such as race and sexual orientation, in combination with age and gender to more fully understand occupational

turnover and resultant employment patterns of marginalized groups. Higher rates of employee turnover may suggest or point to a potential toxic, undesirable, or unsuitable work environment or sport culture—for all coaches, but particularly women. Similarly, a low turnover rate may signal a stable, supportive, well paying, well led, positive work environment and institutional culture where qualified and successful coaches remain. Future case study research in the organizational cultures of low- and high-rate turnover institutions is warranted as adding the perspective of coaches who stay at or leave an institution would provide additional insights.

Lastly, although some statistics regarding age variables were observed, the method of collecting age had limitations. For example, for coaches who had no record of their undergraduate degree or graduation date, their age variables could not be collected. Second, it is possible a coach who had a graduation date listed had attended that institution at a younger or older age. Future research examining age should utilize a more accurate method such as contacting coaches for their year of birth.

Conclusion

The goal of the current study was to add to existing literature pertaining to employee turnover of sport coaches through examination of longitudinal data of head coaches of women's teams in select NCAA Division-I conferences. Athletic departments and policy makers should use these insights to improve their coach hiring and retention practices.

The current study is the first of its kind, providing longitudinal data to help prove or dispel common narratives about women coaches and illuminate patterns of gender and discrimination. The average rate of head coach turnover of NCAA Division I Select 7 women's sport teams is lower than the average rate of employee turnover in the United States. Although encouraging for the entire coaching profession, discriminatory turnover patterns appear to be prevalent. Men in this sample were twice as likely as women to be coaching, regardless of the institutional reason for their departure. When men are fired, they have a greater likelihood to be rehired, especially at the same level and in the same role. Men are also afforded twice the opportunity, as they can in turn coach men, coed teams, or women, while women are excluded from coaching men. However true, these data reflect a small percentage of turnover occurrences in the dataset. Overall the data tell the story that very few coaches regardless of gender, who leave an NCAA D-I head coaching position for any reason, make a lateral move to a similar position. Data indicate that women are not more or less likely to be fired or rehired than their male counterparts. Although we found few instances of male coaches moving over to the men's teams, men currently and historically have had twice the opportunity to land a new coaching position, as they are considered for both men and women's coaching positions, while women are not provided those opportunities. Very few men and women exit and subsequently reenter the coaching carousel at this level of intercollegiate athletics, which provides one data point to counter the narrative that women are less likely to be rehired.

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"The Centerpiece of College Athletics:" Prioritizing Education in the College Sports Reform Movement

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This article, which is based upon long-term fieldwork observations of a revenue-generating National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I women's college basketball team, proposes concrete and specific reforms that would more sufficiently compensate the professional role revenue-generating college athletes perform, without sacrificing the educational connection that is vital to the core of college sports for all male and female athletes, regardless of revenue-generation. It argues that colleges involved in revenue-generating college sports should expect college athletes to be students first, encourage them to earn pay for their names, images, and likenesses (NILs), and strike a better balance between providing education to athletes and entertainment to the public. Specific reforms include raising eligibility requirements, giving athletes more time and financial assistance to finish their degrees, and tying coaching pay to graduation rates, all of which would support the notion that universities treat athletes ethically.

Keywords: college sports, pay-for-play, NILs, education, reform

"I think everyone is a teacher. Everyone!"
- John Wooden (Quoted in Gallimore & Tharp, 2004, p. 119)

The current economic model of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (hereafter, D-I) intercollegiate sports (hereafter, "college sports") creates a great entertainment product, but it does not sufficiently allow for positive educational experiences for many college athletes in revenue-generating sports such as basketball and football, either because education is not prioritized institutionally, and/or because the broader culture encourages and incentivizes athletes to focus on their athletic pursuits (Sack, 2009b; Lanter & Hawkins, 2013). This is ultimately a matter of institutional integrity; we need to put the "college" back into college sports, and the way we do so will speak volumes to future generations of athletes and students.

In 2017, Gurney, Lopiano, and Zimbalist argued that there are two paths to college sports reform – either marketize college sports or improve the education (Gurney et al., 2017) – but I and others (e.g., Meyer & Zimbalist, 2020) believe that both can be accomplished, and that both must be accomplished to operate both men's and women's sports ethically.

However, the way that college sports are to be "marketized" should be done carefully, so that athletes can share in the profits of this billion-dollar entertainment industry, but also so that college sports can remain a viable means of higher education for those who wish to prioritize their own identity as a student (Those who do not wish to be students now have more options than even just ten years ago, such as playing for the Professional Collegiate League (PCL), https://thepcleague.com.). Setting up a hybrid model, which would allow each college to have a certain number of players be non-matriculated "pros" who receive salary in explicit exchange for their athletic services (Zimbalist, 2001), does not seem fair. Moreover, other piecemeal reforms, such as limiting the numbers of scholarships available to college football players, which often have roster sizes that are double (53 for National Football League (NFL) teams, up to 125 for college) that of NFL teams, or by the NCAA taking control of basketball summer camps (Zimbalist, 2001), or by shortening the length of the season and the number of hours coaches can contact athletes, would not go far enough to ensure that education is improved for all athletes.

Based on long-term fieldwork observations of a NCAA D-I women's college basketball team, which is part of an elite academic institution (defined to be "elite" as having a top ten ranking in the latest *US News & World Report*), and based on broader observations of the big-time college sports landscape (Miller, in press), I believe that the distinction between athletes whose universities provide them with a high-quality education, and those who do not, is just as important as the distinction between "revenue-generating sports" and "non-revenue generating sports", and that for so-called "big-time" – that is, profitable, professionalized, and pressurized (generally, Power 5 schools) – intercollegiate sports to operate in an ethical manner, more universities need to strive to provide a high-quality education to all athletes, which includes the provision of education regarding how to profit from their "names, images, and likenesses" (NILs).

One might argue that any reforms undertaken at the NCAA or college level should ensure compensation to athletes is proportional to the services rendered to the university, both real and symbolic, and that these payments must come directly from university coffers. Big-time athletes are, by this argument, underpaid laborers on the court and field, and that for this problem to be redressed, the beneficiary of their sweat – universities, primarily – must pay. After all, athletes' NILs are also used by universities officially in billboards and advertisements, and as such these athletes should be compensated properly.

But *college* sports cease to have *raison d'etre* if athletes are paid salaries directly by universities, as professional athletes would be, so pay should be limited to "freeing" athletes to profit from their own NILs. The NCAA itself recognized this in late June 2021, when its Board of Governors officially suspended its rules forbidding athletes

from selling their NILs (Murphy, 2021). Colleges are not NCAA franchises; they are NCAA *member schools*, with the operative term being "schools", so this NCAA change, while historic and important, does not indicate the end of the reform road. Now, NCAA member schools should focus their efforts on re-centering education as college sports' main priority and providing athletes with education that includes NIL courses so that they can maximize their profits during college.

Many scholars and high-profile institutions have encouraged education-focused reforms, and from their work, we can see that the universities' core business is and should be education, not sports entertainment (see e.g., Gerdy 1997, Staurowsky & Ridpath, 2005). Contrary to what some would say, education *is* as important as access to pay, because it provides an opportunity for personal growth for *all* athletes, regardless of background, gender, social class, race, talent, or ability. In 2018, the Commission on Collegiate Basketball, which was led by Condoleezza Rice, concluded that, "the answer to many of college basketball's problems can be found in a renewed commitment to the college degree as the centerpiece of intercollegiate athletics" (Commission on College Basketball, 2018, p. 2). The Commission concluded this because they believed intercollegiate athletics was based on "trust" and the "promise" that "athletes play for their schools and receive a realistic chance to complete a college degree in return," adding that "any policy or action that violates that trust" would be "morally wrong" (Commission on College Basketball, 2018, p. 2).

I am persuaded by such a moral position, since the business of college sport involves human beings and their bodies to whom respect and ethical treatment should be assured. I also believe that the best way to assure such respect and treatment is to prioritize education and make concrete reforms that would cement that prioritization. As such, this article suggests a comprehensive solution that reforms college sports in a way that provides more to those who create college sports entertainment, but *also* encourages the provision of a better educational offering to those who choose to go to college to play sports *and* get an education, which is to say, many if not perhaps even most college athletes. We *can* more sufficiently compensate the professional role big-time college athletes perform, all *without* sacrificing the educational connection that is vital to the core of *college* sports. Even if reclaiming college sports *for* higher education may not be an easy project, I believe it is a necessary one.

This article therefore offers concrete and specific suggestions for how these tasks may be accomplished, based on my own observations and on the latest and best reform proposals made by reformers, scholars, and journalists. It argues that we "free" all athletes *with their education in mind*, strike a better balance between academics and athletics, detail coaching "deliverables", raise eligibility and academic standards, give athletes more time and financial assistance to finish their degrees, certify and give academic credit for sports training and sports study, give awards to institutions and individuals that take their duty to educate seriously, and tie coaching pay to graduation rates. In other words, to "stand up for academic principles in the face of commercial temptations" (Clotfelter, 2019, p. 310), and take steps to make the college degree the "centerpiece of college athletics" (Commission on College Basketball, 2018, p. 2).

Free The Athletes (With Their Education in Mind)

The year 2020 was one to remember, in college sports and out. History may recall it as a curiosity that the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests happened in the same year, but both are linked in significant ways. Just like the virus itself, colleges and universities that operate revenue-generating basketball and football teams disproportionately exploit and sometimes devastate black lives, since the college athlete work force in these sports is made up of many young people of color. COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, disproportionately impacts communities of color, too, since health care in America tracks alongside socio-economic status, and American Blacks earn only a fraction of what whites earn.

The last few years have provided landmark moments in the fight for gender equity, too. One example was during the 2021 March Madness basketball tournament, in which images of subpar training facilities for women's basketball teams emerged on social media, highlighting how female athletes remain underserved (Manza Young, 2021a). The NCAA's unequal treatment of these players reminded us that sports are a "male preserve" and that women athletes are often cast aside or overlooked not only by the sports media but also by the very organizations who insist that they are giving them opportunity (Cooky et al., 2013).

These intersecting pandemics – racism, sexism, coronavirus – have shown college athletes that they can be activists for their own causes, and that they have latent power that they can leverage to contribute to the reform movement. Indeed, one might argue that it was the athletes themselves, by standing up for themselves in 2020 and 2021, who were instrumental in swaying public opinion enough to convince the Supreme Court to rule in their favor in *NCAA v. Alston* and to convince the NCAA to strike down its own NIL restrictions.

That said, the primary reform on many college athlete's minds has long been pay-for-play, and even with these historic moments, it remains so. Various groups and individuals, such as Jeremy Bloom (Freedman, 2002), Jason White (Nocera & Strauss, 2016), Ed O'Bannon (see, e.g., Bishop, 2013; Eder, 2013; Eder & Bishop, 2013; Nocera & Strauss, 2016), Ellen Staurowsky and Ramogi Huma (see e.g., Staurowsky & the National College Players' Association (NCPA), 2012), Shawne Alston, Nick Kindler, D.J. Stephens, Afure Jemerigbe (Hagens Berman Law Firm, 2017), Martin Jenkins (Berkowitz, 2018; Farrey 2014; Tracy 2019), Allen Sack (Sack 2009a, 2009b), Andy Schwarz, Nancy Skinner, Steven Bradford, and Jay Bilas (Nocera & Strauss, 2016,; Schlabach, 2013) have fought for better athlete pay for years, in the courts of law and public opinion.

Progress has been made, most recently due to public calls that athletes be able to access the free market to sell themselves as spokespersons or sign endorsement deals (i.e., to control their NILs, Byers & Hammer, 1997). In 2019, a bill called the "Fair Pay to Play Act" (SB 206) passed the State Assembly of California. The FPPA, which was passed unanimously, would, starting in 2023, effectively forbid California colleges and universities from controlling the NIL of college athletes.

Some universities lobbied against the bill, but California Governor Gavin Newsom signed it into law (As of 2020, 36 states had passed legislation like California's). The NCAA responded to the FPPA by arguing in a letter to Governor Newsom that "the bill would wipe out the distinction between college and professional athletics and eliminate the element of fairness that supports all of college sports" (NCAA, 2019). It was a spurious argument, though, which rested on the false assumption that college sports at the big-time level are already "fair", which they are not. Although the NCAA has portrayed itself as the guardian of a "level playing field", competition between revenue-generating college sports programs is far from fair, since budgets, coaching staffs, and equipment/facilities vary widely.

Eventually, though, the NCAA Board of Governors determined in June 2021 that athletes could make money by teaching sports camps, monetizing their social media accounts, signing autographs, participating in advertising campaigns, and signing with agents to find endorsement deals (Murphy, 2021). The June 2021 NCAA vote on NILs marked a watershed, but one might argue that they wanted to take control of the issue before more Americans began to call for athletes to be paid directly by universities. Opinion polls regarding pay-for-play proposals are convoluted, sometimes because the issue of athletes earning from their NIL is often conflated with the issue of colleges paying athletes directly. While a 2017 *Washington Post*-UMASS Amherst poll found that while 52% of Americans believe an athletic scholarship is enough to compensate athletes for their services to the university, 60% said they believed college athletes should be paid "based on revenue they generate" (Among African Americans, the percentage was even higher (54%), while among whites (32%) and Hispanics (41%) it was lower.) On the issue of NIL, the response was higher, with 66% of Americans saying that, "college athletes should be paid when their name or image is used in video games or to sell merchandise" (Hobson & Guskin, 2017). By contrast, in 2020 Knoester and Ridpath found that the "majority of U.S. adults now support, rather than oppose, allowing college athletes to be paid" (Knoester & Ridpath, 2020, p. 2).

Some universities already do pay players, at least if one considers the receipt of "grant-in-aid" funds to be a form of "pay". There is also a lucrative black market for the best athletes, despite NCAA restrictions that have forbid such transactions. As a result, receiving monetary reward for one's athletic abilities has become a quasi-criminal act (I say "quasi" because the NCAA does not have legal authority).

For some college athletes, what is already given is perceived as a good deal (Danley 2009). However, it is open for debate whether the amount universities pay is currently enough, since "enough" depends on a variety of factors, such as personal background, race, class, and quality of education provided. Recruited athletes receive a uniform "grant-in-aid" that is essentially a stipend capped by the members of the NCAA, which is not available to non-athletes and is "awarded without regard to the financial need or the academic attainment of the recipient" (Byers & Hammer, 2017, p. 373). How much this "award" is worth exactly depends on the institution granting it, since tuition, room, and board range widely across the country. In 2018, the Commission on Collegiate Basketball concluded that athletic scholarships were

worth between "$13,392 to $71,585 for in-state students and from $18,125-$71,585 for out-of-state students, depending on the institution" (Commission on College Basketball, 2018, p. 7). Many athletes receive ancillary benefits on top of that, some of which can be worth many more thousands of dollars.

Since 2012, some NCAA athletes have received more compensation than their predecessors, too. In 2012, the NCAA drafted a reform package that included a proposal to give NCAA athletes $2,000 stipends for more financial leeway, and by 2015, that proposal had been implemented, with athletes in some sports and at some schools receiving stipends ranging from $2,000 to $7,000 (Berkowitz & Kreighbaum, 2015).These stipends are based on a financial aid analysis that is applicable to all students at the institution.

What remains, then, is not the question of *whether* athletes are paid by universities, but *who* controls those payments, *how* much they will be, and *where* the additional money will come from. Paying players beyond what they already earn will likely be achieved by encouraging them to sell their NILs, especially if universities actively educate them on how to do so. Certainly, there is a good case to be made, as Huma and Staurowsky (2020) have done, that certain college athletes are deserving of much more direct pay than they currently are, pay that would (or perhaps should) come directly from universities. In their 2020 study, Huma and Staurowsky conclude that the average fair market value of a Football Bowl Subdivision football player was $208,208 in 2018-19, which amounts to $832,832 over a four-year span. For basketball players, the figures were higher - $370,085 for one year, and $1,480,340 for four (Huma and Staurowsky 2020, pp. 2-3). These figures may be even higher for football and basketball players in some of the highest revenue conferences.

Huma and Staurowsky (2020) base these estimates on the revenue that these athletes generate for their NCAA member schools, so there is good reason to believe that they deserve a bigger piece of this pie. Moreover, if "pay-for-play" came directly from university coffers, there would be less need for the NCAA's enforcement apparatus, which currently monitors and polices athletes' reception of "impermissible benefits." There are over 400 pages of NCAA rules, (Bishop, 2013), and eliminating some of this enforcement apparatus would free up more money to pay players, and likely diminish much of the tension between the NCAA, its member universities, and athletes. What we might call "direct pay-for-play" would also likely limit the pay gap – and the power gap – between those who "play" for universities and those who coach them. College coaches can earn huge sums of money, and money is power, so they often have leverage not only over their players but also over the university, which does not want to fire an expensive employee and must pay their salary as well as that of their replacement. Sometimes, highly paid coaches have also abused their power over players, but some of that abuse may end if players earned salaries closer to those of the coaches. If athletic labor were to be more sufficiently paid, then the relative power imbalance between coaches and athletes that currently exists might to some degree be mitigated.

Yet there are many potential problems that might arise from "direct pay-for-play", which are important to consider when answering the question of how players

will be paid. First, direct pay-for-play might make some colleges bankrupt, at least if we are to believe the veracity of college's self-reported financial statements (Zimbalist, 2009). Title IX also plays a role, as Buzuvis explains, since "paying athletes in revenue sports, coupled with the commensurate obligation under Title IX to pay female athletes, would be prohibitively expensive" (Buzuvis, 2015, p. 297.) Next, colleges insist that if they pay players, the NCAA and universities might lose their tax exemptions as not-for-profit educational organizations. Would direct pay-for-play put colleges in "business unrelated to education," which would then eliminate colleges' entitlement to a tax break (Edelman 2017)? After all, why should colleges be exempt from paying taxes as any other profitable business would? Finally, some see paying players directly from university coffers as a "slippery slope." In 2011, Zimbalist argued that "monetizing relationships" at the university might lead to salaries for the best actor in theatrical productions or violinist in the school orchestra, and "allocating course enrollments slots" for the most popular professors "to those students who bid the highest" (Zimbalist, 2011). In later work, Zimbalist (with Meyer) called for Congress to give the NCAA a limited antitrust exemption but stopped short of demanding that colleges and universities pay players directly (Meyer & Zimbalist, 2020).

It is easy to see how freeing college athletes to profit from their NILs will allow the most popular athletes to benefit in the free market, but it will also allow all athletes to capitalize on their unique abilities. There was never good reason why athletes should not be allowed to use their own NIL, so it is good news that the NCAA finally universally agreed without the aid of judicial decisions to "free the athletes". NILs are athletes' own property to begin with, and there should never have been anything in a NCAA contract that, in the words of economist Andy Schwarz, "abrogates" those rights (quoted in Aspen Institute, 2018). However, perhaps given its enduring reluctance to free athletes, the NCAA is not the best organization to oversee transactions involving NILs, and that a new "honest broker" is required (The Drake Group, 2020), but if the NCAA remains the organization of administrative record, it should encourage athletes to self-report the selling of their NIL, for transparency purposes. Otherwise, there should be "no involvement of institutional representatives and other controls" (Lopiano et al., 2017). Even as the legal prospect of such a solution remains unclear, "freeing the athletes" fully is the ethical thing to do.

However, why not free athletes to access the free market *and* improve their education at the same time, thereby re-centering the importance of education in this ecosystem? We can tie together these reforms, too, by requiring their NIL earnings to be locked in a trust fund that they can access only after graduation (waivers can be filed and exceptions can be made where necessary) (Drexel Now, 2011; McKechnie, 2013). This would, theoretically, improve graduation rates. Given that in the long run "a college diploma is substantially *more valuable* than any pay [he] might receive," (Easterbrook, 2013*,* p. 138) and by some estimates a diploma "adds $1 million to the average person's lifetime earnings" (Easterbrook, 2013*,* p. 141), this is the right

move. Some young athletes today may not realize or appreciate how valuable a college degree can be. Why not reform the system in a way that more effectively incentivizes behavior that is in athletes' best long-term interest, and in the interest of the society to which they will inevitably join? Isn't this the best way to do that to free athletes with their education in mind? After all, the last thing anyone wants is a battered former college athlete, discarded by their school after their NCAA eligibility is gone, without a degree.

Free Female Athletes, Too

Lurking in many reform proposals is the sexist idea that one *only* need to consider male athletes when addressing the question of pay-for-play. This sexism is based upon the mistaken premise that "women do not play big-time sports", but this is not always the case. In 2011, for example, Nocera proposed paying male college athletes but suggested that women's sports such as basketball did not "occupy a [sufficiently] different role on campus" like football and men's basketball, and therefore did not "deserve" to be paid. He added, "If the time comes when women's basketball is as commercialized and profit-driven as men's basketball, then yes, the women should be paid as well. But we're a long way from that point" (Nocera, 2011, p. 30). However, Nocera's makes a questionable assumption here. Such a distinction may be true on some American campuses (e.g., where women's basketball is not relatively popular), but there are plenty of examples to the contrary (e.g., the University of Connecticut, Tennessee). If big-time male athletes *deserve* to be paid, then why shouldn't big-time women also *deserve* to be paid? Furthermore, social media feeds are now incredibly lucrative, especially for female athletes, and these athletes have every right to be paid just as male athletes do. Eight of 10 the most followed college athletes on social media are women, raising the prospect that these athletes can profitably monetize their NILs (Manza Young, 2021b). Meyer and Zimbalist note that women athletes often have fewer professional opportunities than that of male athletes, so college is a crucial time for them to maximize their time in the public spotlight and earn money while they can (Meyer & Zimbalist, 2020). Some female athletes have already cashed in on their NILs, endorsing products and earning tens of thousands of dollars (Karpen, 2021).

Unfortunately, the courts have largely sidestepped this question of whether colleges need to pay athletes for the use of their NILs directly, and whether Title IX plays any role. In March 2019, Judge Claudia Wilken ruled in *NCAA v. Alston* that the NCAA was in violation of the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act and that they had to eliminate their caps on the value of "grants-in-aid" and allow member schools and their conferences to determine the value of the scholarship they offer athletes (Murphy, 2019). The ruling was upheld on appeal in 2020 Effectively, this meant that, "schools . . . will be able to compete [with each other] by offering athletic scholarships of higher value" (McCann, 2019), although Wilken limited her ruling to include costs related to education (e.g., books, computer purchases). The Supreme

Court ruled on *Alston* in June 2021, deciding that the NCAA can no longer in the name of "amateurism" prohibit schools from providing athletes with educational benefits such as laptops or paid internships. (NCAA v. Alston et al., 2021).

However, *Alston* fails to remedy the question of whether big-time male and female athletes *should* receive the same or a similar amount in pay, and whether it would be a violation of Title IX if they were not. The NCAA wanted the Supreme Court to determine if Wilken's decision in *Alston* "blurs the line between student-athlete and professional" (Remy, 2020), but that line was blurred long ago, as the Supreme Court's ruling in *Alston* attests.

The remaining urgent issue is whether NCAA member schools must pay athletes directly, and if they were to do so, whether Title IX would apply. It seems clear that this law would apply (Meyer & Zimbalist, 2020), but universities could skirt it by stopping short of paying players directly for their NIL, and instead encouraging them to capitalize on their NILs.

Strike a Better Balance Between Academics and Athletics

Many scholars have emphasized the need to improve the education of college athletes (see e.g., Gerdy, 1997; Ridpath, 2008). In court filings, the NCAA also maintains that its "basic purpose" is to "maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body and, by so doing, retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports" (*NCAA v. Alston,* p. 6). The NCAA has implemented branding campaigns that suggests that it provided "opportunity" to young athletes (alongside "wellbeing" and "fairness"), and that it "celebrates college athletes".

Still, given the enormous sums that these NCAA member schools earn off their athletic efforts, more must be done to prove that the education of big-time athletes is a true priority, and that these advertisements are more than obfuscatory rhetoric. At some big-time programs, neither athletes nor university officials are particularly concerned about education; rather, it is *eligibility* that is prioritized. To simply revolutionize the system by allowing athletes to monetize their NILs, while also overlooking the educational element of the enterprise, would amount to a shortsighted solution, not to mention ignoring research that proves that sports participation has various educational benefits. By making the educational exchange between university and athlete more explicit, more athletes will see how this exchange can be beneficial to them in the long run.

Detail "Coaching Deliverables"

Here is what universities can do to prioritize education. For starters, be more explicit about the educational role college sports play and hire and fire coaches based on *educational criteria*. As Meyer and Zimbalist (2020) argue:

> The answer to the bloated spending [e.g., on college sports coaches' salaries] is not to pay the athletes a salary; it is to cap coaches' and administrators' salaries, limit the expenditures on lavish facilities used for a single sport, and reinforce the educational mission of the school" (p. 262)

Setting these conditions would require an antitrust exemption. Similarly, universities can craft detailed statements about coaching "deliverables", and hold coaches to them. They can also make detailed statements about what athletes can reasonably expect from their coach/educators on and off the court, and what will be expected of them in return.

Raise Eligibility Requirements

Next, universities could unilaterally end special admissions consideration for exceptional athletes (who do not make the grade). Currently, many colleges tweak academic and admissions policies, creating "special admit" status, even at academically rigorous schools that field athletically talented teams. If a student has not made the proper academic preparations for college, the student may disrupt peer learning, or disrupt a professor's lesson plans, who might otherwise teach a higher-level subject matter. Admitting academically underprepared students can thus have a deleterious impact on the overall learning environment, and that may lower the quality of education a particular university provides to all students. The athletes themselves may also become disillusioned in a difficult classroom and give up on their education, wrongfully concluding that it is "their fault". Gurney therefore calls special admissions processes for athletes' college sports' "original sin" (quoted in Lens 2021, p. 199). These are hardly the outcomes anyone wants. This may not be an easy step to take, but it is a step available to universities hoping to create a more positive educational culture. It would be much easier for individual universities to enact if a regional or national association of universities did so together. Some conferences, including the Ivy League, Patriot League, and the New England Small College League, have historically imposed higher admission standards and GPA requirements on their student-athletes (Easterbrook, 2013). Some individual colleges, including Stanford, Boston College, Duke, and Notre Dame, insist that they keep their own academic standards higher than other colleges (Easterbrook, 2013). Yet few other institutions of higher education have raised academic standards beyond what the NCAA requires.

In 2005, Staurowsky and Ridpath argued for the adoption of a 2.0 minimum GPA to create the "potential to empower athletes to place their educational interests above their athletic interests" (Staurowsky & Ridpath, 2015, p. 118). The NCAA has since adopted a 2.3 minimum GPA in core high school courses to ensure D-I eligibility. However, the GPA standard could be even higher, given that the 2.3 GPA standard represents a C average, which hardly seems to represent the kind of "excellence" colleges say that they expect of student-athletes.

Raising the GPA alone, though, would not be enough, and it could lead to other problems such as academic fraud. Therefore, The Drake Group (Gurney et al., 2015) has suggested that low-performing high school students who are recruited to play

college sports be deemed ineligible from athletic participation in their freshman year if they are "more than one standard deviation below the mean academic profile (based on high school grade-point averages and standardized test scores) of the previous year's incoming class at the recruiting institution" (p. 5). Moreover, the Drake Group suggests that

> … the institution that admits the athlete must provide: (1) athletic scholarship assistance during the year of transition; (2) academic skills and learning disability testing; (3) if necessary, a remediation program supervised by academic authorities; (4) a reduced for-credit course load to accommodate the time required for remediation; (5) a 10 hour per week participation restriction applicable to athletics-related activities (practice, meetings, etc.); and (6) tenured faculty oversight of the student's academic progress throughout his or her enrollment at the institution. (Gurney et al., 2015, p. 5).

Gerald Gurney of the University of Oklahoma started the nation's first athletic study center, having grown concerned as he saw his university do somersaults to get underprepared athletes eligible to play, even as it seemed to care little about whether they received a good education. While in 1982 there were only 24 athletic tutoring programs nationwide (Zimbalist, 2001), now every D-I university must have one. A national association of athletic academic advisors exists to share best practices, too. Thus, additional education resources abound at most schools, with some providing big-time athletes with extra instruction, including remedial instruction, but athletes are often disincentivized by the institution, faculty, coaches, and peers from focusing on schoolwork. If the GPA required to be eligible were raised, and academically low-performing high school athletes remediated, these incentives would likely change.

Raise Academic Standards for All Athletes and All Students

The chance to be challenged at an academically rigorous institution is beneficial for anyone who in high school may not have been challenged to reach their cognitive potential, for those who are "late bloomers," or for those may have come from a disadvantaged background where the K-12 schools are not high quality. In that sense, our society may be better off when universities "take risks" on athletes who may not demonstrate academic achievement before college but show academic *potential*.

Yet there is still the lingering sense that while populations underserved at the K-12 level should be given an equal opportunity to gain admission to universities, giving those opportunities *primarily* to athletes from such backgrounds sends a dubious message: that it is balls and not books that should be the focus of a youth's free time. It is also arguably indefensible, since if the goal is to offer opportunity to those historically underserved, why should an athlete rather than a stellar student receive that scholarship?

In the end, this is not the best course for any nation to take, and therefore not the message universities should be sending with their prioritization of athletic entertainment over education. Democracy dies in darkness and focusing on sports to the detriment of academic pursuits can lead to an underinformed/undereducated voting populace.

That is why I believe that receiving an athletic scholarship should be considered a privilege that is *earned through one's studies and through one's athletic accomplishments*, not something granted to talented athletes who care little about school but are stellar at sports. Some worry that if we raise academic standards for all athletes, we might be excluding students who might not have otherwise made it to college. For example, an athletic department official at a private elite institution told me in 2013:

> Let's [say that we] make [the GPA standard for eligibility] a 3.3, which would be a huge jump from where it's at now. Are we then excluding, and I think you would, people who, for no fault of their own, were born into a[n education] system where they just didn't have the opportunity? Is that right? I don't know how to answer that. I don't know how to start to put more value on academics, or if we should. If you're phenomenal at football . . . maybe it's not for me to say? . . . When you try to institutionally and across an entire policy mandate something, you're always going to have an outlier or a group of outliers that were negatively impacted (personal communication, January 11, 2013).

This official then went on to add:

> Somehow this country has got to back our educational system a little bit more than they are . . . I don't know the way to do that . . . The private schools have cropped up and that allows this more privileged group to get the education they deserve. That's crap, now we're just rich is getting richer, poor is getting poorer, how do we systematically across the board start to value education?

Obviously, this official's comments illustrate that college sports reform is only part of the solution to this systemic societal problem, but the time is ripe for reform, and so it should be seized. In the long run, a failure to keep a high academic standard *for all* only ensures that big-time athletics will continue to have a tenuous connection to the core values of higher education, and that the misguided priority structure will invariably trickle down to lower levels of education and incentivize young people to choose sports over school, when what we should want is a better balance between the two.

Give Athletes More Time and Financial Assistance to Finish Their Degree

If athletes are underprepared for college schoolwork, they may take more time to graduate. Some studies have suggested that graduation rates for big-time athletes are lower than the average student (Southall, 2012a; Southall, 2012b). So, in 2012, members of NCAA D-I agreed to award multiyear scholarships (Sack et al., 2014). Previously, athletes were only given one-year scholarships subject to renewal each year. In 2015, the Power 5 conferences instituted measures to make it less likely that athletes would have their athletic scholarships revoked "for athletic reasons," but the measures did not cover all NCAA schools. While these are steps in the right direction, no student who is recruited for sports should lose their scholarship if they are injured, does not get along with the coach, or decides that academics are more important than sports and chooses to quit the team. In 2018, the Commission on

Collegiate Basketball therefore recommended that big-time colleges pay "for the degree completion of student-athletes with athletic scholarships who leave member institutions after progress of at least two years towards a degree" in order to "to restore credibility to the phrase student-athlete" (Commission on College Basketball, 2018, p. 7).

Some scholars have called for guaranteed, good-for-life scholarships for big-time athletes (e.g., Jackson, 2018), but the Commission's recommendation seems more sensible, especially given the financial struggles academic departments at many universities now face. If athletes are to have lifetime scholarships, payment for their studies ought to be transferred from the athletic department to the academic department at the time of granting the scholarship, so as to prevent academic budget shortfalls.

Give Athletes Freedom to Transfer, Without Restriction

Athletes should also be able to transfer to a new school without restriction, because education rather than competitive imbalance between sports programs should be the ultimate priority. If an athlete believes he/she will be better educated elsewhere, then so be it.

For too long, the NCAA required that athletes in big-time sports sit out a year before they could play again. As recently as 2019, the NCAA stated on its website that D-I athletes could only play for a new school if the athlete was transferring out of D-I into D-II or D-III, or if the athlete was "transferring to a Division I school in any sport other than baseball, men's or women's basketball, football (Football Bowl Subdivision) or men's ice hockey" (NCAA, n.d.). However, this language clearly prioritized the maintenance of competitive balance between sports programs in certain revenue producing sports, and controlling the "assets" of college athletic bodies, rather than the education of each individual athlete.

The NCAA rules further stated, "If you are transferring to a D-I school for any of the previously-listed sports, you may be eligible to compete immediately if you were not recruited by your original school and you have never received an athletics scholarship" (i.e., if you were a "walk-on" rather than an official "recruit") (NCAA, 2015). But what difference should it make? Why did the sport one plays have any impact on one's freedom to choose where to attend college and play sports? The rule was used to ensure that talented players did not transfer to rival schools, but the players should have the right to play for whatever team they want, whenever they want. If in Olympic sports, athletes can use a one-time waiver, why not in other sports?

In April 2018, the NCAA temporarily loosened the restrictions on D-I athletes' transfers, though in June 2019 it tightened these rules. As the Drake Group noted in a press release at the time, the waiver request must now have "documented extenuating, extraordinary and mitigating circumstances outside of the athlete's control that directly impacts the health, safety, or well-being of the student-athlete" to be approved(Lopiano, et al, 2018). The 2020 global pandemic was certainly an "extraordinary" circumstance, and so many athletes have been able to transfer as a result.

The rigid language regarding "transfer terms" points to the NCAA's prioritization of entertainment rather than education. As McCullough explains, "This transfer rule is essentially a noncompete clause like a company uses to keep an employee from hopping to a competitor . . . the NCAA wants to treat its most valued athletes as employees only when it suits the schools' agenda" (McCullough, 2019). These rules fuel the narrative that the NCAA is not acting in the best interest of the athletes, but rather in the interests of the institutions that it represents (As of early October 2020, there were reports that suggested that the NCAA would vote to institute a one-time transfer exception for all athletes in all sports; Auerbach, 2020).

Certify And Give Academic Credit for Sports Training

Another way to send the right educational message would be to certify football, basketball, and other big-time sports as *academically* valuable subjects of study, and then develop relevant curriculum to properly credit students' efforts in studying them. As Kretchmar argues, "we can be involved in acts on the dance floor and in the gymnasium that are just as insightful and brilliant as the acts of the philosopher, mathematician, or writer" (Kretchmar, 2005, p. 116.) At Penn State University, where Kretchmar taught, "students can even get a master's degree in a program that focuses on skillful activity such as singing, dancing, or playing the piano," and yet, while "the gatekeepers of higher education apparently see these kinds of advanced motor performance as cultured, creative, and intelligent," there is "no performance major in exercise, sport, or any other kinesiology movement" (Kretchmar, 2005, p. 112). By certifying courses in the strategy and tactics of sport, and sports courses regarding recruiting, advertising, history, or sociology, athletes could begin to reverse this stigma. Of course, the curriculum would have to be rigorous and approved by a faculty panel that included but was not limited to coaches, but such certification could also ensure that athletes have a leg up on the competition for jobs in the sports industry. It is only an intellectual bias against kinesthetic learning that prevents these kinds of courses and even degree programs from materializing.

Give Awards to Institutions and Individuals That Take Their "Duty To Educate" Seriously

In 2018, the Commission on College Basketball recommended that significant punishments be implemented to disincentivize cheating and to encourage coaches, athletic directors, and college presidents to offer proper oversight to expose wrongdoing and deter bad behavior before it happens (Commission on Collegiate Basketball, 2018, pp. 10-11), but perhaps an approach to reform that incentivizes prosocial behavior (Bénabou & Tirole, 2016; Exley, 2018) would work better.

One possibility would be to give public awards to universities that deliver on their promises to make "athlete-students" into "student-athletes". One could also rank universities in order of their relative priority given to education. Easterbrook suggests that college football rankings formulas could incorporate graduation rates as 25% of the total formula (Easterbrook, 2013, p. 317ff). A group called Next College Student Athlete (NCSA) also produces its own proprietary "Power Rankings", which

are based on "size, location, academics, and cost", and aimed at helping recruits decide which schools are best for student-athletes (NCSA.com, n.d.).

Faculty must be part of this process. Staurowsky and Ridpath (2005) note that while universities may not have a legal duty to educate their students, the faculty do have a professional duty to advocate for their own legal interests, and that these interests include the securing of an environment in which all students can be educated. College faculty who are members of organizations such as the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) are thus theoretically obligated by their association's statement of professional ethics to "advocate for mechanisms that will protect the access athletes have to academic freedom" (Staurowsky & Ridpath, 2005, p. 121). According to Hilborn, universities fail to fulfill their own missions when they fail to fulfill their "duty to educate" and do not ensure that athletes can study and play their sports in an environment where they reasonably meet academic requirements. It is not enough for universities to provide scholarships for athletes; they should also acknowledge their duty to ensure that the scholarship can be honored by the athlete in and out of the classroom (Hilborn, 1995, p. 769).

If there existed better metrics to measure a university's fulfillment of this "duty to educate", would-be freshmen athletes would be able to see if and how schools upheld their promises of providing a quality education, graduating their students, and helping them secure jobs. They might even be able to see how athletes and students differ in these regards, and they would be able to make informed decisions about their future.

Creative rewards could also be devised to incentivize individual coaches, athletic directors, and college presidents to prioritize education over winning. Awards like Lowe's CLASS award, which is given to the nation's best college scholar-athletes, already exist, and similar awards for coaches, athletic directors, and college presidents could incentivize them to balance success in academics and athletics. Why not imagine a corporate-sponsored award for big-time coaches who graduate 100% of their athletes each year *and* have 100% approval ratings from their players? It could come along with a bonus, too, which would incentivize coaches and encourage companies to donate for the positive public relations benefit. The rankings that currently exist focus too heavily on sports performance, which is indicative of entertainment value, but we should also try to measure the education received, the lessons learned, and the degrees earned (Gerdy, 1997).

Tie Coaching Base Pay to Graduation Rates

As it stands, too many big-time coaches earn salaries that are vastly higher than what players receive, which creates an imbalanced power dynamic. If coaches disregard academics in favor of athletics, their players may (be forced to) do the same, or at least feel tension if they want to disobey their coach's orders.

There are reforms we can make. For example, coaches' base – not bonuses – compensation packages could be tied to graduation rates, thereby ensuring that the educational promise of college sports is realized and positive incentives rather than negative penalties drive coaching behavior (Easterbrook, 2013). Colleges

could also tie coaching bonuses to how student athletes *improve* academically, not necessarily how their students perform at one given moment in time, or how many graduate. If these reforms were instituted, coaches would be hired and fired by how well they prepare their players for life outside of sports, and, since so few will play professionally, these coaches could be seen as faculty members.

Easterbrook (2013) suggests suspending coaches for a year if they oversee a program which does not graduate its players at a rate above that university's average, that such penalties follow the coach to another university should he be hired elsewhere and that all NCAA sanctions and penalties follow a coach, not stay with a program, as is currently the case. He also suggests refusing to pay severance packages for fired coaches whose players did not meet high standards for graduation rates during their tenure (Easterbrook, 2013).

I prefer tying the base pay of coaching salaries to educational deliverables because then the institution makes it clear to the employee what is expected of them, and it amounts to a more positive reform. Colleges could offer coaches end-of-year bonuses if their graduation rates are higher than average for the conference, or higher than last years' rates. Tying bonuses alone to graduation rate does not, in my opinion, go far enough.

The issue of college coach pay is in some ways like the issue of CEO pay in corporate America. The interests of coaches, universities, and corporations, rather than players, are prioritized, just as in corporate America the interests of CEOs and shareholders are prioritized over the interests of employees. But the NCAA could create a metric for coaching pay based upon the ratio of scholarships given to the players who graduate, along the lines of what Robert Reich has suggested. In *Saving Capitalism*, Reich argues that America could lower CEO pay by tying corporate tax rates to the ratio of CEO pay/average employee pay (Reich, 2016). If colleges agreed to a similar metric for college coaches, they would also help incentivize coaches to do as much as they can to raise graduation rates. In the process, they might even create a more level playing field among teams, since coach pay would be effectively capped and there would not be as much competition between the best coaches for the highest pay jobs.

Encourage Big-Time Sports Universities to "Stand Up for Academic Principles in the Face of Commercial Temptations"

University leadership must be more courageous, and some are. In 2003, Michigan's former president, James Duderstadt, called for the shortening of college sports seasons, the re-institution of the freshman ineligibility rule, and limiting the power of "celebrity coaches" by deferring or restricting the amount of money they could receive from outside business dealings (Duderstadt, 2003). In 2011, Brit Kirwan, the chancellor of the University of Maryland system, said "the huge TV contracts and excessive commercialization have corrupted intercollegiate athletics . . . [and] to some extent they have compromised the integrity of the universities" (Quoted in Nocera, 2011).

Duderstadt (2003) and Kirwan do not represent the majority. In 2001, the Knight Commission recommended that college trustees, presidents, faculty, athletic directors, and alumni "stand up for academic principles in the face of commercial temptations" (quoted in Clotfelter, 2019, p. 215). In practice, this might entail setting up an independent commission to better monitor contracts between media, corporate sponsors, and universities, prohibiting or limiting company logos on uniforms, controlling when games are played (i.e., not "school nights" like Tuesday night), or limiting the number of hours teams can practice. It might also mean limiting roster sizes, limiting (or changing the structure of) pay for coaches, or agreeing on a coaching salary cap that all universities must abide by. These steps could protect "academic principles in the face of commercial temptations".

Discussion

Seek Integrity

"Integrity" is the key here; we do not want to eliminate college sports but rather bring their operations back in line with higher education's core values. The issue of integrity exists in another sense, too. While universities have championed the educational (particularly, the character-building potential of sports), they have inadvertently ignored or overlooked their own potentially powerful role as institutional paragons of moral character in the community. After all, what kind of organization can serve the greater good if it is economically exploiting young men and women, especially in sports where the risks of bodily injury and long-term health problems are so high?

If universities are to continue producing big-time college sports (particularly, if public, taxpayer-funded universities are to do so), they should be required to revise their mission statements to reflect the centrality of sport. Orleans (2013) makes this point succinctly when he argues:

> We have to make the case that athletics is directly related both to institutional missions and to student-athlete development: a case that shows faculty and alumni, students and parents, and legislators and taxpayers that athletics deserves support because it is educationally and institutionally important (p. 83).

Only then will universities hold themselves to a higher standard of ethical behavior and begin to regain their "integrity." As Clotfelter (2019) argues, we need a "new candor" that would "begin with more accurate mission statements" which includes the acknowledgment of the centrality of college sports to universities' bottom line and mission. These statements would also acknowledge the "century-old marriage between commercial athletics and American higher education" and its "benefits and costs" (p. 221).

If university leaders are serious about protecting academic principles and regaining their integrity, then they must ensure that no coach, administrator, or other university official under their employ is hypocritical about, or exaggerates the power of, the educational element of big-time sports until the institution can truly

deliver on such statements. Neither universities nor the NCAA should ever say that "student-athletes" are students first and foremost, if their treatment by the university proves, or even subtly suggests, that they are not. Until true reform comes, they should explicitly acknowledge that the education athletes receive will be *at best* unintentional, ancillary, and insufficiently delineated, as well as dependent upon a particular coach and his/her commitment to the value of education.

Thus, colleges should admit they are in the business of producing entertainment for consumers, and that the entertainers they contract with are athletes/students. Universities should also explicitly acknowledge, in their mission statements, that big-time college athletics are a central part of their branding/marketing plan, and that athletes are an (unpaid) part of it.

In concrete terms, restoring integrity would mean ensuring everyone involved in the university knows that classroom education (i.e., academic education), and education within sports participation (i.e., "sports education") are both to be respected and given a central role in the broader socialization process. Students can and do benefit from learning in each realm, but they learn different things in each realm. Life in a capitalist economy undoubtedly requires perseverance, hard work, and discipline, skills that can be gained both by playing sports and by studying. Life in a capitalist *democracy* equally requires educational credentials and critical thinking skills, which may be less commonly developed by participation in sports, especially if a "grand illusion" is offered to young athletes that the odds are in their favor of making the pros (Pappano, 2012). A higher education *in the classroom* can teach young people how to learn how to teach themselves, just as a higher education *on the court or field* can teach young people how to learn how to train themselves physically (and mentally).

At the end of the day, the verdict in the public debate over the economics of "opportunity" versus the economics of "exploitation" depends largely on whether college athletes' education is evaluated highly or not. If an athlete's education lives up to the promises that universities make about it, then "exploitation" may seem like an overly dramatic term, and "opportunity" may seem to fit. Without education, the term "*college* sports," let alone "higher education," ceases to have much meaning. Regardless of background, identity group, or political affiliation, anyone can get behind the idea of hard work paying off, and anyone can learn of its value and use it as a stepping-stone to create a better life. Moreover, if *quality* education takes place between the coach and player *on the field/court* (as opposed to inside a classroom), then an athlete's overall relationship to the university, which employs the coach, cannot so easily be called exploitation. However, if either of these kinds of education (classroom-based education or court/field-based education) are not satisfactory, then the economic exchange between university and athlete, and between coach and player, may become the primarily level of analysis, and some may reasonably conclude that this exchange does not constitute an equitable contract, but rather an "exploitative" relationship.

Conclusion

"Everyone Is a Teacher. Everyone."

Universities, the NCAA, coaches, and athletic directors, can and should transparently and honestly acknowledge the *professional role of labor and service that big-time college athletes provide to and for the university,* while also reemphasizing the primacy of the *educational* endeavor (Mitten, et al., 2009). Everyone has a part to play. Universities must raise academic standards for all athletes, unilaterally and without NCAA mandate if necessary, and expect coaches to perform an educative role. The NCAA and/or universities must create new incentives for schools, coaches, and athletes to prioritize graduation and better balance between books and balls. Athletic department officials must ensure that education is as much of a priority as enhancing the "entertainment product." Coaches must be more mindful about the time required for classroom education, and about the lessons learned through sports participation. Parents must more often stress the importance of striking balance between books and balls. Finally, athletes must choose to "buy in" to the idea that their academic efforts are as important as their athletic efforts, *even if that is not the clear impression that the broader sports culture currently sends them*. It may be hard for them to make that decision, but it is their demands as the consumers of the college education that carries the greatest leverage to advance systemic change, especially if it is done through collective action. Finally, everyone involved in college sports should do their part, because, as the late great UCLA basketball coach John Wooden once said, "Everyone is a teacher". As adults, we should never forget the educational part we play when we seek to reform college sports, in the recommendations we promote of course, but also in the way we incentivize others to behave.

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Literature Review

Division III Athletics Background

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

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

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

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

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

Role of Athletics at Division III Institutions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strategic Contingency Theory

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

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

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

RQ1: How is athletics success defined and operationalized in small college athletics?
RQ2: How do definitions of athletics success guide institutional policies and priorities related to athletics?
RQ3: Do these types of institutions believe they have a chance to "win" (in the form of on-court/on-field success) consistently and how does that impact institutional and athletics department strategies?

Methods

Research Setting

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

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

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

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

Research Approach

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

Procedures and Participants

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

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

Table 1
Institutional Profiles

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

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

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

Analysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Findings

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

Lack of Competitive Balance in NCAA Division III Athletics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussions of Success in Athletics Director Hiring Process

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

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

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

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

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

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

Definitions of Athletics Success

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

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

Faculty Definitions of Athletics Success

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

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

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

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

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

Administrator Definitions of Athletics Success

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Athletics Director Definitions of Athletics Success

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion and Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

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

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Need Fulfillment in Intercollegiate Student-Athletes' Dual Roles: A Mixed-Methods, Person-Oriented Investigation

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Individuals competing in intercollegiate sport are tasked with managing the dual roles of athletes and students. The purpose of the current study was to simultaneously explore student-athletes' perceived satisfaction of autonomy, competence and relatedness in sport and academics. A mixed-methods, person-oriented design was utilized. Quantitative data was collected with a sample of $N = 238$ student-athletes from various intercollegiate sports. For sport, four clusters were revealed: "Low Need Satisfaction," "Moderately Low Need Satisfaction," "Moderate Relatedness," and "High Need Satisfaction." For academics, four clusters were revealed: "Low Need Satisfaction," "Moderate Relatedness," "Moderate Autonomy and Competence," and "High Need Satisfaction." Reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of $n = 12$ student-athletes representing all clusters revealed four themes: (a) global factors sensitized for the experience of basic psychological needs, (b) contextual factors determined fluctuations in need fulfillment, (c) perceived interaction effects in the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs within the same domain, and (d) sport participation had a cross-contextual influence on need fulfillment in academics. Findings provide an understanding of student-athletes' perceived basic psychological needs across the achievement domains of academics and sport.

Keywords: basic psychological needs, National Collegiate Athletic Association, self-determination theory

The intercollegiate athletic system in the United States places student-athletes in an environment that is arguably unlike any other sport-related achievement context. Specifically, individuals competing in intercollegiate sport are tasked with simultaneously managing the dual roles of athletes and students. There are undeniable benefits for student-athletes due to this unique organizational structure, including the potential for financial assistance from scholarships, access to academic support staff, and the development of self-esteem (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Paule & Gilson, 2010). However, despite such advantages, it should not be disregarded that student-athletes have to continuously balance the nearly year-round demands that are associated with meeting both athletic and academic performance expectations (Nichols et al., 2019).

In intercollegiate sport, student-athletes compete at an elite level in their sport, which exposes them to a range of physical, psychological, and social challenges (e.g., training volume and intensity, public scrutiny, social isolation; Gould & Whitley, 2009; Huml et al., 2019). Perhaps most noticeably, there is an inherent and continuously growing pressure to perform optimally due to the importance placed on winning (Gould & Whitley, 2009). To meet these competitive expectations, student-athletes often spend up to 40 hours per week in mandatory and voluntary sport-related activities (e.g., training, practice, video analysis; National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2020). While such an immense time commitment may not be uncommon for elite athletes, those in intercollegiate sport must simultaneously meet the academic standards required to progress toward the completion of their post-secondary degree. In fact, student-athletes are typically mandated to maintain course loads and GPAs that exceed their universities' minimum standards for non-athletes (Huml et al., 2019). These formal expectations are in addition to the social adjustment, career exploration, and intellectual growth that every college student is confronted with (Watt & Moore, 2001).

As a result, student-athletes often report feeling "swamped" and "the monotony of scheduled class and practice times can create feelings of being shuffled from one setting to the next, with little time to meet new people, engage in academic opportunities, and other social events" (Huml et al., 2019, p. 4). Therefore, it is not surprising that many student-athletes perceive anxiety and stress as part of their participation which, for some, can result in experiences of burnout (e.g., American College Health Association, 2018; Gould & Whitley, 2009). Furthermore, a large percentage of student-athletes lack a regular, adequate amount and/or quality of sleep (American College Health Association, 2018; NCAA, 2020). Such adverse experiences can meaningfully hinder individuals' overall quality of life which is in direct contrast to the NCAA's (n.d.) mission as a governing body to safeguard "the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes" (para. 1). Consequently, to foster a positive involvement in intercollegiate sport, it is essential to comprehensively understand the psychological conditions that either facilitate or hinder student-athletes' ability to think, feel, and act optimally as they engage in their dual roles as performers in sport and academics.

According to Ryan and Deci's (2017) self-determination theory, the quality of people's cognition, affect, and behavior is determined by the satisfaction of the three inherent basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Specifically, people are more likely to experience positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes when they have choice in their engagement and can act according to their personal values (autonomy), interact effectively within their social environment (competence), and feel securely connected with others (relatedness). For example, researchers have found that the fulfillment of the three basic psychological needs allows for optimal enjoyment, performance, persistence, self-esteem, and subjective vitality in athletes' sport participation (e.g., Alesi et al., 2019; Cheval et al., 2017; Gillet et al., 2009), while simultaneously lowering individuals' reported levels of burnout (Li et al., 2013). Similar benefits have been revealed for non-athlete university students who are more likely to experience satisfaction with their major, better sleep quality, and higher levels of well-being when they perceive their autonomy, competence, and relatedness to be fulfilled (e.g., Campbell et al., 2018; Martela & Ryan, 2016; Schenkenfelder et al., 2020).

Athletes' basic psychological need satisfaction has been investigated extensively across different sports (e.g., dance, handball, soccer, tennis), age groups (i.e., children, adolescents, adults), and competitive levels (e.g., recreational, elite) (e.g., Alesi et al., 2019; Banack et al., 2011; Cheval et al., 2017; Gillet et al., 2009; Goulimaris et al., 2014). However, although a limited number of studies have been conducted in intercollegiate sport (e.g., Hollembeak & Amorose, 2005; Mack et al., 2011, Raabe & Zakrajsek, 2017; Readdy et al., 2014), there appears to be meaningfully less empirical evidence to provide an in-depth understanding of student-athletes' experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their sport participation compared to other settings. Furthermore, there is an even more noticeable lack of research investigating intercollegiate student-athletes' perceptions of their basic psychological needs in their academic experiences. This is a noteworthy gap in the literature because according to Vallerand (2000), the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is context-specific, which means that a person can experience varying degrees of need fulfillment across different life domains. For example, Milyavskaya and Koestner (2011) revealed significant variations in individuals' perceptions of their three basic psychological needs across six contexts (i.e., family, friends, relationships, school, work, and activities). As such, a student-athlete's fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness may be dissimilar in sport and academics.

Findings of previous research indicate that the domain-specificity of basic psychological need satisfaction is an important conceptual consideration for those tasked with fostering positive experiences in the unique achievement context of intercollegiate sport (e.g., academic counselors, coaches, sport psychology professionals). For example, Milyavskaya et al. (2009) previously found that, across four countries, adolescents who experienced a balance of need fulfillment across important life domains (e.g., school, home, friends) reported higher levels of well-being and better school adjustment than those with less consistency in their perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Thus, in order to cultivate optimal cognitive,

affective, and behavioral outcomes among student-athletes across their dual roles, it appears necessary to consider—and comprehensively understand—the fulfillment of their basic psychological needs in both the sport and academic setting.

The Present Study

Accordingly, the purpose of the current study was to simultaneously explore student-athletes' perceived satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sport and academics. A mixed-methods, person-oriented[1] approach was used for the research. The mixed-methods design was chosen because it helped to gain an initial understanding of student-athletes' need fulfillment in sport and academics via the quantitative investigation ("what" was happening) and, subsequently, provide additional insight through the qualitative follow-up ("why" it was happening) (Moran et al., 2011; Readdy et al., 2014).

Quantitatively, the use of a person-oriented approach can help to explore potential level (e.g., high, medium, or low fulfillment across all three needs) and shape effects (e.g., distinct magnitudes in the fulfillment of one or more of the three needs) (Morin & Marsh, 2015) that may characterize student-athletes' unique experiences in sport and academics. That is, in contrast to variable-centered analyses, which are based on the assumption that all participants in a study belong to a single homogeneous group (e.g., similar manifestations of autonomy, competence, and relatedness across individuals), the person-oriented approach allows for the identification of developmental subgroups in a sample with respect to the variables of interest (Bergman et al., 2003). As such, the person-oriented quantitative data analysis offered an opportunity to explore individual variations between different student-athletes' perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The resulting patterns of need fulfillment that exist for clusters of participants can help to provide insight into how individual student-athletes may experience their unique dual roles differently. A subset of members in each cluster then participated in qualitative interviews to explore their experience in greater depth "by providing much richer detail or by painting in a more complete picture that was only 'sketched' via the results of quantitative work" (Horn, 2011, p. 297). Consequently, the sequential method of data collection allowed for complementarity ("the enhancement or clarification of findings from one method by the use of another") and development ("the use of findings from one phase of research to inform the development of methods for the following stage") in this study (Moran et al., 2011, p. 365).

Overall, the mixed-methods approach embraced the current study's critical realist paradigm, which "utilizes the compatibility thesis of worldviews, supporting the point that quantitative and qualitative research can work together to address the other's limitations" (Shannon-Baker, 2016, p. 329). Ontologically, the quantitative portion of the research initially allowed for the measurement of student-athletes' basic psychological need satisfaction as a reality that can be observed (i.e., realism) (Smith et al., 2012). However, participants were also given a voice in explaining their experiences (i.e., the patterns of need fulfillment that emerged in the quantitative analyses) through the qualitative interviews, which were interpreted by the

researchers to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (subjectivist and constructionist epistemology) (Smith et al., 2012). Consequently, this design allowed for an effective investigation of the following two research questions:

> [RQ1] What patterns of perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness exist among student-athletes with respect to their sport and academic participation?
>
> [RQ2] How do student-athletes experience these patterns of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sport and academics?

Method

Participants

A total of 238 student-athletes (93 male, 145 female) participated in the quantitative data collection. The average age in the sample was 19.50 (± 1.25) years, which included 67 freshmen (28.2%), 72 sophomores (30.3%), 44 juniors (18.5%), and 51 seniors (21.4%); four individuals did not report their student grade level (1.7%). Participants self-identified as White/Caucasian (n = 196; 82.4%), African-American (n = 20; 8.4%), Asian/Pacific Islander (n = 3; 1.3%), Hispanic/Latino (n = 7; 2.9%), and more than one race (n = 8; 3.4%); four chose not to identify their race (1.7%). The sample comprised student-athletes from a range of sports: rowing (n = 42; 17.6%), synchronized figure skating (n = 39; 16.4%), volleyball (n = 43; 18.1%), cross-country and/or track and field (n = 50; 21.0%), basketball (n = 31; 13.0%), soccer (n = 18; 7.6%), beach volleyball (n = 10; 4.2%), and swimming (n = 5; 2.1%). Participants competed for intercollegiate athletic departments that were affiliated with NCAA Division I (n = 99; 41.6%), Division II (n = 83; 34.9%), and Division III (n = 56; 23.5%).

A subset of 12 student-athletes also participated in the qualitative portion of the study.

Data Collection

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for all procedures. Current intercollegiate student-athletes who were at least 18 years old were recruited to participate in the current research. For the quantitative data collection, coaches for all NCAA Division I, II, or III affiliated intercollegiate athletic departments (whose email addresses were publicly available) within an approximately two-hour driving range of the first and third authors' institutions were contacted. More specifically, the researchers sent an email to the coaches of 158 individual teams from 11 universities in the Southeast and Northeast of the United States to provide them with the purpose of this study and ask for permission to recruit the student-athletes on the teams they coached. Thirteen coaches authorized the researchers to meet the members of their respective teams in person, describe the purpose of the study, and ask student-athletes to participate. To accommodate the different teams, all data was collected within a two-week timeframe. Of the 268 student-athletes who were present during data

Table 1
Demographics for Qualitative Sample (n = 12)

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	Student Grade Level	Sport	NCAA Division
Andrew	Male	White/Caucasian	19	Sophomore	Soccer	III
Conner	Male	White/Caucasian	20	Junior	Soccer	II
Elizabeth	Female	White/Caucasian	20	Junior	Synchronized Skating	I
Grace	Female	White/Caucasian	18	Sophomore	Rowing	I
Jane	Female	White/Caucasian	20	Junior	Synchronized Skating	I
Laurel	Female	White/Caucasian	19	Sophomore	Volleyball	III
Loraine	Female	White/Caucasian	21	Senior	Synchronized Skating	I
Maggie	Female	White/Caucasian	19	Freshman	Synchronized Skating	I
Mikala	Female	White/Caucasian	20	Junior	Cross-country	III
Morgan	Female	White/Caucasian	19	Sophomore	Rowing	I
Naomi	Female	White/Caucasian	18	Freshman	Volleyball	III
Rose	Female	White/Caucasian	19	Sophomore	Rowing	I

collection, 238 agreed to partake in the research (88.8% response rate) and provided written informed consent for their involvement. Participants completed (a) a set of demographic items, (b) the Basic Needs Satisfaction in Sport Scale (BNSSS; Ng et al., 2011), and (c) a modified version of the Basic Need Satisfaction at Work Scale (BNSWS; Kasser et al., 1992).

The BNSSS is a 20-item instrument that allows for the assessment of individuals' fulfillment of autonomy (10 items), competence (five items), and relatedness (five items) in sport. Student-athletes responded to each item on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not true for me*) to 7 (*very true for me*). A score for the satisfaction of each basic psychological need is computed by averaging all items on the respective subscale. Reliability analyses for the current data showed good internal consistencies ($.87 \leq \alpha \leq .89$).

The BNSWS has been developed to assess basic psychological need satisfaction in people's work domain. This version of the survey is comprised of 21 items across three subscales: autonomy (seven items), competence (six items), and relatedness (eight items). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*). A score for the satisfaction of each basic psychological need is computed by averaging all items on the respective subscale. For the current study, the instrument was modified slightly to better fit the academic setting. The stem of the survey was changed from "The following questions concern your feelings about your job during the last year" to "The following questions concern your feelings about academics." Similarly, for the individual items the words "at work" were replaced with "in class" (e.g., "I get along with people in class"). Reliability analyses for the cur-

rent data revealed satisfactory internal consistency for the competence (α = .70) and relatedness (α = .76) subscales, but not for the autonomy subscale (α = .47).

A subsample of the student-athletes who participated in the quantitative portion of the study were recruited for the qualitative data collection. To include participants representing all clusters that were derived in the quantitative data analysis, purposive sampling procedures were employed. More specifically, recruitment was designed to allow for the collection of data from at least two participants from each cluster that emerged for sport and academics. The first author initially contacted 24 student-athletes from the quantitative sample who collectively represented each sport and academic cluster six times via email and asked them to participate in the qualitative follow-up. Six of those student-athletes agreed to partake. Subsequently, the first author contacted additional individuals based on the clusters that were still missing in the qualitative sample. Overall, 51 student-athletes were contacted, 12 of whom agreed to participate and provided informed consent for their involvement (23.5% response rate). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the qualitative data in this study. All 12 interviews were conducted by the second author via Zoom, audio recorded, and lasted between 52 and 85 minutes ($M = 70.7 \pm 11.2$). Each of the interviews was then transcribed verbatim. Prior to data analysis, individual transcripts were sent back to the participants as a form of member reflection (Tracy, 2010). One student-athlete made editorial revisions but did not alter the content of the interview.

The interview guide was developed based on an in-depth review of relevant research on self-determination theory in sport and academics as well as previous protocols that have been used to explore student-athletes' need fulfillment (e.g., Raabe et al., 2016; Readdy et al., 2014). The interview guide that was used in the current study was structured into three sections. First, following some initial questions regarding participants' overall experience as a student-athlete, the second author individually explained each basic psychological need and provided individuals with an opportunity to ask questions for further clarification. He then inquired about their level of satisfaction with the particular need (e.g., "How much competence do you currently experience in academics?"). Follow-up questions and probes were used to obtain additional detail and to explore factors that influenced student-athletes' need fulfillment. Second, participants were provided with a visual representation of their individual pattern of basic psychological need satisfaction (i.e., diagram for z-standardized cluster) and asked whether it accurately reflected their perceptions ("Does this diagram seem to match what you've previously described?") as well as to explain any potential discrepancies. The interview was structured to separately explore participants' need fulfillment in sport and academics in sections one and two. Third, after student-athletes' experiences in both settings had been discussed comprehensively, participants were simultaneously provided with visual representations of their clusters for sport and academics and asked to reflect on the relationship between the two.

To evaluate whether the interview guide allowed for an effective investigation of the constructs of interest and RQ2, the second author conducted a pilot interview

with one current NCAA Division III student-athlete from a sample of convenience prior to data collection. Based on the pilot, slight adjustments were made to the explanations of the three basic psychological needs and the wording of some individual questions in an attempt to enhance their clarity.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 26. As part of a preliminary analysis, a *residual analysis* was conducted to identify and remove outliers (i.e., ± 3 *SD*). In line with the person-oriented approach, a *cluster analysis* (utilizing the Ward procedure with the squared Euclidian distance; Bergman et al., 2003) was then performed to find groups of participants with similar score patterns in the chosen operating factors (i.e., perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness). The optimal number of clusters was determined based on practicality, conceptual appropriateness (i.e., alignment with the assumptions of self-determination theory), and statistical criteria. Statistically, a cluster solution was sought that entails the maximum relative increase in error sum of squares (ESS; elbow criterium; Backhaus et al., 2018) and exceeds 66.7% of explained error sum of squares (EESS; two-third criterion; Bergman et al., 2003). Subsequently, the cluster solution was optimized further via a cluster center analysis. This entire procedure was completed separately for participants' basic psychological need satisfaction in sport and academics.

The qualitative data was analyzed by a research team that consisted of the first, second, third, and fifth author. All researchers are well-versed in self-determination theory and had previous experience analyzing qualitative data. The use of four independent investigators helped to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis as "researchers often overlook important things when going through the data independently, whereas having several sets of eyes looking at the data yields better decisions and has the potential to reduce individual biases" (Hill et al., 1997, p. 524). To further enhance the rigor of the data analysis (Tracy, 2010), reflexive thematic analyses procedures in line with Braun and Clarke (2017; 2019) were utilized. First, the four researchers individually read the transcripts multiple times to familiarize themselves with the data. Second, they independently coded the transcripts to identify initial inductive meaning units in the data. Third, the investigators met four times for a total of seven hours to collaboratively organize their individually derived meaning units into lower order themes that most optimally embodied the data. Once the four authors consensually agreed on the sub-themes, they were collapsed into higher-order themes based on their relationships and significance in representing the participants' accounts. Fourth, the researchers independently reflected on the initial themes and sub-themes before reconvening to finalize a thematic structure that they consensually believed to truthfully denote the data. Fifth, all themes and sub-themes were labeled to indicate their meaning. Sixth, once the four authors had completed all aspects of the data analysis, they produced the current manuscript.

Results

Quantitative Results (RQ1)

A preliminary analysis indicated that aside from student-athletes' perceived relatedness in sport there were no significant cohort effects in the current data based on individuals' competitive level (i.e., NCAA Division I, II, and III). Therefore, this moderator variable was not considered in subsequent analyses. The residual analysis revealed one outlier based on the participant's basic psychological need satisfaction in sport. The individual's sport data was, therefore, excluded from any further analyses. Based on the previously described criteria, 4-cluster solutions indicated the best fit in both sport and academics, respectively. While the analysis of the elbow criterion initially suggested the use of a 3-cluster solution for sport (42.5% of relative increase in ESS) and academics (42.4% of relative increase in ESS), both cluster solutions were meaningfully below the intended EESS (59.4% for sport and 58.0% for academics). The 4-cluster solution helped to increase the EESS to 65.5% for sport and 64.7% for academics. Following the cluster center analysis, these 4-cluster solutions showed an explained ESS of 69.3% for sport and 66.0% for academics. All detected clusters were relatively homogeneous for both settings which was indicated by the low mean squared Euclidian distance of all participants (i.e., homogeneity coefficients; HC) within each pattern ($0.4 \leq HC \leq 1.2$ for sport and $0.5 \leq HC \leq 0.8$ academics).

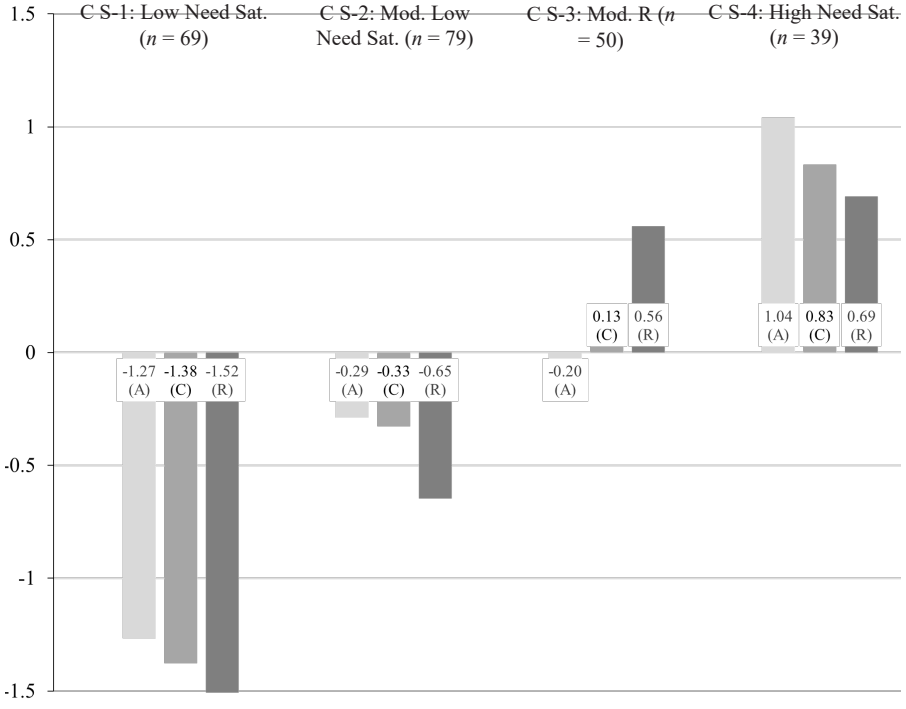
Table 2
Perceived Levels of Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness Separated by Participants' Cluster Affiliation (N = 238)

		Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness
		M ± *SD*		
Sport	Total (*N* = 237)	5.73 ± 0.84	5.85 ± 0.88	6.15 ± 0.90
	Cluster S-1: Low Need Sat. (*n* = 69)	4.60 ± 0.51	4.56 ± 0.72	4.76 ± 0.77
	Cluster S-2: Mod. Low Need Sat. (*n* = 79)	5.46 ± 0.46	5.53 ± 0.55	5.55 ± 0.49
	Cluster S-3: Mod. Relatedness (*n* = 50)	5.54 ± 0.53	5.96 ± 0.50	6.65 ± 0.35
	Cluster S-4: High Need Sat. (*n* = 39)	6.63 ± 0.32	6.61 ± 0.45	6.77 ± 0.35
Academics	Total (*N* = 238)	4.73 ± 0.71	5.15 ± 0.90	4.89 ± 0.91
	Cluster A-1: Low Need Sat. (*n* = 53)	4.01 ± 0.44	4.13 ± 0.66	3.73 ± 0.51
	Cluster A-2: Mod. R (*n* = 49)	4.23 ± 0.40	4.73 ± 0.61	5.10 ± 0.54
	Cluster A-3: Mod. Autonomy & Relatedness (*n* = 74)	4.97 ± 0.34	5.37 ± 0.48	4.73 ± 0.49
	Cluster A-4: High Need Sat. (*n* = 62)	5.45 ± 0.50	6.08 ± 0.50	5.92 ± 0.48

In the context of sport, the four clusters were: "Low Need Satisfaction" (Cluster S-1; *n* = 69), "Moderately Low Need Satisfaction" (Cluster S-2; *n* = 79), "Moderate Relatedness" (Cluster S-3; *n* = 50), and "High Need Satisfaction" (Cluster S-4; *n* = 39).

Figure 1

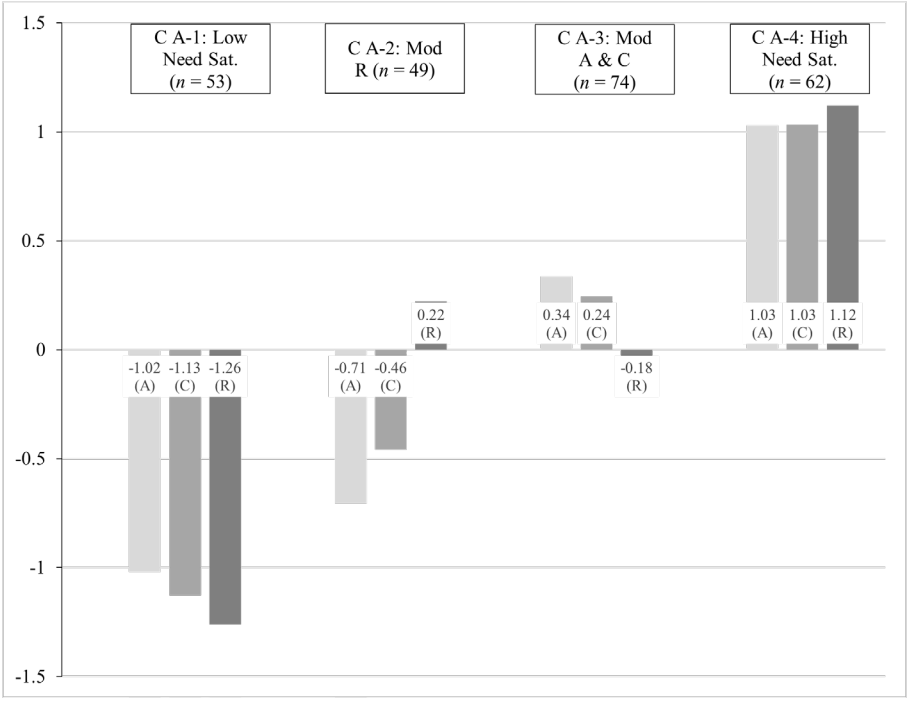
Patterns (z-standardized) of Student-Athletes' Autonomy (A), Competence (C), and Relatedness (R) in Sport (N = 237)



In the context of academics, the four clusters were: "Low Need Satisfaction" (Cluster A-1; *n* = 53), "Moderate Relatedness" (Cluster A-2; *n* = 49), "Moderate Autonomy and Competence" (Cluster A-3; *n* = 74), and "High Need Satisfaction" (Cluster A-4; *n* = 62).

Figure 2

Patterns (z-standardized) of Student-Athletes' Autonomy (A), Competence (C), and Relatedness (R) in Academics (N = 238)



Qualitative Results (RQ2)

The student-athletes who participated in the interviews represented all four patterns of basic psychological need satisfaction in sport (Cluster S-1: $n = 3$; Cluster S-2: $n = 2$; Cluster S-3: $n = 4$; Cluster S-4: $n = 3$) and academics (Cluster A-1: $n = 2$; Cluster A-2: $n = 3$; Cluster A-3: $n = 3$; Cluster A-4: $n = 4$) that were identified in the quantitative data. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2017; 2019) of the qualitative data helped to reveal four overarching themes. Participant names in the following descriptions are pseudonyms chosen by the student-athletes.

Theme 1: Global Factors Sensitized for the Experience of Basic Psychological Needs

Participants discussed that their perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as intercollegiate student-athletes were meaningfully influenced by aspects of their involvement in sport and academics prior to college. That is, individuals had grown accustomed to certain factors that had a positive effect on their basic psychological needs, which made them more receptive to the fulfillment of those needs at the collegiate level. Participants specifically mentioned: (a) personal identification with sport sensitized for perceived autonomy in sport, (b) friendships with team-

mates sensitized for perceived relatedness in sport, and (c) importance of academic performance sensitized for perceived autonomy in academics.

Personal Identification with Sport Sensitized for Perceived Autonomy in Sport. Participants discussed that athletics had been an important part of their life for a long time, which had fostered a sense of value of, personal connection with, and identity (i.e., autonomy) in their sport. For example, when asked about her perception of autonomy, Maggie (S-3, A-2) described "the personal connection" she had with her sport because "I've done this since I was three years old, so it's been basically my whole life. It's all I've ever known… that's a very special connection to me." As a result, she continued to explain that "when it came time for me to apply to colleges, I knew that… I wanted to be able to still continue my athletic career" which displays the value (i.e., autonomy) she attributed to her sport participation. Morgan (S-3, A-4) similarly shared that "I feel like I find my identity a lot in the fact that I do row. I did in high school, I do even more so now because I'm a student-athlete at [university]." This sensitization prior to college created an inherent baseline of perceived autonomy in participants' current engagement.

Friendships with Teammates Sensitized for Perceived Relatedness in Sport. Participants had grown accustomed to the social aspect of sports and relied on their relationships with teammates as a source of relatedness. As Laurel (S-4, A-1) stated being part of a sport team creates "automatic friends." Several student-athletes in this study described that this sense of relatedness with their teammates was an important motivator for them. For example, Morgan (S-3, A-4) shared, "I feel like if I wasn't as close to the girls on the team, I wouldn't be as motivated to continue with rowing." Grace (S-3, A-4) similarly expressed, "if I didn't feel related, if I felt my teammates didn't care, I wouldn't want to do it anymore." As Loraine (S-4, A-3) explained, participants were actively seeking out teammates as a source of relatedness, "a big reason why I was involved in synchronized skating rather than individual skating was because I wanted to build those friendships. I wanted to have those girls that I could trust and be on the ice with every day." Participants recognized how much they valued these friendships with their teammates and, therefore, more actively sought to develop them which helped to foster their perceived relatedness.

Importance of Academic Performance Sensitized for Perceived Autonomy in Academics. Participants discussed that performing well in school has always been important to them. As Rose (S-2, A-3) shared, for many student-athletes the "inspiration to do well is definitely my desire to succeed out of college and I know that a lot of people look at your GPA." This emphasis on academics had been instilled in most participants from an early age as Rose (S-2, A-3) continued, "my parents have also preached good grades because that can also be a deciding factor for what I do with grad school." As a result, similar to most student-athletes in this study, Loraine (S-4, A-3) described that she had essentially "been working towards that prescribed path of what I should be doing my whole life." In other words, participants had developed

an understanding of the value of academics prior to college which made it easier for them to experience autonomy in their current engagement.

Theme 2: Contextual Factors Determined Fluctuations in Need Fulfillment

When discussing their basic psychological need satisfaction, most participants indicated that their perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness fluctuated over the course of an academic semester. They attributed these variations to multiple contextual factors: (a) standing on the team influenced perceived autonomy in sport, (b) personal connection influenced perceived autonomy in academics, (c) time and experience influenced perceived competence in academics, and (d) class structure and pedagogy influenced perceived relatedness in academics.

Standing on the Team Influenced Perceived Autonomy in Sport. Participants thought that upperclassmen typically have more choice and input in their sport participation, which fostered higher levels of autonomy for those student-athletes. Loraine (S-4, A-3) explained that as a senior she perceived a high level of autonomy because her university's:

> Skating program is really built in a way that the senior class is the leader of the team… We decide things like when we were going to have curfew before competition or what outfit we are going to wear on competition day or something like that.

However, while most participants discussed this enhanced sense of autonomy as it relates to upperclassmen, the same concept also seemed to pertain to those individuals with particular positions and leadership roles in their sport. For example, Rose (S-2, A-3) was only a sophomore but expressed that "being the coxswain I am the leader of the boat so I'm the person who gets to choose which way I steer the boat and our race plan and how to implement practice." Overall, participants acknowledged that certain individuals on a team were provided with more opportunities to experience autonomy by their respective coaches than others.

Personal Connection Influenced Perceived Autonomy in Academics. Participants explained that how autonomous they felt in academics was affected by the number of choices they had, and perhaps more importantly, how much value they associated with their education. That is, as Morgan (S-3, A-4) described "there's a part of you that wants to be connected and wants to understand what you're doing on a personal level and not just because you feel like you have to do it." In line with this sentiment, many participants discussed the importance of finding a major that they had a personal connection with. Morgan (S-3, A-4) continued, "I feel a sense of autonomy through my major because it's something that I'm interested in, something I'm passionate about." Participants also perceived greater fulfillment of autonomy when they felt that classes helped to prepare them for a career upon graduation. Naomi (S-1, A-2) mentioned that "I value the classes because they're interesting to me and I know they'll be useful in the future when I have a job." As Loraine (S-4, A-3) explained, having this sense of value also allowed student-athletes to demonstrate a different attitude with respect to their course work:

> Even if the assignment is harder, if I can see the values in it and I'm like, "Oh this is going to help me in life because it's going to teach me how to do this. That will be applicable to a job or to my life in the future…" Those assignments, I'm willing to put a lot of work into… in that sense, autonomy is pretty important.

Therefore, participants who were able to find meaning in their academic pursuits were more likely to engage with a sense of autonomy than those who did not perceive such value in their course work and/or major.

Time and Experience Influenced Perceived Competence in Academics. Student-athletes discussed the challenges of balancing the demands of their sport participation with their course work. As a result, when they entered college, many participants initially struggled with their classes and perceived low levels of competence in academics. Mikala (S-1, A-1) shared "freshmen year it definitely took some adjustment." However, individuals also acknowledged that they eventually learned how to manage their time more effectively, which allowed them to not only balance the demands of the two settings but also feel more competent doing so. Reflecting back on his first two years as a student-athlete, Andrew (S-1, A-4) described that:

> I'm doing a lot better now but my first year, especially my first semester coming in… I won't lie it was a big challenge, but I'm adjusted now. This last season after my sophomore year went a lot better. I knew what to expect and I had my priorities straight.

As highlighted by this quote, participants thought that upperclassmen were more likely to experience high levels of competence in academics because their time as collegiate student-athletes had allowed them to adjust to their dual roles and respective workloads.

Class Structure and Pedagogy Influenced Perceived Relatedness in Academics. Participants discussed that their sense of relatedness in academics was meaningfully affected by the structure of classes and the pedagogy of the respective instructors. For example, when asked how satisfied her relatedness was in the classroom, Jane (A-2, S-2) responded, "It's easier [to experience relatedness] when there are smaller class sizes, you know?" Similarly, the more interactive instructors conceptualized their classes, the more related participants felt to other students. Jane (A-2, S-2) expressed that she felt:

> Quite a bit of relatedness, it's very easy for me to make friends in classes because a lot of my classes are discussion-based, which is helpful. It's nice to be able to build off of what someone else is saying and kind of create a conversation around these topics.

As Naomi (S-1, A-2) explained, some participants felt that when "a class is just a lecture or something… it's not always necessarily very important to have a close friendship or good support in the class because you're not really interacting with other students." Thus, student-athletes did not invest as much into the development of relationships in those courses which, in turn, did not allow them to experience the same sense of relatedness as in smaller, more interactive courses.

Theme 3: Perceived Interaction Effects in the Satisfaction of the Three Basic Psychological Needs Within the Same Domain

When asked to reflect on their autonomy, competence, and relatedness, it became apparent that student-athletes' satisfaction of each individual need also seemed to affect the perception of another need. Participants mentioned an: (a) interplay between perceived relatedness and competence in sport, (b) interplay between perceived autonomy and competence in academics, and (c) interplay between perceived competence and relatedness in academics.

Interplay Between Perceived Relatedness and Competence in Sport. As Grace (S-3, A-4) explained, most participants felt like "competence and relatedness go hand and hand" in sport. Many student-athletes in this study thought that the relatedness that existed among teammates had a direct impact on their team's performance. Conner (S-3, A-3) explained:

> I think [relatedness] is a big part because soccer is a team sport and having that team unity and that team character is a big part of group success and that's what we try to preach here. We're all in it together and if someone's struggling then we all need to be there to pick them up and help support each other no matter what.

A sense of relatedness nurtured a trust among teammates that was necessary for student-athletes to perform well. Elizabeth (S-4, A-4) explained:

> We do a lot of trust stuff… for instance, I was a flyer, so my three girls had to hold me and I was like 10 feet off the ice and if I didn't feel comfortable or didn't trust my teammates my body wouldn't trust what they were doing and if my body didn't trust them then things would not work out. Same thing if I didn't trust what my coaches were telling me… I wouldn't be the skater that I am today, and I wouldn't have pushed past limits and my comfort zone.

Positive teammate relationships to not only affected student-athletes perceived relatedness but also their ability to work together effectively and, in turn, their sense of competence.

Interplay Between Perceived Autonomy and Competence in Academics. Participants expressed that a sense of autonomy in academics also helped them feel more competent with respect to their course work. As Andrew (S-1, A-4) stated, "I think if you're experiencing competence then more than likely you're experiencing autonomy." Naomi (S-1, A-2) explained that this was "because they kind of go hand in hand like if I'm not enjoying what I'm doing then I'm not going to do very good and then I won't feel very competent." Maggie (S-3, A-2) described that when she started college she did not feel competent in academics which she attributed to a missing sense of value (i.e., autonomy) in her major. However, after she decided to change her major, she experienced "a very night and day difference because it was something I could connect to more, discuss more, and feel more open about,"

highlighting an increase in autonomy. She continued to share that in her opinion this influenced her competence because:

> Education is kind of bust if we don't feel connected to it. I think that's why a lot of people don't enjoy their major or are trying to find something that they do enjoy and can be competent with because if you don't understand something fully and you can't connect with it, then you're not really learning about it.

Seeing value in their academics helped participants to engage more meaningfully with their coursework and, consequently, feel more competent.

Interplay Between Perceived Competence and Relatedness in Academics. Participants expressed that the degree of competence they experienced in their academic courses had a meaningful influence on the relationships they were able to develop in the classroom. Maggie (S-3, A-2), for example, described a particular class in which she perceived a low level of competence and, therefore, sensed she was "like a fish out of water because I felt like everybody knew what they were doing but me… I didn't feel connected to anybody. I didn't know what I was doing. I had to ask a million questions." This quote illustrated that when student-athletes felt like their ability in a class was not comparable to other students they were not comfortable to reach out to them, thus, lowering their perceived relatedness. In contrast, Maggie (S-3, A-2) stated that:

> Second semester I remember just going into my classes and really enjoying it… I not only felt connected to the subject at hand, but also the people around me… so it was very much a night and day difference from feeling like I had no idea what was going on to feeling a personal connection to something.

This relationship between competence and relatedness was not limited to classmates, but extended to faculty, as Naomi (S-1, A-2) described, "if I'm attending class and making myself look good and turning in my assignments on time then I have a better relationship with a professor." Thus, a sense of relatedness appeared to be a prerequisite for participants to feel comfortable enough to attempt to foster relationships with others in the academic setting.

Theme 4: Sport Participation Had a Cross-Contextual Influence on Need Fulfillment in Academics

Student-athletes described the cross-contextual influence their sport participation had on their basic psychological need satisfaction in academics. More specifically, participants discussed: (a) sport season and perceived competence in academics, and (b) friendships with teammates and perceived relatedness in academics.

Sport Season and Perceived Competence in Academics. Participants acknowledged that it was more challenging to navigate the demands of their academic classes when their sport was in the competition part of the season. As Jane (A-2, S-2)

put it "it's definitely a grind, you've got to put in the work that you're going to get out and if I want the grades that I have I'm going to have to manage myself and manage my time." Maggie (S-3, A-2) described that her coursework was demanding to begin with, but "then to add the pressure of skating onto it was just a lot. And, to manage your free time, time to do homework and all that was just a lot to handle." Similarly, Elizabeth (S-4, A-4) stated that it was sometimes difficult to maintain a high level of competence in academics because of all the competition-related travel "when we are in season… We are missing weeks on weeks of classes… we're missing part of our academic career for skating," which made it more difficult to keep up with her course work and, in turn, affected her perceived competence. Thus, many participants shared Andrew's (S-1, A-4) sentiment in that it was a challenge:

> Trying to balance the school work with the 30-some hours of soccer I had a week. It was really hard and I wasn't motivated to do the school work I needed to, I was really only motivated to go to soccer practice.

Overall, participants felt that it was easier to perform well and, thus, experience competence in academics during their athletic off-season.

Friendships with Teammates and Perceived Relatedness in Academics. Most participants described that the majority of their friends were the teammates with whom they participated in their sport. Since these friendships seemed to satisfy their need for relatedness, many student-athletes in this study did not seek out friendships with their classmates. Laurel (S-4, A-1) mentioned that "last year I really didn't talk to anyone in any of my classes. I just went and I didn't have any friends in my classes. I mean all my friends played volleyball." Similarly, Loraine (S-4, A-3) explained that seeking relatedness "was much more important to me in skating than it ever was in academics." Many participants acknowledged that they did not develop close relationships with classmates simply because it was logistically difficult to maintain friendships with non-athletes. Grace (S-3, A-4) described that:

> I have other friends outside of rowing… But it's just very hard with all the time that we spend in practice. Sometimes I'm just exhausted after and the only time I really hang out with them is over the weekend, and over the weekend we have practice too, so it's hard.

Whether it was due to time constraints or differing interest, participants often did not actively seek out opportunities to experience relatedness in academics because this need already appeared to be satisfied thought their friendships in sport.

Discussion

The current research was designed to simultaneously explore student-athletes' perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sport and academics. The mixed-methods design helped to not only identify clusters of basic psychological need satisfaction among participants (quantitative), but also gain a more in-depth understanding of how individuals experienced these patterns in their dual roles as students and athletes (qualitative).

The quantitative results suggest that student-athletes' basic psychological need satisfaction is characterized by both level and shape effects (Morin & Marsh, 2015). While some participants reported comparable levels of fulfillment across all three needs (level effects; e.g., Cluster S-1 or A-4), others indicated more varying magnitudes in their perceptions of autonomy, competence, or relatedness (shape effects; e.g., Cluster S-3 or A-2). What seems noteworthy is that regardless of setting (i.e., sport or academics), level effects were revealed for individuals with particularly high or low need fulfillment compared to others in the sample. For those student-athletes, the current findings support the conclusions of previous researchers who have suggested a synergy in the satisfaction of the three needs (e.g., Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Raabe et al., 2020). The contextual factors that influenced those participants' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness likely had a comparable effect on all three needs (e.g., their coaches, teammates, instructors, classmates either positively or negatively impacted their experience). This synergy is valuable to emphasize for coach educators, sport psychology professionals, and others who work with stakeholders in sport and academics (e.g., coaches, academic counselors) to increase their use of need-supportive behaviors; specifically, they can mutually develop "high impact" strategies that maximize need fulfillment without overwhelming the stakeholder or athlete due to their complexity (e.g., developing and implementing optimal goals, providing a rationale for tasks and limits; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Raabe et al., 2020). As such, need support is a *philosophy* rather than a *recipe* in that there are many different means to achieve the intended outcome (Gilchrist & Mallett, 2017), but such means should be thoughtfully designed to prioritize the optimization of multiple (if not all) needs concurrently.

In contrast, there were also student-athletes in the current sample whose fulfillment of the individual needs appeared to have been impacted differently by contextual factors which led them to experience more relatedness than autonomy and competence in sport (Cluster S-3), and either more relatedness than autonomy and competence (Cluster A-2) or more autonomy and competence than relatedness (Cluster A-3) in academics. Since several previous studies have indicated high levels of overall need fulfillment in both sport (e.g., Cheval et al., 2017; Mack et al., 2011) and academics (e.g., Campbell et al., 2018; Schenkenfelder et al., 2020) before, these shape effects offer the most novel insight into student-athletes' experiences. Specifically, in the few person-oriented investigations of perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness that have been conducted, researchers explored an average score combining all three basic psychological needs (e.g., Warburton et al., 2020). Therefore, there was no consideration of possible distinct combinations that may exist in individuals' perceptions. Instead, the present findings indicate that this cumulative approach seems viable for individuals with particularly high or low levels of need fulfillment compared to other participants in the sample but fails to recognize the unique experiences of those with more distinct magnitudes in the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (21.1% of the participants in sport and 51.7% of participants in academics in this study). Thus, future researchers should be encouraged to further explore the distinct experiences of the three individual basic psychological needs separately.

The results also highlight the value of the mixed-methods approach of this study which can provide insight into the reasons for the emerging shape effects. In the qualitative interviews, participants, for example, expressed that class structure and pedagogy influenced their perceived relatedness in academics. Student-athletes who were enrolled in courses in which instructors tailored their classes in a more relatedness-supportive manner likely experienced more relatedness but, based on the qualitative findings, this contextual factor did not seem to have an impact on their perceived autonomy or competence (potentially resulting in Cluster A-2). Similarly, it is possible that participants in Cluster A-3 had a stronger personal connection to their major and coursework (enhancing perceived autonomy) and had more experience managing the dual demands of academics and sport (enhancing perceived competence); yet, the qualitative findings did not indicate that either factor influenced their sense of relatedness.

While the qualitative findings revealed such global and contextual factors that shaped individuals' perceptions, it is particularly the suggested interaction (within-context) and cross-contextual effects that have meaningful conceptual and practical implications. The proposed cross-contextual effect in participants' satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness indicates that need fulfillment is not only context-specific, but also seems to support Vallerand's (2000) assumption that individuals' perceptions in one life domain can influence their perceptions in another domain. In the qualitative interviews in this study, it became apparent that it was especially individuals' sport participation that had a meaningful impact on their need fulfillment in academics, which aligned with the findings of Raabe and Readdy (2016) who explored the perceived basic psychological needs of collegiate cheerleaders and concluded that:

> These young adults were at a stage in their life that brought about fundamental changes in personal and societal expectations… having recently graduated high school, the study participants were faced with an increasing prominence and pressure of schoolwork to position themselves for success after college. Thus, the value individuals placed on academics potentially seemed to create a palpable tension in their motivation for sport engagement. (pp. 86-87)

In this context, it is also noteworthy that the overall mean scores for the satisfaction of all three needs (i.e., regardless of cluster affiliation) were significantly higher in sport than academics ($p < .001$). The most noticeable discrepancy was in participants' perceptions of relatedness, which can likely be explained by student-athletes reporting in the qualitative interviews that it was more difficult for them to develop friendships in academics. This conclusion aligns with the qualitative results of Raabe et al. (2016) who explored the influence of teammates on intercollegiate swimmers' need fulfillment and found that participants almost exclusively spent their free time with other athletes. Hassell et al. (2010) previously highlighted that elite youth athletes often struggle to develop close relationships outside their immediate sport context because they feel that non-athletes cannot relate with their training, commitment,

and competition, making it more difficult to meaningfully connect with those individuals. The present findings indicate that these challenges were further magnified by more tangible issues related to a lack of available time.

Conceptually, although beyond the scope of this study, it is possible that participants engaged in compensation to maintain their overall sense of relatedness (as well as autonomy and competence). That is, Vallerand (2000) proposed that:

> Losses in self-determined motivation in one context (e.g., education) can lead a person to compensate in another context (e.g., leisure) by becoming more intrinsically motivated there. It is hypothesized that such a phenomenon allows individuals to restore (or keep) their global motivation at a certain (self-determined) level. (p. 315)

With motivation being a product of basic psychological need satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2017), it is possible that participants, for example, compensated for lower levels of relatedness in academics by seeking out closer relationships with teammates in sport. However, it is important to note that Deci and Ryan (2000) suggested that such "compensatory processes are expected to result not only in the defensiveness that protects them from the pain associated with need deficits but also in goal processes and contents that are associated with less than optimal performance and well-being" (p. 249). Thus, whether it is due to changing priorities and interests (Raabe & Readdy, 2016) or in an attempt to compensate losses in need fulfillment in a particular life domain, stakeholders need to understand that it is important to cultivate high need satisfaction in *both* sport and academics, and not rely on compensation effects to facilitate student-athletes' overall experiences. In line with the conclusions by Nichols et al. (2019), this recommended dual focus "contradicts some of the narrative that academic, social, and everyday activities detract from athletic performance or that student-athletes are discouraged from participating in extra activity in the higher education landscape" (p. 330).

Due to the important practical implications, future researchers should specifically explore this cross-contextual influence of need fulfillment using a variable-centered approach, which allows for the examination of individual variables in each context as well as causal relationships between these variables across settings (Bergman et al., 2003). To the authors' knowledge, limited research has been conducted to investigate this interplay between motivational tenets in different settings (Vallerand, 2000), especially as it pertains to athletes. For example, Martin (2008) demonstrated the domain-specificity of motivational tenets using confirmatory factor analysis. Similarly, Milyavskaya and Koestner (2011) found that need fulfillment significantly influenced individuals' motivation across over 800 different domains. However, in neither study did the researchers consider the potential cross-contextual effect between the various domains. Furthermore, none of these endeavors were conducted in the sport setting in general or intercollegiate athletics specifically. This appears to be a worthy gap to address because a balance in need fulfillment has been shown to, for example, enhance overall adjustment (Milyavskaya et al., 2009) and prevent burnout (Perreault et al., 2007).

Limitations

Despite the current study's contribution to the literature, there are limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, while the sample included both male and female participants from a range of sports, recruiting individuals from other (especially revenue-producing) sports, those who do not self-identify as White/Caucasian, and more men for the qualitative investigation would likely offer a more comprehensive perspective about student-athletes' experiences of need fulfillment in sport and academics. Second, this study only explored one single time point in student-athletes' participation and it would be valuable to use a longitudinal approach to investigate potential changes in their experiences, especially as they mature from freshmen to seniors. Third, given the low internal consistency for the academic autonomy subscale, it would be valuable to either examine the applicability of other instruments or, ideally, develop a specific measure for the assessment of student-athletes' need fulfilment in academics. Fourth, the current research solely focused on the satisfaction of student-athletes' basic psychological needs and it would be beneficial to also explore their perceptions of need thwarting (see Costa et al., 2015 for conceptual differences) in their dual roles.

Conclusion

In sum, the current findings indicate that while student-athletes may have *two roles*, they are still only *one person* as their participation—including the respective demands, challenges, and experiences—in one setting cannot be separated from their participation in another (in this case sport and academics). Thus, it appears that efforts to foster need-supportive climates in one of the two settings alone (e.g., only in sport)—while valuable—likely fail to comprehensively support student-athletes' need fulfillment. Granted, it seems unreasonable to suggest that stakeholders (e.g., coaches, sport psychology professionals, instructors, academic counselor) can limit the performance demands in either domain. Instead, to facilitate student-athletes' ability to think, feel, and act optimally as they engage in their dual roles as performers in sport and academics, it is essential for those stakeholders to be mindful of not only the expectations and challenges in their respective setting but also the other context. While most of these stakeholders are inherently concerned with just one of student-athletes' roles (e.g., coaches with sport, academic counselors with academics), open communication and mutual consideration between everyone involved in student-athletes' participation would likely provide them with a foundation to successfully manage their time and priorities across both settings.

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Note

[1] The person-oriented approach (Bergman et al., 2003) is grounded in developmental psychology recognizing that people, their characteristics, and the development of both are unique. Accordingly, instead of isolating variables as the main analytical units, this conceptual approach considers the interaction among the constructs of interest in collectively shaping individual participants' cognition, affect, and behavior.

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Athletic Fundraising: An In-depth Analysis of the Challenges Faced and Strategies Utilized in the NCAA Division II Athletic Landscape

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In the current economic environment, state appropriations to higher education are continually decreasing, with cuts in state aid resulting in universities undergoing significant financial cuts. In particular, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II athletic departments have been seriously impacted. The Division II structure requires athletic programs to depend on private, charitable contributions, brought in through organized fundraising activities. This study used the previous athletic fundraising literature and stakeholder theory to guide 14 semi-structured interviews with Division II athletic fundraisers, representing a wide range of public universities. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the major challenges that individuals who fundraise for Division II athletic departments face as well as the strategies that are being used to overcome those challenges. This study also aimed to identify the role that stakeholders played in athletic fundraising and how stakeholder claims of power, urgency, and legitimacy guided the fundraising process. Theoretical and practical implications are also advanced.

Keywords: athletic fundraising, Division II, intercollegiate athletics, stakeholder theory

Introduction

In trying economic times, state appropriations to higher education have decreased. Academic programs, faculty positions, student scholarships, and athletic departments have all undergone significant financial cuts (Mitchell et al., 2017), including at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II level, whose athletic departments are not self-supporting. In fact, a primary revenue source for these departments includes support from state governments through designated funds for intercollegiate athletics (DeSchriver, 2009). Another essential revenue stream for NCAA Division II athletic programs are charitable contributions, which are procured through organized fundraising strategies (Fulks, 2019). Overall, the

summary of data from 2019 showed the median generated revenue for Division II schools with football was $887,000 compared to a median expense of $7.4 million. Meanwhile, schools not sponsoring football saw a similar gap between median revenue ($414,000) and expenses ($5.8 million) (Fulks, 2019).

Due to their reliance on shrinking state funds, financial perils facing Division II schools are prevalent. Often times, small, across-the-board cuts are not sufficient and sport reductions must occur (DeSchriver, 2009). This reduction of state support has recently impacted NCAA Division II institutions. For example, following the conclusion of the 2017 football season, Humboldt State University (CA) was forced to privately raise $500,000 to continue operation of its football program as the university faced a spending reduction of $9 million over its next budget cycle. The athletic department failed to reach that amount, and a month prior to the 2018 season, the university announced it would discontinue the program (Humboldt State, 2018). In 2019, St. Cloud State University eliminated its football and men's and women's golf programs, citing budget and Title IX concerns (Hertel, 2019). As more Division II athletic departments are forced to eliminate sport programs due to budget constraints, the importance of fundraising has never been more apparent. Philanthropic gifts are a key to generating additional revenue dollars that can alleviate the financial strains associated with increased scholarship costs, coaching salaries, and operating budgets (Plinske, 1999).

Like Division I, Division II offers student-athletes financial aid packages. However, the amount of scholarships Division II schools can provide are far fewer than Division I. For example, under current NCAA regulations, Division I programs at the highest level can provide up to 85 scholarships in the sport of football, while Division II programs have a cap of 36 ("Division II Partial-Scholarship Model," 2016). Division II also has a unique partial athletic scholarship model that allows a further range of student-athletes to receive athletic-related financial aid. Unlike Division I, Division II athletic departments' budgets are exponentially smaller. However, different from the Division III level, whose budgets these institutions most likely mirror, Division II programs still provide athletic scholarships, while Division III does not, thus positioning these schools as a hybrid of Division I and III in terms of funding philosophy.

Athletic fundraising and the way professionals manage stakeholders at the Division II level are unique because of the size of the institutions and athletic departments as well as the drastically smaller budgets, compared to their Division I peers. Stakeholders of all kinds can influence or be influenced by an organization and its hierarchy. A Division II athletic department's ability to engage in successful fundraising is essential for its sustained growth and operation. Fundraising's relevance has maintained critical importance due to the financial fallout that has resulted from sport cancellations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Torres, 2020). To date, most studies have focused on the issues and trends regarding fundraising at the Division I level and have not examined fundraising at the Division II level.

The purpose of this exploratory study, therefore, was to identify the major challenges that individuals who fundraise for Division II athletic departments face

as well as the strategies that are being used to overcome those challenges. From a theoretical perspective, this study is significant because it will help scholars develop a deeper understanding of Division II athletic fundraising from a stakeholder management perspective, with a particular focus on those with power, urgency, and legitimacy. Additionally, this study provides managerial insights into the challenges that athletic fundraisers face at the Division II level.

Theoretical Framework

While widely used in strategic management, Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory aptly applies to the Division II athletic fundraising context. Stakeholder theory recognizes that businesses and non-profits alike have several agendas and stakeholder needs that they must serve. Freeman argued that organizations must create as much value as possible for these stakeholders because they can influence strategic direction and also be influenced by the organization. There is a history of scholars applying stakeholder theory within the sport management field as well as athletic fundraising (Covell, 2004, 2005; Huml & Cintron, 2021; Steadland, 2015; Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2011). Athletic departments are multi-level organizations comprised of numerous stakeholders (athletic directors, chancellors, coaches, and donors) with influence, both internally and externally.

Mitchell et al. (1997) defined a stakeholder as an entity such as a person, group, community, institution, and even the environment that are influenced by the firm. Freeman considered a stakeholder to be "Any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (1984, p. 25). In athletic fundraising, these stakeholders can include coaches, administrators, alumni, donors, the local community, and other university and foundation personnel. Stakeholders have a direct impact on an organization's success or failure. In a Division II athletic fundraising environment, stakeholders can influence success or failure by more than simply providing or withholding donations. For instance, a coach or administrator who mismanages donor relations could deter a donor from providing funds. According to Mitchell et al. (1997), stakeholders can be classified with regards to how much power, legitimacy, and urgency they have.

Salancik and Pfeffer (1974) stated that power is the ability to affect and bring change to a desired outcome. Power is one of the most prevalent concepts in athletic fundraising as it pertains to stakeholders. In a transaction-based program (one party giving another a sum of cash or cash-equivalents in exchange for an expected benefit), this claim comes into play frequently. For example, a donor who provides his or her resources ultimately has the final discretion at where those dollars may go. With regards to legitimacy, Mitchell et al.'s (1997) definition separates it from power through the distinction of authority:

> An entity may have legitimate standing in society, or it may have a legitimate claim on the firm, but unless it has either power to enforce its will in the relationship or a perception that its claim is urgent, it will not achieve salience for the firm's managers. (p. 866).

Legitimacy is a social currency (Suchman, 1995). Claims of legitimacy can often occur in the athletic fundraising sector when a donor contributes to both athletic and academic endeavors. The university foundation, which is aiming to secure academic donations in this scenario, serves as the organization with the legitimate claim. In this instance, it could have a legitimate claim over the athletic development officer because academics could hold a higher, more legitimate position in the university setting. Finally, a claim has urgency when it meets two conditions: "(1) when a relationship or claim is time-sensitive in nature, and (2) when the relationship or claim is important or critical to the stakeholder" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 867). The most common example of this in a practical setting is when administrators (i.e., university presidents and athletic directors), coaches, and donors have a desire to see projects or initiatives fundraised and completed in a swift manner.

Review of Literature

The literature on athletic fundraising has focused on the strategies and challenges surrounding the impact of winning on a department's ability to fundraise and donors' behaviors and motivations (Boenigk & Scherhag, 2013; Brunette et al., 2017; Covell, 2005; Huml et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Park et al., 2016; Popp et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2010; Walker, 2015). Covell (2005) applied stakeholder theory to assess the impact that winning intercollegiate athletic teams had on athletic department donations at Ivy League schools, finding that an individual's decision to donate to an athletic department was not affected by on-field results. Furthermore, participants in the study did not expect their donations to lead to more on-field victories. Huml and Cintron (2021) examined perceived status by fundraisers as they identify, manage, and prioritize their stakeholders, finding that status was a useful tool for donor management.

Walker (2015) examined athletic department donations the year following an institution's participation in the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Final Four and major college football bowl games over a 10-year period (2002-2011). Walker compared contributions to those schools with significant athletic department success to those departments that did not experience athletic success, concluding that there were increases in overall private support at more successful institutions.

Recent scholarship has also examined the tendencies within the Division II fundraising landscape. Kim et al. (2019) expanded upon previous research to examine donor motivations, finding that these included philanthropy commitment and power, with less focus on tangible benefits. Donor behaviors and motivations have been a consistent focus in prior research as it relates to athletic fundraising challenges and strategies (Brunette et al., 2017; Ko et al., 2014; Park et al., 2016). In order for industry professionals to secure financial charitable contributions, they must develop an understanding of the constituency groups with whom they work. This applies particularly to the concept of stakeholder theory because development officers must cultivate trust and build a knowledge base with their stakeholders to maximize financial contributions to an athletic department.

The literature has shown there are several factors that influence a donor's behavior. They include, but are not limited to: (1) whether the individual was a student-athlete at the institution (Shapiro et al., 2010); (2) whether or not that person is an alumnus (Baade & Sundberg, 1996); (3) age at which an individual's association with the school began (Popp et al., 2016); and (4) quality of customer service received by the donor (Shapiro, 2010). Fundraising units at the Division I level can have multiple individuals dedicated towards stewardship, donor relations, and even outbound ticket sales staffs (McEvoy et al., 2013). However, institutions operating at the Division II and III levels are not afforded such luxuries and must find ways to serve their constituents with limited staff. This could serve as a significant obstacle when it comes to development officers overcoming the challenges they face when fundraising at these levels due to their additional job responsibilities and limited staff sizes.

This study was guided by the following research questions, which were motivated by the literature on athletic fundraising and stakeholder theory (Covell, 2004, 2005; Huml & Cintron, 2021; Popp et al., 2016; Steadland, 2015):

Research Question (RQ) 1: What are the main challenges development officers and other athletic fundraisers face in the process of athletic fundraising at Division II institutions?

Research Question (RQ) 2: What strategies are employed by development officers and athletic fundraisers to address the challenges they face in raising funds for Division II athletic departments?

Research Question (RQ) 3: How do power, urgency, and legitimacy of stakeholders guide and shape athletic fundraising efforts at Division II institutions?

Method

Given the exploratory nature of this study and to obtain more in-depth knowledge about the field of athletic fundraising, a qualitative approach was undertaken (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Also, due to the fact that limited research has been conducted with Division II athletic fundraising, this study was exploratory in nature, which lends itself to qualitative methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We chose to focus on public institutions so that we could conduct a deeper level of analysis across a set number of variables. Additionally, with the continued decrease in state funding support for higher education (Mitchell et al., 2019), public institutions have had to rely on additional revenue streams for functionality, such as philanthropy.

Sample and Participants

The subject pool was determined through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2012) in the fall of 2018. This approach was taken in order to build a portfolio of participants whose public institutions were as representative of the NCAA Division II landscape as possible. Because of this, the school (athletic department) was selected first. From there, we looked through their staff directories. Individuals with a job title centered around fundraising were selected first. In some cases, schools

had individuals overseeing external relations. After reading biographies detailing job responsibilities, some of those individuals were selected. If no such individuals could be identified, we pinpointed the athletic director as the person who met this criterion. At the time of this study, there were a total of 145 public Division II institutions spread throughout 19 conferences. The remaining four conferences (out of a total of 23), were comprised solely of private institutions.

A database was then assembled of the 145 potential schools. The goal of the sampling procedure was to conduct maximum variation sampling to have variance on multiple variables. The inclusion criteria focused on factors such as enrollment, with data taken from the most recent figures reported by *U.S. News & World Report* in 2018. This was done for consistency, as reliable, current data were not available from all institutional websites (Morse et. al., 2018). Location and on-field athletic success were also included. In order to achieve the best representation, fundraisers within athletic departments all across the United States were invited to participate (Stark-Mason, 2019). To objectively determine on-field athletic success we utilized a three-year average of rankings from the Learfield Director's Cup. Lastly, athletic department composition was factored. This included the number of NCAA sports at the institution and whether it sponsored a football program.

Based on these criteria, a total of 47 potential participants were contacted by email inviting them to participate in a semi-structured interview over the phone, video call, or in-person. A subsequent follow-up email was sent to non-respondents one to two weeks after the initial email. Overall, 14 development professionals agreed to participate in this study. Subjects had a wide range of job titles and responsibilities in addition to fundraising, with positions ranging from assistant directors of development to senior level athletic department administrators and university foundation officials. The only requirement for participants was that athletic fundraising had to be a significant component of their job responsibilities. The participant demographics are highlighted in Table 1, while the institutional profile of schools is provided in Table 2. Each institution included in this study had 1-2 dedicated fundraisers in their athletic department (outside of an athletic director).

Pseudonyms were assigned to each fundraiser to protect their identity. In total, there were 12 male participants and two female participants. These demographics are likely representative of the gender distribution in fundraising, with more males occupying athletic fundraising positions (Wanless et al., 2017).

Data Collection and Analysis

After Institutional Review Board approval, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews. Since every fundraiser and institution are different in their challenges and strategies, a semi-structured approach was utilized in order to acquire rich and accurate data (Creswell, 2012). Of the 14 interviews, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each, 12 occurred over the phone, while two took place in person. The interviews were digitally audio recorded, with the first author transcribing all interviews verbatim. After conducting 14 interviews, the authors determined that data saturation was reached as no new themes were emerging (Creswell, 2012).

Table 1

Participant Table

Pseudonym	Fundraising Experience	Athletic Fundraising Experience	Employment Reporting Structure
Fundraiser 1 (School 1)	32 years	2 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 2 (School 2)	9.5 years	9.5 years	Athletic Department
Fundraiser 3 (School 3)	30 years	5 years	Foundation
Fundraiser 4 (School 4)	3 years	3 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 5 (School 5)	11 years	11 years	Foundation
Fundraiser 6 (School 6)	3 years	2 years	Athletic Department
Fundraiser 7 (School 7)	7 years	7 years	Foundation
Fundraiser 8 (School 8)	2.5 years	2.5 years	Athletic Department
Fundraiser 9 (School 9)	2.5 years	2.5 years	Athletic Department
Fundraiser 10 (School 10)	2 years	2 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 11 (School 11)	1.5 years	1.5 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 12 (School 12)	7 years	7 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 13 (School 13)	18 years	5 years	Foundation
Fundraiser 14 (School 14)	13 years	13 years	Foundation

Table 2

Institutional Profiles

Pseudonym	Location*	Enrollment	Learfield Director's Cup Finish	# of Sports (Student-Athletes)**	Football Y/N
School 1	City	20,000+	150-200	11 (200-250)	No
School 2	Suburb	5,000-10,000	50-100	11 (300-350)	Yes
School 3	Suburb	15,000-20,000	1-50	13 (300-350)	Yes
School 4	Suburb	10,000-15,000	50-100	12 (350-400)	Yes
School 5	Rural	0-5,000	100-150	13 (350-400)	Yes
School 6	Rural	0-5,000	50-100	16 (350-400)	No
School 7	Rural	10,000-15,000	50-100	14 (350-400)	Yes
School 8	City	15,000-20,000	100-150	15 (200-250)	No
School 9	Rural	5,000-10,000	50-100	20 (500+)	Yes
School 10	Suburb	10,000-15,000	1-50	15 (450-500)	Yes
School 11	Rural	5,000-10,000	50-100	13 (350-400)	Yes
School 12	Suburb	5,000-10,000	150-200	14 (400-450)	Yes
School 13	Suburb	10,000-15,000	50-100	18 (450-500)	Yes
School 14	Rural	10,000-15,000	50-100	15 (300-450)	Yes

*Location was determined as follows, with populations details based on 2020 U.S. Census data: City – University is located in a city with more than 1,000,000 residents; Suburb – University is located within a 100 mile radius of a metropolitan area over 1,000,000; Rural – University is located outside of a 100 mile radius of a metropolitan area over 1,000,000.

**Student-athlete data was obtained from the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) 2019-20 database report.

The interview guide was grounded in stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and developed based on the literature in athletic fundraising (Martinez et al., 2010; Shapiro & Ridinger, 2011; Stinson & Howard, 2008). Sample questions included: "What are the biggest challenges when it comes to athletic fundraising at your particular institution?"; "Broadly speaking, what do you think are the biggest factors that lead to successful athletic fundraising at the Division II level?"; and "What group of stakeholders have the most influence upon your fundraising decisions and why?" As the interviews progressed, questions were added because of the iterative and free-flowing nature of the conversations. An example of a question that was added is: "What impact do winning teams have on your ability to fundraise, if at all?"

Data were first analyzed through a priori coding based on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and the athletic fundraising literature (Boenigk & Scherhag, 2013; Popp et al., 2016). The data were coded initially to the challenges and strategies that athletic fundraisers faced as identified in the literature, and with regards to stakeholder theory (Creswell, 2012). A second round of open coding occurred in order to identify emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Table 3 outlines the key themes as well as sample and selective codes that were identified as challenges and strategies.

Table 3
Challenges – Key Themes, Sample Codes, and Selective Codes

Focus	Key themes (stage)	Representative code (# of mentions)
Challenges	Institutional factors (A, O)	Culture of giving (6) Institutional history (6) Institutional support (6)
Challenges	Investment in fundraising (A, O)	Staffing (15) Budget (4) Lack of AD fundraising (3)
Challenges	Other donor interests/fatigue (A)	Academic interests (4) Competition vs. larger schools (4) Donor fatigue (3)
Challenges	Relationship with foundation (A, O)	Communication with foundation (5) Collaboration with foundation (4) Foundation resources (2)
Challenges	Success of athletic teams (A)	Inability to leverage wins (5) Lack of athletic department success (3) Reliance on winning (3)
Strategies	Role of stakeholders (A, O)	Coaches' engagement & involvement (15) Student-athlete connection (13) Student-athlete experience (3)
Strategies	Building & growing donor base (A)	Engaging constituents (7) Building donor relationships (4) Alumni word of mouth (3)
Strategies	Strategic fundraising plan (A, O)	Identifying sport program needs (6) Developing annual fund (5) Identifying donor interests (5)
Strategies	Relationship with foundation (A, O)	Collaboration with foundation (9) Access to foundation resources (8) Internal communication (5)
Strategies	Investment in fundraising (A, O)	Institutional support (8) Athletic director involvement (5) Staffing (3)

Note: The table also reflects the stage of coding – a priori (A) and open (O).

In qualitative research, it is necessary for a researcher to ensure trustworthiness, dependability, and credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To help address these issues, confidentially was ensured to participants, their respective institutions, and athletic departments. This encouraged participants to speak honestly about the issues, strategies, and challenges. Member checking was utilized to enhance the dependability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interview transcripts were sent to each participant to review for accuracy and clarity. Study interpretations were also sent to participants for member checking to enhance the credibility of the results. While limited responses were received for this member check, the three participants who responded to this inquiry were in agreement with the interpretations. To further enhance credibility of this study, a peer debriefer was also utilized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An assistant dean for advancement at a major Midwestern university with many years of experience in athletics and university fundraising served as the peer debriefer. This individual was in agreement with the findings and interpretations from this study.

Findings

First, findings related to RQ 1 will be presented, followed by the findings related to RQ 2. The findings for RQ 3, the role that power, urgency, and legitimacy have in the athletic fundraising process, will be addressed throughout the first two sections.

RQ 1: Challenges Facing Division II Athletic Fundraisers

The first research question aimed to identify the core challenges that athletic fundraisers face in the NCAA Division II landscape. The key challenges that were most frequently mentioned included: 1) institutional factors, 2) investment in fundraising, 3) other donor interests and fatigue, 4) relationship with foundation, and 5) success of athletic teams.

Institutional Factors

All but one of the participants cited institutional factors as a barrier when it came to fundraising for athletics. These barriers were a result of elements both inside and outside of an athletic department that impacted the success of athletic fundraising. For the most part, these factors were uncontrollable for the development officers. Fundraiser 10 succinctly summarized the challenges related to the university's philanthropic history as: "That institutional buy-in and having the resources, no question is the number one obstacle."

Institutional support can be viewed through two lenses: the university's prioritization of athletics and the institution's financial support of athletics, which overall were mentioned by five different fundraisers. Intercollegiate athletics can rank low on an institution's or president's priority list. When it comes to creating a vision and plan for athletic fundraising and the department, the administrative focus on athletics can play a factor, as strategic direction for an organization begins at the top of a hierarchical pyramid. The de-prioritization of athletics on a campus can

happen regardless of on-field athletic success. Fundraiser 1 mentioned that athletics has been deprioritized for years at their institution:

> We had a president that tried to do away with intercollegiate athletics. It was the culmination of a number of years of deprioritizing intercollegiate athletics. That has had a ripple effect in terms of alumni's willingness or interest in engaging with the university in general.

However, Fundraiser 3 shared one of the reasons donors may not give to athletics at his institution, despite their on-field success, was because "we're not a particularly school-spirited campus. The students typically don't rally around athletics, so there is just not the intensity that I think some donors like and get at the Division I level."

Intercollegiate athletics being deprioritized on campus can occur regardless of on-field success, as our participants illustrated. For fundraisers, this can create an unenviable situation. In this case, the institution serves as an internal stakeholder with power, as the university has control of athletics in this situation. When an individual donor has the claim of power, they hold far less of it when compared to the institution itself. A donor also has power in deciding whether or not to donate due to a lack of on-field athletic success.

Investment in Fundraising

An investment in athletic fundraising was the second-most cited challenge. Ten out of 14 participants mentioned issues relating to staffing, fundraising budgets, and how their other job responsibilities can inhibit their engagement in fundraising activities. Because of the nature of Division II, athletic departments are smaller and staffing is limited. As was evidenced in Table 1, only four athletic departments even had fundraisers employed directly by their unit, reporting directly to the athletic director.

A lack of dedicated fundraising professionals presents challenges. Fundraiser 4 is tasked with securing donations for a number of sports, including football, at an institution with an enrollment between 10,000-15,000. He noted: "If you can't expand your staff or your ability to reach all of those people, you're essentially leaving money on the table just because you can't make the ask."

In addition to funding the actual positions, having a budget to engage in fundraising activities is also a challenge. Fundraisers shared about how they would like to see additional staff members, as an increase in budget would increase their capability to raise funds. Fundraiser 5 highlighted: "I think that is one of the main things, and it's not just Division II, its smaller universities. They may not be able to fund the position well enough for it to be successful."

Other Donor Interests and Fatigue

It is not uncommon for individuals to have multiple philanthropic interests. Athletic fundraisers are vying for these philanthropic dollars in a crowded market (i.e., competition). As individuals and families show a willingness to give, other non-profits in a community may ask for similar support, and this can lead to donor fatigue. Other donor interests and donor fatigue were discussed by nine fundraisers.

One of the biggest competing interests athletic fundraisers face is Division I athletic programs. For institutions who are in the backyard of a Division I school, the smaller Division II program can be a secondary interest for donors. In essence, Division I schools may have more legitimacy in the eyes of donors. Four fundraisers talked about the need to gain legitimacy with their stakeholder groups, as illustrated by Fundraiser 3:

> We kind of live in the shadow of (redacted institution name), even though we're 90 miles away. We have a lot of people in our town who have (redacted institution name) season tickets and drive down to the games. I think that some donors really like to get caught up in the frenzy of Division I athletics.

Another challenge in a crowded intercollegiate athletics environment is building affinity for their program and student-athletes from donors, alumni, and community members. Fundraiser 10 explained: "My student-athlete could walk out on the court here and half the town hasn't met him yet because it's his first game. I think we have to go a little bit further in building that affinity and then translating that affinity to philanthropic giving."

Relationships with University Foundation

Division I programs often have their entire athletic fundraising arm as a unit within the athletic department, separate from the campus' central advancement unit. That is not the case for programs at other NCAA levels. For example, Fundraiser 7 reports to a foundation executive. He shared about his athletic department's relationship with the campus foundation: "At Division II, you may not have that level of involvement or engagement from the institution to give you the help you need, and that can be a very difficult thing." In many ways, this gives credence of power and urgency to the university.

Most of the challenges focused around a lack of communication between the two units. Foundation offices have access to greater resources, such as software programs that keep track of donor information, prospect tracking and development lists, and wealth screening and identification. In these situations, the foundation has additional legitimacy over athletic departments. Fundraiser 9 is an athletic administrator with no direct reports in the foundation and described the relationship between the two units: "I think there can definitely be more communication and more cohesiveness between the two of us, and look at it more as partners instead of competitors."

A lack of collaboration and communication between individual fundraisers and campus units can present additional challenges, such as possessiveness of donors. Fundraiser 8 reports directly to her athletic director, and shared: "That's a problem across the divisions where advancement departments are territorial of their donors and they want to make sure that athletics isn't taking over their donors or trying to steal them." A foundation office by itself does not necessarily have more power, urgency, or legitimacy than other internal stakeholders such as the institution's leadership team. However, when combined, the foundation's claim encourages an athletic department to be a collaborative partner rather than a more individualistic one.

Success of Athletics Teams

Finally, one of the iterative questions that emerged as the conversations continued was the impact of winning athletics teams. For some, as eight fundraisers mentioned, winning or a lack thereof was a challenge. Fundraisers 2, 3, and 13 all fundraise for athletic departments that had a Learfield Director's Cup three-year composite average in the top-100. They spoke about the challenge of highlighting wins to their donor base, as illustrated by Fundraiser 2: "I don't think there is a direct correlation between winning and an increase in fundraising. Unless you have a solid team behind that can kind of help mold that, but I think it is a very particular case-by-case instance."

Fundraiser 3 noted that from his first-hand experience, winning has not made his job any easier: "We've had some national championship teams here and we've not seen a boost in fundraising for those particular teams. We're very successful athletically and academically, but there just is not that feeling of great excitement around athletics."

RQ 2: Strategies for Division II Athletic Fundraisers

The second research question aimed to uncover the main strategies that athletic fundraisers utilize in the NCAA Division II landscape to address fundraising challenges. The primary strategies are: 1) capitalizing on the role of stakeholders, 2) building and growing a donor base, 3) developing a strategic fundraising plan, 4) cultivating a relationship with the foundation, and 5) investing in fundraising.

Capitalizing on the Role of Stakeholders

Stakeholders play a critical role in the success of an athletic fundraising program. The utilization and recognition of stakeholders was a prominent strategy for success. Thirteen development officers mentioned the role that stakeholders play in the success of athletic fundraising. The two most frequently mentioned stakeholders when it came to the strategic approaches in fundraising were coaches and student-athletes.

Additionally, each interviewee was asked what group of stakeholders had the most influence on their fundraising decisions. The sub-themes explore the stakeholders with power (donors), legitimacy (coaches), and urgency (institutional leadership). While not as significant as coaches, fundraisers did note the legitimacy that student-athletes provide to the fundraising process. Stakeholders with urgency – the institutional leadership – will be explicated in the strategy of investment in fundraising.

Role of Donors. Donors are an incredibly important stakeholder group when it comes to athletic fundraising, as they have the claim of power. Each fundraiser was asked which stakeholder group had the most influence, and donor was the most commonly mentioned stakeholder, noted by eight interviewees. External stakeholder donors who are not student-athletes can be a variety of individuals, such as non-athletic alumni of the institution, friends of the university, and other community

members. Fundraiser 5 shared that his athletic department's most important stakeholders were engaged alumni and community members, noting that by nature of giving a donation, donors become invested in a program. This can then have a trickle-down effect to other donors:

> They are the ones who are already invested . . . I think as you're asking more donors, showing them that appreciation and consideration from your current donors only helps them tell the story and build trust and equity amongst other constituent groups. Now others are saying this donor has had a really good experience. That is how I know to trust you guys.

Role of Coaches. Nine fundraisers noted the role that coaches play in their success, with six fundraisers mentioning that coaches were their most influential stakeholder. The data shows coaches play an essential role in the engagement and cultivation of donors. Fundraiser 7 re-iterated: "I think it's the biggest factor. Coaches need to have that idea of identification of working people through the development process. There may be four or five people that are really intimate with a (sport) program that I don't know, but the coaches will." Coaches who are engaged and involved in the fundraising process can have a positive impact on athletic fundraising. By the nature of their position, coaches have an intimate knowledge and legitimacy about their program and its needs. They have the ability to identify additional potential donors and further enhance a relationship between a donor and the athletic department in a way that a fundraiser may not be able to do.

In order to effectively utilize coaches in the fundraising process, it is first necessary for development officers to build a relationship and foster trust with their coaches. Fundraiser 1 spoke to this: "I've definitely found that in the sports that I don't have a relationship with the coaches, I get a no – I'm just another guy who's asking them to do something." As soon as that trust is built, coaches are often more willing to be a part of the process. Fundraiser 10 added: "All of my coaches know that if I've got a donor in town or on campus who wants to see them, I'm not asking to take their time unless there's a purpose." Thus, it is important for coaches to feel a sense of urgency when it comes to fundraising.

Role of Student-Athletes. Another heavily emphasized internal stakeholder group was student-athletes, with nine respondents mentioning the role student-athletes play in the fundraising process. The fundraisers' strategies centered around sharing student-athlete stories and focusing on connecting student-athletes with their donor base. Following a fundraising auction, Fundraiser 2 sent out a survey seeking feedback from donors, sharing: "Everyone, 20 out of 21 people, said their favorite part was the student-athlete. That's kind of my goal is to tell more of the student-athlete story." He added: "They are amazed at the stories that they have . . . [Division II] is truly about the student-athlete experience. Donors like hearing that. The student-athletes are a big thing."

There is value in all stakeholder groups, but as the data shows, leveraging stakeholders with legitimacy (coaches) and catering a fundraising program towards

stakeholders with power (donors) can be an effective fundraising strategy, particularly as it pertains to stakeholder involvement.

Building and Growing a Donor Base

An athletic department's donor base is one of its most important stakeholder groups. Donors are stakeholders with power, and fundraisers view them as having the most influence upon their fundraising decisions. Strategies for building and growing an athletics donor base focused on engagement with stakeholders, such as alumni and former student-athletes, and spreading the athletic department message through word of mouth. Eleven fundraisers pointed to this strategy.

In order to effectively grow and build a donor base, fundraisers look to the relationships they are cultivating or additional relationships they might need to build, highlighting the urgency with which a fundraiser needs to operate. This is even more important for Division II schools because fundraisers are more reliant on altruistic-based gifts, rather than transactional-based gifts like Division I is (Popp et al., 2016). Fundraiser 9 related:

> I think there's a lot of, when you get to bigger Division I schools, there's more of the return on investment, so it's more of a business transaction. While we do have a lot of partners that feel that way, it's also about a greater cause in the student-athlete success and scholarships. I think having those relationships . . . is the most important thing, and if they trust you then they're going to be more inclined to give.

The trust that is built between a fundraiser and their stakeholders is an essential component to successful athletic fundraising. However, a fundraiser can leverage their stakeholders, particularly donors, to develop trust amongst one another. In essence, they can build a word of mouth understanding that is shared from one stakeholder to another that creates additional support. Fundraiser 13 alluded to this: "We can say it over and over again, but if it comes from an alum, it makes a huge difference. They'll believe them quicker than they'll believe us." This demonstrated the legitimacy that donors and alumni can have within their own stakeholder group.

Developing a Strategic Fundraising Plan

Strategic planning is an essential component for developing a successful athletic fundraising plan. Every fundraiser was asked what their department's athletic fundraising program entailed, and they noted aspects such as an annual fund, capital campaigns, alumni reunions, and golf tournaments. However, in order to engage in successful athletic fundraising, a clear strategic plan must be in place in order to achieve the greatest engagement with stakeholders. This can then lead to additional fundraising dollars. While every fundraiser talked about what their athletic fundraising program entailed, 10 fundraisers emphasized the need to be strategic in their fundraising.

Fundraiser 10 said: "It begins with our annual fund, no question. That is the bread and butter." Fundraiser 7 felt similarly: "I think the very first thing you start with when you look at something in Division II, when I'm coming into an operation

. . . is the foundational pyramid of annual gifts." Annual funds lay the groundwork for an athletic fundraising strategic plan. Not only does it serve as a revenue source, it also provides a donor base from which an athletic department can work. Fundraiser 6 added what he thought led to successful athletic fundraising at the Division II level: "I think first and foremost that we have some kind of plan . . . I think it begins with a plan, and then with that plan complementing the booster club and fundraising projects." Having a strategic plan highlighted a stakeholder group's legitimacy and urgency.

The practice of athletic fundraising involves matching a donor's interest with an athletic department's need. Because of this, another aspect of a strategic fundraising plan is having clearly identified program needs. This is where athletic fundraisers need to rely on internal stakeholders, such as coaches, in order to have the best insight into what needs there might be. Fundraiser 7 noted the importance of coaches identifying program needs and leveraging their legitimacy towards the fundraiser, "They need to create a tangible list of what the program needs. People ask 'how can I help out the program'? I'm not sure what the volleyball program needs, but the coach is able to talk about that tangible list."

Cultivating a Relationship with the Foundation

There is no doubt that a strong partnership between an athletic department and a university's central advancement unit has a positive impact on an athletic fundraiser's ability to do their job. Ten fundraisers noted aspects that a positive relationship with a foundation had on their ability to engage in successful fundraising activities. The groundwork for this success begins with collaborative efforts amongst the two entities. As a result of that, athletic departments gain access to highly useful foundation resources. Communication is at the core of this strategy. Fundraiser 7 is housed in the athletic department but reports to an individual in the campus' main foundation office. He spoke to multiple benefits that can come from utilizing foundation assets: "We have the foundation and all of their expertise – all of their knowledge available to us." Fundraiser 11 talked about the value in the partnership between the two campus units: "I couldn't do it under one area of just athletics or the foundation. Being able to bounce ideas off everyone and using the tangible resources – you have to have that partnership." For the fundraisers, foundation offices can serve as a stakeholder group with great legitimacy.

Investing in Fundraising

An investment in fundraising is a direct way to combat the biggest challenges in Division II athletic fundraising, that of staffing, budget constraints, and other job responsibilities outside of fundraising. Nine fundraisers mentioned investments in athletic fundraising that they have been able to utilize as a strategy. Additionally, two fundraisers noted institutional leadership as the stakeholder that had the greatest impact on their fundraising decisions.

To be successful, the investment in fundraising has to start at the athletic department level. Fundraiser 14 said: "You have to have that buy in from the coaches,

from the AD [athletic director] and knowing that everyone is on the same page." Fundraiser 5 added: "For example, we have one main fundraiser for philanthropy for athletics and that's me. To be able to fund the operation of that where if I need to hop on a plane and go to Phoenix to talk to an alum, I need to be able to do that. And they do."

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the major challenges that individuals who fundraise for NCAA Division II athletic departments face as well as the strategies that are being used to overcome those challenges. In addition, this study aimed to better understand how stakeholders were involved through the claims of power, urgency, and legitimacy and the impact they have in the athletic fundraising process and experience (Mitchell et al., 1997).

RQ 1: Challenges Facing Division II Athletic Fundraisers

The first research question focused on the main challenges development officers and other athletic fundraisers face in the process of athletic fundraising at Division II institutions. The overarching theme surrounding these challenges was the fact that several of them were uncontrollable by the fundraiser. For instance, a development officer has no control over what other philanthropic opportunities may be nearby, such as a Division I athletic program. Additionally, the investment that is made in athletic fundraising is determined by the university itself. Athletic departments can have some input in showcasing the need for a fundraising position and budget, however, the final decision on the financial investment in athletic fundraising is not established by the fundraiser. Much of the previous literature has focused on athletic fundraising in the Division I environment, where fundraisers are typically given the resources they need to succeed (Shapiro & Ridinger, 2011; Popp et al., 2016). While studies have focused on Division III fundraising and the associated landscape (Feezell, 2009; Katz et al., 2015), there has not been a focus placed on the financial investment that Division II athletic fundraising receives. Again, Division II is in a unique position because of the scholarship component that must be fundraised for, while Division III does not provide scholarships to student-athletes. Therefore, Division III fundraisers do not have to necessarily operate under the same urgency as Division II fundraisers.

The institutional investment made in athletic fundraising is uncontrollable by the fundraiser for the most part. The athletic department and fundraisers can express need for additional support, but it presents challenges if the university leadership does not view athletic fundraising as a priority. Institutional investment as it relates to staffing and budgets is one of the noteworthy differentiators between Division I and II. If a university has a smaller donor base with a more limited capacity to give, this can present additional obstacles for the fundraiser because of the institution's alumni composition. As the data shows, the institution can be a stakeholder with power,

urgency, and legitimacy, and the university can often reflect all three simultaneously. This dynamic can evince uncontrollable factors for the athletic fundraiser.

Institutional barriers encompassed many of the challenges faced by fundraisers. Given that some participants were also fundraisers for areas outside of athletics, there could be conflicts of interest that cause internal strife. These challenges could be more unique to Division II due to these conflicts, as there is the expectation for athletics fundraisers that athletics should always be prioritized when that is not always reasonable in a higher education setting.

Another aspect identified in the literature was the role that winning athletic teams have on the success of fundraising (Stinson & Howard, 2008). However, results of the current study demonstrated this is not always the case at the Division II level. Fundraisers worked with athletic programs with great on-field success and with limited on-field success, and winning did not necessarily increase their ability to fundraise. Because Division II takes a more holistic approach to intercollegiate athletics, the emphasis at this level is placed on finding balance between academics and athletics. While winning is important in Division II, it is not the be-all goal that some Division I athletic departments have.

Much of the literature has focused on internal factors for mitigating challenges such as providing quality customer service to donors (Shapiro, 2010) or understanding donor motivations (Kim et al., 2019). The literature has focused primarily on fundraising at Division I institutions with abundant resources, and there has not been as much attention given to the ability of fundraisers to do their job at the Division II level. The current study showed a need for Division II fundraisers to effectively and efficiently perform their job responsibilities, and these factors include having the resources to effectively cultivate, solicit, and steward their donors and having a large enough staff to engage with an athletic department's entire donor base.

While there were varying responses from fundraisers at each of the schools, there were no noticeable differences based on institutional variables such as location, enrollment, Learfield Director's Cup Finish, number of varsity sports, and whether or not the institution sponsored football. For instance, as we noted in the findings for RQ 1, fundraisers at three institutions (Schools 2, 3, and 13) all experienced similar challenges related to fundraising based on athletic success. However, they had varying levels of enrollment and numbers of sponsored sports. Fundraiser 5 worked at one of the smallest schools, and he found donors to be his most important stakeholder group, despite their smaller alumni base.

This lack of difference could be due to the small-scale landscape that athletic fundraising operations have at the Division II level. While all of the schools in this study had an individual who has a core job function related to fundraising (beyond an athletic director or coach), there are athletic departments in Division II that do not have any staff members with a sole focus on fundraising. As such, the staffing concerns and budget constraints of Division II may not allow athletic departments to build fully robust development programs, and they may tend to resemble each other due to isomorphism, which would lead to similar challenges. Fundraisers who

are tasked with raising funds for multiple areas on a campus could also be further challenged by conflicting priorities such as an expectation that athletics should always be prioritized when that in fact may not always be the case.

RQ 2: Strategies Utilized by Division II Athletic Fundraisers

Our second research question sought to identify strategies employed by development officers and athletic fundraisers to address the challenges they face in raising funds for Division II athletic departments. The strategic utilization of stakeholders was the most widely implemented strategy. Three stakeholder groups were identified when it came to developing strategies: coaches, student-athletes, and donors.

Significant strategies noted in the literature demonstrated the importance of having a strategic fundraising plan (Walker, 2015; Wanless et al., 2017). Similarly, the findings of the current study highlight the need for departments to have a strategic, robust fundraising plan that extends beyond just fundraising activities. In the same respect that a poor relationship between an athletic department and university foundation can create challenges, a positive relationship can make all the difference (Plinske, 1999). Findings from the current study suggest athletic fundraisers should focus on building communication and collaboration with a central advancement unit. Foundation offices are stakeholders with legitimacy, as they have a plethora of resources for athletic fundraisers particularly those that are not employed directly by the foundation.

As Division II schools are typically smaller in size than their Division I counterparts with fewer students and employees, it is possible for athletic departments and fundraisers to build close working relationships across campus. Legitimacy is a strategy that can be utilized to demonstrate departmental knowledge, such as articulating what occurs within athletic departments and what athletics can provide to a campus. By utilizing their legitimacy, fundraisers can develop urgency amongst other university stakeholders to further demonstrate their needs (i.e., the need to have the ability to fundraise for scholarships, not simply budget items). In particular, this study extends the literature by identifying the challenges that athletic fundraisers deal with that occur outside of the intercollegiate athletics environment, and strategies they undertake to address these challenges.

One of the most consistent themes uncovered was the importance of bridging the relationship between an athletic department and university foundation office. We did see mixed responses on the positive or negative working relationship between the two entities based on circumstances such as institutional history or a fundraiser's employment reporting structure. However, this theme was a constant and could also be applied to future Division I or III fundraising studies. Differences in fundraising strategies related to location, number of sponsored sports, or enrollment did not surface in the findings.

RQ 3: Stakeholder Involvement in Division II Athletic Fundraising

Finally, the third research question asked: How do power, urgency, and legitimacy of stakeholders guide and shape athletic fundraising efforts at Division II

institutions? The role that stakeholders play was identified as the greatest avenue to success. Perspectives on one stakeholder group – donors – were consistent with the literature. A stakeholder who is a donor can be a former student-athlete, an individual who is a non-athlete alumnus, or a friend of the university. All of those attributes are variable factors that influence a donor's behavior and motivation (Shapiro et al., 2010). It should come as no surprise that donors proved to be the most powerful stakeholder group.

In addition, coaches are stakeholders with important legitimacy. These stakeholders have the knowledge base of what their sport program and team need in order to maximize their potential. This could be scholarships, additional recruiting budget dollars, and supplies and equipment. Thus, it is paramount for fundraisers to develop relationships with their coaching staffs so that when they are visiting with other stakeholder groups they can most knowledgably speak to individual program needs. Coaches can have a negative influence on fundraisers as well. In the current study, 11 institutions sponsored football. Football coaches could view their programs as having the most legitimacy, as they likely bring in the most revenue to their athletic department, even at the Division II level. Coaches who perceive themselves to have too much legitimacy can transition into stakeholders with power. This can create challenges for the fundraiser, especially in athletic departments where there is only one individual who is responsible for fundraising for all sport programs. The power of coaches is demonstrated in the literature, particularly in relation to donor groups, as supporters appreciate the connection they can develop with coaches (Shapiro & Ridinger, 2011; Wanless et al., 2017), and this allows coaches to leverage the legitimacy they have with their donor groups. However, if coaches develop too much power, they can develop their own agendas and create challenges for the fundraiser.

Another stakeholder group is the university and institutional leadership, who are stakeholders with urgency. While the institution can be an inhibitor or enabler to an athletic department's ability to engage in successful fundraising, the overall urgency the institutional leadership has varies from institution to institution. This could be the case due to the lack of interaction and discussion on the issues between fundraisers and university administration on a day-to-day basis. It is the athletic director who reports to the university president and is involved in those daily conversations, not the athletic fundraiser.

In addition, capitalizing on the role of student-athletes was identified as a common strategic link across all institutions, regardless of size or program success, that can lead to athletic fundraising success. The fundraisers' strategies centered around sharing student-athlete stories and focused on connecting them with their donor base, strategies which would also be applicable in the Division I or III environment (Gladden et al., 2005).

Theoretical Implications

As limited research had been conducted examining athletic fundraising through a lens of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), this study makes a significant theoretical contribution by applying stakeholder theory to the athletic fundraising process, with findings demonstrating that stakeholder theory is an appropriate avenue

through which to analyze athletic fundraising, and not just at the Division II level. By examining the challenges and strategies in the Division II athletic fundraising environment, the beginnings of a conceptual understanding were established through identification of stakeholder theory claims (power, urgency, and legitimacy) mapped onto athletic department stakeholders.

Power, as argued by Mitchell et al. (1997), creates influence that a stakeholder has over an organization. In the athletic fundraising context at the Division II level (and Division I and Division III as well), donors are the stakeholder group that come to the forefront regarding power. In philanthropy, donors will be in a position of power given that they have the resources that the organization needs, which was reinforced through our findings. However, in Division II, where there is less focus on transactional-based giving, the athletic department and institution hold less power than they might at a larger Division I program. The findings of the current study also demonstrate, from a theoretical standpoint, that the claim of legitimacy is at the center of the athletic fundraising context. Fundraisers must develop legitimate claims with all stakeholders involved in order to boost credibility and develop trust with their constituents and colleagues.

Urgency factors into stakeholder theory when a relationship or situation is time-sensitive (Mitchell et al., 1997). Of the three claims to stakeholder theory, urgency was the most difficult to establish in the athletic fundraising setting. However, fundraisers often operate with a sense of urgency when there is a swift desire to see monies secured for a particular project. This urgency extends to the university and athletic department. For instance, with capital projects (new buildings, facility renovations, etc.) there is clear urgency because once construction is finished there could be less incentive for individuals to donate to a completed project. Therefore, the findings of the current study determined that the institution/university is the stakeholder with the greatest claim to urgency.

While some of the challenges and strategies are more relevant to Division II as illuminated above, the theoretical insights revolving around stakeholder management by fundraisers are applicable for Division I and III athletics fundraising as well as for broader academic fundraising at an institution.

Practical Implications

There are challenges to athletic fundraising this study explored that are uncontrollable to the fundraiser, such as winning and university climate. However, the way in which they manage and build relationships with the various stakeholder groups has shown to be an effective strategy for enhancing athletic fundraising success. In particular, athletic fundraisers can develop stronger rapport with their coaches, who are stakeholders with great legitimacy. While many fundraisers develop strong relationships with their donors, there should also be a strong focus placed on the fundraiser-coach relationship. This will enable fundraisers to best identify program needs, which will allow for an easier matching of donors' interests.

It is important for athletic fundraisers, particularly those whose offices are in the athletic department or who do not report to anyone in the university foundation,

to develop consistent communications and meeting times with foundation staff. As was evidenced in the findings, there are a variety of resources that the foundation has at its disposal that can enhance an athletic fundraiser's ability to do their job. By partnering and collaborating with the foundation, instead of working in opposition, athletic fundraisers can identify and engage with additional donors, have more accurate donor information, and potentially even distribute some of the workload (e.g., gift processing and end-of-year gift receipts) which would be of benefit to small athletic fundraising staffs.

The managerial implications and suggestions derived from this study are relevant to athletic fundraisers across all NCAA divisions, not just Division II. Fundraisers across all levels face some similar challenges such as donor fatigue and a lack of fundraising resources. In addition, the concept of capitalizing on stakeholders, particularly those with legitimacy such as coaches and student-athletes, can be a viable fundraising strategy for Division I, II, and III.

Limitations & Future Directions

As with most research studies, there are limitations that need to be discussed. Given the small sample, the current study may not capture the entire breadth of challenges, strategies, and stakeholder influences in the Division II landscape. This study was also limited to the perspective of the athletic fundraiser, as input was not solicited from coaches, donors, or other university personnel. Because data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic fallout in higher education and intercollegiate athletics, additional studies could compare and analyze how the challenges and strategies have changed during the pandemic and in a post-COVID-19 atmosphere.

As a limitation of this study was its small sample size, a larger sample would help identify broad-based critical issues surrounding Division II athletic fundraising, and requisite strategies. Furthermore, six of the participants had less than three years of full-time fundraising experiencing. Future research could focus on those with more robust fundraising experience as they might be able to better attest to the challenges and strategies athletic fundraisers face. In addition, our study featured only three universities that did not sponsor football. Future studies could include a larger subset of non-football schools.

Similar studies could also be conducted at private institutions in Division II. This study focused on public institutions, but future research could be directed towards examining the landscape private schools face and comparing with public institutions. Future studies could also explore in greater detail the intersection of stakeholder theory with athletic fundraising. These studies could work to better establish the claims of power, urgency, and legitimacy for stakeholders involved in athletic fundraising.

As this study showed, stakeholder management is an essential part of successful athletic fundraising. Development officers must identify the various stakeholders of all claims (power, urgency, and legitimacy) and leverage them to their benefit. Fundraisers must do more than build relationships with whom they work. To

maximize their athletic department's potential from a fundraising standpoint, they must give priority to all competing stakeholder claims. By adopting stakeholder management practices when it comes to fundraising, athletic directors, coaches, and fundraisers can give their athletic department a competitive edge.

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The Relationship Between Academic Clustering and Athletic Academic Support Department Reporting Lines in NCAA FBS Programs

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This article investigated whether an association existed between the academic clustering of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) college athletes and the reporting lines of athletic academic support departments at their institutions during the 2017-18 academic year. Critics have argued that college athletes cluster into a major at a higher rate when athletic academic support departments report to athletic department officials instead of university administrators not employed by their athletic department. The authors contacted athletic academic support directors at NCAA Division I FBS institutions to find out whether their departments reported to an administrator employed by or outside of the athletic department. Then, the authors used annual football media guides provided by athletic departments to determine the number of college athletes who were enrolled in each academic major. Finally, the authors used an ANOVA to calculate whether an association existed between an athletic academic support department's reporting lines and the rate that college football athletes clustered into one or more majors. The results indicated that the association between the rate that college football athletes clustered into one or more majors and the reporting lines used by athletic academic support departments at their institutions was insignificant.

Keywords: college sport, academic clustering, academic integrity

Introduction

Former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I college athletes have indicated that athletic academic advisers contributed to their academic success (Hatteberg, 2020; Hazzaa et al., 2018; Menke, 2016; Paule & Gilson, 2010; Ridpath, 2010). Critics of college athletics, however, have argued that athletic academic support staff members should report to university officials instead of athletic department administrators. The Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA) sug-

gested that "The academic advising facility for student-athletes should be integrated into and report through the existing academic advising structure and not through the athletics department" ("Framing the Future," 2007, p. 10). The Drake Group argued that "academic support services for college athletes shall be under the direct supervision and budgetary control of the institution's academic authority, administered externally to the athletic department . . . no academic counseling should occur by athletic department employees" ("Guidelines for Academic," 2014, p. 2). University faculty members have also portrayed allowing athletic academic support department employees to report to athletics department administrators as harmful to the academic experience of college athletes (Lybarger et al., 2018).

One potentially negative outcome of allowing athletic academic advisors to report to athletics department administrators is academic clustering (Gurney et al., 2017; Huml et al., 2019; Smith & Willingham, 2015). A survey of NCAA Division I athletic academic advisors indicated that coaches and athletic academic advisors can persuade a college athlete to select an academically clustered major, although college athletes sometimes decide to do so on their own (Case et al., 2017). Previous research has portrayed academic clustering as potentially harmful to college athletes. One study found that NCAA Division I college athletes whose coaches discouraged them from pursuing certain majors had lower grade point averages (GPAs) (Beron & Piquero, 2016). In athletic department media guide biographies, some athletes are listed as being enrolled in a major that does not match up with the career that they plan to pursue, which could be partially due to academic clustering (Paule-Koba, 2019). College athletes in an academically clustered major may earn lower salaries, especially in the short-run (Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010). Although the academic clustering of college athletes can be problematic, that is not always the case. For example, if college athletes are clustered in a "sport management" major, their experience in sport, not any illicit actions, could be the cause of the cluster (Dent et al., 2014). If college athletes cannot pursue their desired major because of their participation in athletics, then academic clustering becomes dubious.

While previous studies have examined academic clustering (Case et al., 1987; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Otto, 2012; Paule-Koba, 2015 & Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010), the authors are aware of no previous research that has examined whether academic clustering occurs at a higher rate based on the reporting lines utilized by athletic academic support departments. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess whether college athletes cluster into one or more academic majors at a higher rate at institutions where the athletic academic support staff members report to an athletic department administrator instead of an administrator employed outside of athletics.

The present study investigated the following research questions:

RQ1: During the 2017-18 academic year, what percentage of NCAA Division I FBS athletic academic support departments reported to an athletics department official, utilized dual reporting lines, or reported to a university official outside of the athletics department?

RQ2: Was there an association between the reporting lines of NCAA Division I FBS athletic academic support departments and the rate at which their football athletes clustered into one or more academic major(s) during the 2017-18 academic year?

Literature Review

Definitions of Advanced Terms

The authors will use the terms "athletic academic support department", "athletic academic support staff", and "campus advisers" throughout the study. An athletic academic support department and support staff provide college athletes with services such as the improvement of study skills (Rubin, 2017). The term "campus advisers" refers to university employees who provide advising to college athletes and other students, which can include faculty whose main priorities are teaching and/or conducting research, professional academic advisers whose primary role is to advise students, and staff who specialize in advising students for a particular academic department or major (Self, 2011).

The authors also describe campus reporting lines as either "dual" or "dotted" in some instances. Athletic academic support departments with dual reporting lines report to an administrator within the athletic department and one outside of the athletic department, and neither acts as the primary supervisor. Athletic academic support departments with "dotted" lines also report to two administrators. One serves as the primary supervisor while the athletic academic support department reports secondarily to the administrator with a "dotted" line.

Other terms refer to various levels of NCAA competition. The NCAA split their member institutions into three divisions during 1973 (NCAA, n.d.). Division I institutions typically maintain a larger athletic department budget and student body relative to the institutions in other divisions (NCAA, n.d.). Within NCAA Division I football, membership is subdivided between the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and Football Championship Subdivision (FCS). During 2014, the leaders of NCAA Division I institutions voted to allow the five wealthiest athletic conferences in Division I to implement their own regulations (Bennett, 2014). These include the Atlantic Coast, Big Ten, Big 12, Pacific 12 and Southeastern Conferences and are known as the "Power Five" (Gurney et al., 2017). "Power Five" institutions compete at the FBS level. "Group of Five" football programs consist of five athletic conferences which also compete at the FBS level (Dellenger, 2020). These include the American Athletic Conference, Conference USA, the Mid-American Conference, the Mountain West Conference, and the Sun Belt Conference.

The authors refer to some football athletes who are represented in the data set as "non-redshirted freshmen". A "non-redshirted freshmen" describes an athlete who belongs to a varsity team and competes in athletic competitions against other institutions during their first year as a full-time student (NCAA, 2019a, p. 82). A red-shirt freshman belongs to a varsity team but does not compete in athletic competitions against other institutions during their first year.

Another advanced term, "academic clustering", was defined in the first study of the topic as 25% or more of the college athletes on a team as selecting the same academic major (Case et al., 1987). Some scholars have continued to utilize this benchmark (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Otto, 2012; Paule-Koba, 2020). Other research has used various statistical significance tests to measure whether academic clustering has occurred in college athletics (Houston & Baber, 2017; Love et al., 2017; Watkins & Slater, 2021). The use of a 25% benchmark to determine if academic clustering has occurred, without any comparison to the general student body, could be misleading since a higher percentage of students enroll in certain academic majors at some institutions compared to others (Otto, 2012). Therefore, the authors chose to measure whether clustering occurred among NCAA Division I FBS programs based on a z-test of proportions instead of using the 25% benchmark.

Academic Clustering

Studies have found evidence of academic clustering among NCAA Division I football programs, especially at the "Power Five" level (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Houston & Baber, 2017; Otto, 2012; Watkins & Slater, 2021), although it occurs to a lesser extent at the FCS level (Paule-Koba, 2020). In addition to football, some men's and women's NCAA Division I basketball and baseball programs also academically cluster (Case et al., 1987; Goodson, 2015; Miller, 2021; Paule-Koba, 2015).

Other studies have examined the relationship between certain variables and academic clustering. Multiple studies have determined that black, male, and "high profile" sport college athletes were more likely to be in a clustered major (Case et al., 1987; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010; Houston & Baber, 2017), although another found that minority college athletes did not academically cluster more frequently at the FCS level (Paule-Koba, 2020). Research shows that while academic clustering takes place among men's NCAA Division I basketball teams (Case et al., 1987), it is less common among NCAA Division I women's teams and historically black college and university (HBCU) basketball programs (Goodson, 2015; Paule-Koba, 2015). The academic clustering of "Power Five" football programs also appears more prevalent among institutions with higher admissions standards (Love et al., 2017). In some cases, highly recruited colleges athletes, as well as those who are drafted by the National Football League (NFL), are more likely to select an academically clustered major (Fountain & Finley, 2011; Watkins & Slater, 2021). Also, college athletes with a stronger athletic identity are more likely to declare less rigorous majors and may academically cluster as a result (Foster & Huml, 2017).

Although previous studies have established that academic clustering occurs in NCAA Division I FBS programs, and academic clustering appears to be more common among football athletes that are minorities, football athletes at highly selective institutions and/or more talented football athletes, these studies have not examined the relationship between an athletic department's reporting lines and academic clustering.

The Shared Responsibility of Academically Advising College Athletes

Campus advisers and athletic academic advisers both provide academic advising to college athletes (Rubin & Lewis, 2020), however, the job duties and work environment of athletic academic advisers may cause them to play a more significant role than campus advisers (Hatteberg, 2020; Robbins & Bentley-Edwards, 2020; Rubin & Lewis, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2020). Athletic academic advisors may meet with college athletes more often than campus advisers do (Stokowski et al., 2020). In some cases, athletic academic advisers also advise less students than campus advisers (Rubin & Lewis, 2020).

Another reason athletic academic advisers may have a more significant impact on athletes than campus advisers is that former college athletes have indicated that they did not establish a significant relationship with faculty members while in college (Kidd et al., 2018). Moreover, some college athletes have claimed they received less social support from faculty members than athletic academic advisers and other athletic department staff members (Hatteberg, 2020). Some campus advisers also hold negative perceptions towards college athletes, such as that they are less qualified to complete academic work and that they expect athletic academic advisers to complete tasks for them, like determining their course schedule (Stokowski et al., 2016). There is also a noticeable disparity between the workload of athletic academic advisers, since some report working forty hours per week, while others work over sixty hours per week, and some only supervise 10 to 20 college athletes while others advise a few hundred (Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018). Since athletic academic advisors play a significant role in advising college athletes, the relationship between the different reporting lines that they utilize and academic clustering is worthy of study.

College athletes and campus administrators have perceived athletic academic advisors as facing a conflict of interest between the well-being of college athletes and the athletic success of their institution. University academic advisers have complained that they encourage students to make their own academic decisions, but some athletic academic advisers assume responsibilities such as selecting which courses their college athletes take (Hardin & Pate, 2013; Hatteberg, 2020; Rubin & Lewis, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2020). Moreover, campus advisers sometimes perceive athletic academic advisors as "focusing on eligibility" compared to the other academic goals of college athletes (Hatteberg, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2020). College athletes have indicated that their campus advisers placed more emphasis on their academic goals than their athletic academic advisers (Huml et al, 2014).

These issues can be compounded by allowing athletic academic advisers to report to administrators within the athletics department instead of other campus officials (Friedman, 2008). Athletic academic advisors have described themselves as pressured to keep college athletes eligible, especially by coaches (Case et al., 2017; Stokowski et al., 2020). Moreover, athletic academic advisors can have their office in the same building as athletic department administrators, where some athletic academic advisors who report outside of athletics have an office in another campus building (Rubin & Lewis, 2020). Therefore, expecting athletic department advisers

to report to administrators outside of athletics could reduce the pressure that athletic department staff and coaches may place on athletic academic advisors to help college athletes remain eligible, which could cause academic clustering to occur at a higher rate (Case et al., 2017).

Overall, several studies have established that academic clustering occurs among NCAA football programs (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Paule-Koba, 2015; Paule-Koba, 2020), and examined the relationship between academic clustering and other factors, but not the reporting lines used by athletic academic advisors (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Love et al., 2017; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010; Watkins & Slater, 2021). Athletic academic advisors play a significant role in advising college athletes (Rubin & Lewis, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2020), and those who report to athletic department administrators may be under increased pressure to help college athletes to remain eligible, which may cause an increase in academic clustering (Case et al., 2017).

Method

Data Collection

The present study investigated football programs which competed at the NCAA Division I FBS level during the 2017-18 academic year. The authors selected this time frame since it was the most recent academic year with degree completion data available for male undergraduate students at U.S. institutions. The researchers narrowed the focus of the study to football athletes because football programs maintain the largest average roster size compared to any other NCAA Division I sport. During the 2017-18 academic year, an average of 121 athletes competed on each NCAA Division I FBS team (Irick, 2018). In comparison, an average of 48 athletes competed on each NCAA Division I lacrosse team, although it maintained the second highest average roster size (Irick, 2018). Therefore, football teams provide the largest potential sample size which can improve the confidence interval for statistical testing (Schumacker, 2014).

Other unique aspects of NCAA Division I college football also make it worthy of study. According to the College Sport Research Institute's (CSRI) Adjusted Graduation Gap (AGG), football athletes at the "Power Five" and "Group of Five" level graduate at a lower rate than other full-time students (Southall et al., 2021), and according to a 2020 NCAA report, football athletes recorded a lower Graduation Success Rate (GSR) than any other NCAA Division I men's or women's sports ("Trends in Graduation," 2020). NCAA Division I football athletes reported spending more hours per week on their sport in season than any other sport except for baseball ("Five Themes from," 2019). These factors may make football athletes at an increased risk to lose their athletic eligibility compared to other sports, and as a result, more susceptible to academic clustering (Hatteberg, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2020).

To determine which reporting lines each athletic academic support department utilized, the researchers obtained the contact information available on official athletics department staff directories to contact the director of each institution's athletic academic support department. Then, the researchers asked the directors of each ath-

letic academic support department whether their department reported to an administrator in the athletics department, an administrator outside of the athletic department (e.g., provost, dean of undergraduate studies), or used dual lines where there is equal oversight from athletics and an on-campus administrator. To determine the academic majors selected by football athletes, the researchers collected the declared major of football athletes from the 2017 edition of football media guides acquired from official athletics department websites.

The researchers excluded football athletes who the media guide listed as having no declared undergraduate major. Any football athletes who were listed as majoring in a pre-professional program, such as "Pre-Law", were counted as undeclared if their institution did not award an undergraduate degree with that academic major. True freshmen were excluded from the study as well because media guides can be released before the beginning of fall classes. Therefore, any true freshmen who declared a major may have done so before taking a single college class. Moreover, other clustering studies have excluded true freshmen athletes (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Love et al., 2017; Otto, 2012). Red-shirted freshmen were included in the results since they have taken courses at the college level. In addition, the researchers also excluded graduate students to avoid equating them with undergraduate students. According to one researcher, labeling a graduate college athlete as a "fifth year senior" implies that "they are academically behind because they need more than the traditional four years to earn a bachelor's degree" (Haslerig, 2017, p. 116). If a football athlete was listed as a "double major", which signified that they pursued a degree in two majors, the researchers counted them as two athletes. If the media guide indicated that an athlete had already received a baccalaureate degree and was pursuing a second baccalaureate degree, he was counted as one athlete within the latter degree program.

The researchers obtained data regarding the major distribution of male undergraduate students during the 2017-18 academic year among the institutions included in the data set by collecting Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) codes data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, which the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provided. These data indicate how many undergraduate degrees every institution awarded in each academic major during the 2017-18 academic year. The CIP is a taxonomic system developed by the U.S. Department of Education's NCES to accurately track fields of study across higher education institutions in the United States which may choose to title majors differently (IPEDS, 2010). The CIP uses a two-digit number to denote a field of study. A four-digit decimal differentiates between academic majors within the same field of study. For example, the CIP number 14 represents engineering, while 14.0801 represents "civil engineering" and 14.0901 represents "computer engineering." The investigators recorded the majors based on the six-digit CIP code provided by each institution to examine the specific major of each football athlete. The researchers used CIP data so that clustered majors could be compared between institutions. Also, using CIP code data confirmed that the major listed in each media guide was offered by the institution (Love et al., 2017; Otto, 2012).

Data Analysis

Out of the 129 institutions that compete at the NCAA Division I FBS level, 116 directors of athletic academic support departments responded to the authors' request regarding the reporting lines utilized by their department. Therefore, the response rate for RQ1 was 89.92%. Based on their responses, the researchers conducted a frequency analysis to answer RQ1 (see Table 1). The sample (N=116) included institutions in the "Power Five" (N = 59), "Group of Five" (N = 54) and conference independents (N = 3), all of whom competed at the FBS level during 2017. Fourteen were private and 102 were public. To compare the distribution of reporting lines between "Power Five" and "Group of Five" institutions the researchers used SPSS statistical software to perform a cross-tabulation with the chi-square test for independence (IBM Corp, 2019). The chi-square test for independence is appropriate because the statistical analysis determines if nominal variables within a single sample are independent or associated with each other (Franke et al., 2012). Institutions that shared their reporting lines (N=116) but did not have media guides which listed the academic majors of football athletes were excluded from RQ2. Out of the 116 institutions which shared their reporting lines, 64 published annual football media guides which indicated the academic majors of athletes. The sample included universities which belonged to either a "Power Five" (N = 39) or "Group of Five" (N = 25) athletic conference. Also, the sample included both private (N = 9) and public (N = 55) institutions.

The researchers examined each team's reported academic majors of their football athletes to determine whether academic clustering occurred among these 64 teams. Then, the researchers used the data provided by NCES to perform a one-tailed z-test of proportions to compare the proportion of football athletes in a degree program to the undergraduate degrees awarded to male students in the same academic major during the 2017-18 academic year. The researchers utilized a z-test since it compares a sample percentage to a known population percentage (Schumacker, 2014). In this case, the sample percentage was the number of football athletes within a specific degree program and the known population percentage was the number of undergraduate degrees awarded during the same year at the respective institution. The researchers compared the proportion of football athletes to male undergraduate students instead of the entire student body to account for previous research which indicates that males select certain academic majors at a different rate than females (Morgan et al., 2013).

Next, the researchers used the following null hypothesis test: $H_0 = P_1\text{-}P_2 = 0$ to determine whether football athletes clustered into one or more academic majors. The null hypothesis stated that there was no significant difference between the proportion of football athletes in an undergraduate degree program and the number of male undergraduate students who received an undergraduate degree in that major. The alternate hypothesis was $H_1 = P_1 - P_2 > 0$, which stated that the proportion of football athletes in a major was higher than the proportion of male students who received an undergraduate degree in that major. The null hypothesis was tested on each academic major declared by a football athlete. If the null hypothesis was rejected, that major

was deemed a cluster as the proportion of football players in the academic major was higher than the expected proportion of the undergraduate population. The number of undergraduate students that was in any academic cluster based on z-score was then totaled and divided by the number of football athletes with a listed major to determine the percentage of football athletes in an academic cluster at each institution. Based on the null hypothesis tests for each university, communications (CIP 09.0101) was the most common proportionally significant cluster ($N = 13$) within the sample. In addition, other communications related majors, including sports communication (09.0906), public relations (09.0999), and communication (09.0102) were also statistically significant clusters at other institutions. The most common clustered majors by CIP code can be found in Table 2.

Finally, the researchers used SPSS to compare the rate of college athletes in a clustered major to reporting lines utilized by their athletic academic support departments. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine the effect of reporting lines on the academic clustering of football athletes. The researchers used the following null hypothesis test: $H_0 = \mu_1 = \mu_2 = \mu_3 = \mu_4 = \mu_5$, which stated that there was no significant difference between the average number of clustered college athletes at institutions based on the reporting lines utilized by their athletic academic support department during the 2017-18 academic year. The alternate hypothesis was $H_1 = \mu_1 \neq \mu_2 \neq \mu_3 \neq \mu_4 \neq \mu_5$ which stated that there was at least one significant difference in the average number of clustered football athletes based on the reporting lines utilized by their athletic academic support departments. An ANOVA was an appropriate statistical test for this research because the statistical analysis determines whether there are statistically significant differences between the means of independent groups (IBM Corp, 2020).

Results

RQ1 examined the distribution of reporting lines utilized by athletic academic support departments at NCAA Division I FBS institutions during the 2017-18 academic year. Based on the responses from the directors of athletic academic support departments, the researchers found that 39 athletic academic support centers reported to a supervisor within the athletic department, 37 reported to a supervisor outside of the athletic department and 40 athletic academic support centers utilized either dotted or dual reporting lines. The full results of the frequency analysis are listed in Table 1. According to a cross-tabulation with a chi-square test for independence, the reporting lines of athletic academic support departments did not significantly differ between "Power Five" or "Group of Five" institutions $\chi^2 (8, N = 116) = 14.295$, $p = .074$.

Table 1
Frequency of Reporting Lines

	Power Five		Group of Five		Independents		Total	
Reporting line	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Athletics	20	33.9	18	33.3	1	33.3	39	33.6
Athletics dotted campus	12	20.3	1	1.9	0	0	13	11.2
Campus	15	25.4	21	38.9	1	33.3	37	31.9
Campus dotted athletics	3	5.1	5	9.3	1	33.3	9	7.8
Dual	9	15.3	9	16.7	0	0	18	15.5

The second research question examined whether a statistically significant difference existed between the clustering of football athletes based on the reporting lines used by the athletic academic support departments at their institutions during the 2017-18 academic year. Out of the 129 institutions that compete in NCAA Division I FBS, 64 provided both the reporting lines utilized by their athletic academic support departments and the academic majors of their football athletes. The frequency of these institutions' reporting lines was distributed between athletics ($N = 19$), athletics dotted campus ($N = 8$), campus ($N = 19$), campus dotted athletics ($N = 5$) and dual lines ($N = 13$). An ANOVA was conducted to determine the association between the reporting lines of athletic academic support departments and the rate at which football athletes clustered into an academic major. The effect was found to be insignificant, $F(4, 59) = 1.624$, $p = .180$, $\omega^2 = .04$.

Discussion

Critics have suggested that allowing athletic academic support departments to report to an administrator in athletics could lead to increased academic clustering among college athletes ("Guidelines for Academic," 2014; Gurney et al., 2017; Smith & Willingham, 2015). The results of this study, however, indicated no significant difference between the reporting lines utilized by athletic academic support departments and academic clustering among their football athletes. Academic clustering can negatively impact college athletes if it causes them to choose an academic major that is unrelated to their preferred career field, or reduces their potential income (Paule-Koba, 2019; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010; Solomon, 2014). There-

Table 2
Most Common Major Cluster at Institutions

Major	CIP Code	Power Five	Group of Five	Total
Communications	09.0101	7	6	13
Sport Management	31.0504	5	5	10
Sociology	45.1101	3	1	4
Business	52.0201	2	2	4
Recreation sport and tourism	31.0101	3	0	3
Economics	45.0601	2	1	3
Liberal Arts	24.0101	1	2	3
General Studies	24.0102	1	2	3
Health, Kinesiology and Leisure Studies	31.0501	2	0	2
African and African American Studies	05.0201	1	1	2
Interdisciplinary Studies	30.9999	0	2	2
Sports Communications	09.0906	1	0	1
Human Sciences	19.0101	1	0	1
Property Management	19.0201	1	0	1
Child and Family Studies	19.0701	1	0	1
Communication	23.1304	1	0	1
Science, Tech & Society	30.1501	1	0	1
Kinesiology	31.0505	1	0	1
Social Science	45.0101	1	0	1
General Studies	30.0000	1	0	1
Life Science Communication	01.0802	1	0	1
Community and Leadership	01.0899	1	0	1
Ethnic Studies	05.0299	1	0	1
Communications	09.0102	0	1	1
Public Relations	09.0999	0	1	1
Family Resources	19.0707	0	1	1

fore, future research should investigate the extent to which factors besides the reporting lines of athletic academic support departments cause academic clustering. These factors include but are not limited to the significant time demands faced by college athletes, conflicts between the university class schedules and practice and competition schedules of college athletes, the tendency of upperclassmen college athletes to recommend an academic major to freshmen college athletes, and the NCAA's progress toward degree requirements (Heuser et al., 2008; Huml et al., 2019; Love et al., 2017; Smith, 2011).

Despite the findings of the present study, it may still be advisable for athletic academic support departments to report to an administrator outside of the athletic department since academic clustering is only one potentially negative outcome that academic reform groups have associated with allowing athletic academic support departments to report to an administrator in athletics. Previous research has argued that utilizing these reporting lines increases the likelihood that academic fraud will occur (Southall et al., 2003). Also, the Drake Group (2014) has gone beyond criticizing the reporting lines utilized by athletic departments by claiming that providing academic support services which are exclusively available to college athletes socially isolates them from the rest of the student body. As a result, they recommended that "Academic support study and computer centers, housing, dining, game room and other non-athletics locker room facilities should be prohibited because they isolate the college athlete from normal student experiences" (p. 2).

A noteworthy result in the data is that there was no significant difference in academic clustering between "Power Five" and "Group of Five" football programs, although previous research indicates that less football programs cluster at the FCS level compared to FBS (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Otto, 2012; Paule-Koba, 2020; Watkins & Slater, 2021). The operational and tutoring budgets of NCAA Division I FBS institutions are significantly larger than those at non-FBS institutions (Judge et al., 2018), which provides evidence of a gap in resources between the athletic academic support departments at NCAA Division I institutions. Hypothetically, having a higher amount of resources available, such as a tutor for an exceptionally difficult course, could impact how an athlete performs academically, and as a result influence which major they eventually select. The lack of significant difference in academic clustering between "Power Five" and "Group of Five" institutions indicates that other factors besides an institution's amount of resources may play a more significant role in causing academic clustering.

The results of the study have multiple limitations. One is that a higher percentage of football athletes reported having declared a major at some institutions. Within the data set, the smallest number of football athletes with a major listed was 30, while the largest was 86. One potential reason that the number of football athletes with declared majors varied by institution is that the athletic academic staff at some universities may advise their freshmen and sophomore college athletes to declare an academic major as early as possible, while others may not. Differences in how the athletic academic support staff advise their football athletes could have impacted the results of the study. For example, other studies have shown that clustering is more

common among upperclassmen (Fountain & Finley, 2011; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010).

Another limitation is that the researchers were unable to evaluate the quality of the academic majors which football athletes clustered into. As previously mentioned, the existence of a cluster does not mean it is an inappropriate academic major for college athletes. Within the sample, 40 of the 64 institutions had a cluster in a sport-related discipline (e.g., sport management, exercise science, or kinesiology), although some of these institutions also had a cluster in non-sport related academic majors. The experiences of college athletes of participating in sport could be a stronger influence than advising from athletic academic support staff members. One concern with academic clustering is that college athletes are "advised towards eligibility" by athletic academic support staff ("Guidelines for Academic," 2014, p. 2), however, evaluating the rigor or quality of the academic majors that football college athletes clustered into was beyond the intent of the study.

An additional limitation involves where the offices of athletic academic advisors are located. Some athletic academic advisors who report to a supervisor outside of athletics still have an office in an athletic department building (Rubin & Lewis, 2020). College athletes could cluster at a higher rate at institutions where their athletic academic advisors are located in the same facility as athletics administrators, and this may increase the pressure that athletics department staff and coaches may place on athletic academic advisors (Case et al., 2017; Rubin & Lewis, 2020).

Finally, the study's results may be skewed since only 64 FBS programs provided enough data in their annual media guides to determine whether academic clustering occurred. Scholars have argued that athletic departments have used the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to "Shield negative information about athletics from the media and public scrutiny" during academic scandals (Huml & Moorman, 2017, p. 138). Since academic clustering has been publicly criticized (Smith & Willingham, 2015; Solomon, 2014), academic clustering may be more common at universities who do not list the academic majors of their athletes. The researchers found no evidence of trends based on reporting lines between institutions that included academic majors of athletes within their media guides and institutions that did not. However, within the sample there were some differences related to conference affiliation. Twenty-eight "Group of Five" institutions included academic majors on their media guides while 26 institutions excluded academic majors. However, 41 "Power Five" institutions included academic majors in their media guides, while only 18 "Power Five" institutions excluded academic majors in their media guides. This could also indicate that there are more resources available to "Power Five" institutions which result in more detailed media guides compared to "Group of Five" institutions rather than an increased importance on academics of college athletes within the "Power Five". After completing the study, the researchers followed up with a sport information director at a "Group of Five" institution, who shared that for reasons that may vary by the institution, some athletic departments choose to publish the majors of their athletes, while others do not (C. Garner, personal communication, August 11, 2021).

Several other potential research topics related to clustering could be researched in the future. First, the majority of clustering studies have examined whether it occurs in either NCAA Division I football or basketball. Whether clustering occurs in other sports, or outside of NCAA Division I, could be examined by researchers. Moreover, the extent to which clustering varies by athletic academic support department reporting lines in other sports or NCAA divisions could be researched. Also, the educational outcomes of college athletes who completed an undergraduate degree in a clustered major could be researched. For example, researchers could investigate whether there is any significant difference between the graduation rates or career earnings of college athletes in a clustered major, compared to other college athletes. In addition, researchers could also interview college athletes who enrolled in a clustered major to learn about how they perceived their academic experience. Researchers could also interview or survey athletic academic support staff to gain insight on whether they prefer to report to an athletic department administrator or a university official outside of athletics.

Other potential reforms to address clustering, besides requiring athletic academic support department staff members to report outside of the athletic department, should also be examined. Although the perception exists that allowing athletic academic support departments to report to administrators in athletics increases academic clustering (Lybarger et al., 2018; "Knight Commission On," 2001), there are other potential causes.

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