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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

## **Literature Review**

### **History of the NCAA's Divisional Structure**

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

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

### **The Differences among NCAA Divisions I and II**

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

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

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

### **Reclassification Process and Requirements**

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

### **Academic Impact**

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

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

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

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

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

### **Psychological Impact**

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

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

### **Financial Impact**

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

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

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

## Method

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



appeared in 79 NCAA Division II team playoffs.

### **Participant Requirements and Criteria**

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

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

### **Procedure**

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

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

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

## Results

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

### The Impact of NCAA Regulations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Relationship between Occupation and Resource Allocation**

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

One athletic department staff member claimed that:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The Impact of Reclassification on Athletic Department Identity**

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Surrounding Environment Intensified the Challenges of Reclassification**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Impact on Morale**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Discussion/Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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# Football and Financial (In)equality: Comparing Salaries of Men's and Women's Teams' Coaches and Severance Pay within Division I-FBS

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This study investigates the relationship between women's and men's team coaches' salaries and severance pay at 104 public NCAA Division I-FBS institutions. Using data from the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Data project from 2014 to 2021, the research reveals that the salaries of men's teams' coaches grew significantly more than those of women's teams' coaches, especially among the most competitive schools in FBS (Power conferences). At Power conference schools, the increase in the severance pay for men's teams' coaches was 5.3 times larger than the growth in women's teams' coaching salaries. The study confirms that the higher the level of competition, there is a growing disproportion of compensation in favor of men's teams' coaches over women's teams' coaches. FBS institutions' chase for prestige means paying coaches of men's teams increasingly more than they pay to the coaches of women's teams, despite espoused values of gender equity, the intent of Title IX, and economic conditions.

**Keywords:** coaches' salaries, Power conference, masculine leadership, revenue allocation theory, severance pay

There is a long-standing tradition in the United States for men to be paid more than women, despite the type of work or effort. Indeed, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 (US EEOC, n.d.), the Equal Rights Amendment (1972), part of the rationale behind Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Suggs, 2005), the Fair Pay Act of 2009 (US EEOC, n.d.), outspoken national icons such as Gloria Steinem (1970), author Margaret Atwood (Field, 2018), actress Jane Fonda (Flamisch, 2018), the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team (Peterson, 2022), and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg (Massey Law Group, 2022) – all argued against women wage discrimination in the United States. Wage discrimination has also been a focus in big-time intercollegiate athletics, in which women in coaching roles have a history

of unequal compensation to men (Grant & Judge, n.d.; Lattinville & Denny, n.d.). Yet, despite the social, cultural, and athletic history of discrimination against women in pay, little empirical research has been conducted to compare the growth rates of men's teams' coaches' salaries with the salaries of other college sports coaches, especially the coaches of women's teams' coaches. Furthermore, while severance pay of football coaches has recently garnered attention (Clarke, 2022; Knight Commission, 2023a; Levine & Schlabach, 2021; Riepenhoff et al., 2024; Syrluga, 2022), no research to date has compared how this practice may impact the overall pay equity for women's coaches. This study seeks to address this gap in research by examining the growth rates of salaries and severance pay for men's and women's teams' coaches.

Despite gender discrimination in sport for equal pay, the interesting phenomenon today is women's sports are experiencing a surge in popularity (Darvin, 2024; Smith, 2024). By 2024, women's sports were encountering a period of significant increase in publicity on television with record media ratings for women's college basketball and its March Madness Tournament, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), and the women's soccer World Cup, (Darvin, 2023, 2024; Nielsen, 2023; Smith 2024). This increased popularity could allow for increased revenue from future media contracts. Considering the new wealthier environment for women's sports in mind, this study aims to determine whether the salaries of the coaches for women's college teams are approaching parity with the salaries of men's teams' coaches of the same sports.

## Literature Review

This study examined the outcomes of personnel decisions by leaders of higher education institutions or their athletics department, specifically how those in a position of authority can leverage their organization's financial capacity to maximize prestige. There have been many questions about severance pay (also known as "dead money") to failing coaches: more specifically, firing a coach and paying the remainder of their million-dollar salary for them not to coach (Clarke, 2022; Fuller et al., 2022; Hirko, 2022; Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2023b). This prestige-maximization philosophy to make financial decisions in favor of *football first* may or may not be aligned with decisions based on an institution's academic values and values of gender equity. Below is a literature review to discuss the gender pay gap in America and college sports considering Title IX with a specific focus on gender pay equity in intercollegiate athletics, and the impact of "dead money" on coaches' compensation.

### Legal Foundations

The gender pay gap between women and men in higher education has been a constant drumbeat over the years that has improved for women in aggregate but still lags far behind the pay of men (Grabham, 2023; Miller & Vagins, 2018). Arguments in favor of providing women equal pay for equal work in America can be traced to 1869 (Alter, 2015). By the time President Kennedy signed into law the Equal Pay Act of 1963, women were making 59 cents on the dollar compared to men (The

White House, 2023). In 2023, Hegwesch and Mefferd (2022) analyzed the greater pay equity concern in America and found regardless of the 1963 Equal Pay Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Fair Pay Act of 2009, there remained “occupational and sector segregation” against women’s pay for equal work. Gender discrimination in pay still exists, although Aragão (2023) found women have closed the gender gap in pay in America by earning, on average, 82% of the wage earned of men.

In college athletics, the gender pay gap has been a significant discussion among scholars, and the public since the passage of Title IX in 1972 (Rhode & Walker, 2008; Steidinger, 2000; Von Allmen, 2013). Before 1972, most coaching positions in women’s teams were voluntary, while coaches of men’s teams received a salary (Female Coaching Network, 2019). In 1972, Cathy Rush earned \$450 as the head coach of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) national champion women’s basketball team of Immaculata College (Bowen, 2019). The first year after Title IX was adopted, women received 2.1% of the average proportion of AIAW and NCAA institutional athletics budgets compared to 97.9% for men (AIAW, 1978). By 1978-79, the AIAW found that the spending for women’s sports increased 4.3% compared to 85.7% for men’s sports. When considering coaching salaries by gender, a 1981 study of 106 NCAA Division I basketball coaches (Mottinger, 1981) demonstrated that the mean salary for 53 male coaches was \$29,841.74 compared to a mean salary of \$17,570.79 for 53 female coaches. In 1989, although athletic administrative staff salaries (including coaches) by gender were roughly the same size of overall expenses (23% for men, 24% for women), the pay gap between the two was significant: \$1,804,000 for men’s salaries compared to \$441,000 for women’s salaries, four times greater for men than women (Raiborn, 1989).

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination based on sex by any educational program or activity receiving federal assistance, including college sports. The research on Title IX and equitable participation for women athletes as men athletes in college is well documented, and participation has improved tremendously since its adoption as law in 1972. However, equitable pay among coaches remains elusive in its interpretation under the law (Lattinville & Denny, n.d.; Women’s Sports Foundation, 2016). Valencia & Birren (2019) raised Title IX as a context of concern in the salary culture in Minnesota as an example of a significant disparity between women and men in intercollegiate athletic coaching compensation. The lack of equitable compensation is explained by a variety of reasons, including (but not limited to) experience, duties, working conditions, fan interest, ticket cost and media coverage (Mota, 2006; Rhode & Walker, 2007; Suggs, 2005; Women’s Sports Foundation, 2016). While Title IX may not specifically refer to the compensation of employees, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Fair Pay Act of 2009 make it illegal to discriminate against equal pay for equal work (US EEOC, 2009). To fight the injustice of the gap for equal pay in college sports, head women’s basketball coach Marianne Stanley of the University of Southern California sued her employer in 1999 based on gender discrimination (*Stanley v. USC*, 1994). However, her fight for equal pay was defeated as the court rejected her claim because men’s basketball revenues were 90 times greater than those of women’s (*Stanley v USC*, 1994).

Today, the highest national and international television ratings in women's sports history provide increasing revenues from media contracts (Smith, 2024). Some women college coaches of women's teams are financially benefitting from the limelight with their teams on television and winning championships (Gaines, 2024). Both Kim Mulkey of Louisiana State University and Dawn Staley of the University of South Carolina earned more than \$3 million annually for women's basketball in 2023 (Alexander, 2021; Kesin, 2025), Patty Gasso of the University of Oklahoma softball team averaged \$2 million per year (Sulley, 2024), and Mary Wise of the University of Florida women's volleyball team earned nearly \$500,000 in 2022 (University of Florida, 2024). But are these coaches the exception to the rule? Most women's team coaches trailed their male counterparts in the same sport despite the significant salary increase for the most successful women's teams coaches (Gaines, 2024).

Regardless of the national wage gap, some progress is being made in professional sports compensation between men and women athletes: The US Women's National Soccer Team made history in 2022 by negotiating with USA Soccer on equal pay to the men's national team, eventually guaranteed by it being codified into federal law as The Equal Pay for Team USA Act (The Equal Pay for Team USA Act, 2022). Thus, this study was created to learn if equal pay enjoyed by the national soccer teams is being realized by coaches of women's teams at the collegiate level, especially when considering the impact of men's football.

A manual produced by the Women's Sports Foundation (2016) to assist with gender-neutral coaches' employment compensation acknowledged: "a key to gender equity considerations is the implementation of a system that is evenly applied to all employees regardless of their sex" (p. 40) and responded to the discussion of educational values by stating "remediating compensation discrimination becomes a part of the larger goal of achieving gender equity in every aspect of the athletic program" (p. 41). While the courts debate institutionalized equitable compensation when considering the letter of the law and the intent of Title IX, gender pay equity in college sports remains a controversy grounded in a discriminative history that remains today.

## **Dead Money Compensation**

Part of the concern of women's equitable compensation to men in big-time college sports is how it is distorted by massive severance contracts to men's football and basketball coaches. In the past decade, criticism has mounted against the massive amount of severance pay delivered to fired football and men's basketball coaches since the advent of the Bowl Championship Series in the 1990s (Clarke, 2022; Fuller et al., 2022; Hirko, 2022; Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2023b). Severance pay (also known as "dead money") is provided by institutions to coaches in their initial contract negotiations as an incentive to coach athletes at their institution with the hope of success. Yet, sports is a zero-sum game, so success is not guaranteed. According to the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, in NCAA Division I-FBS, more than \$623 million was paid from 2015 through 2022 to terminate football coaches at public institutions before the end of their contract, in effect paying football coaches millions not to coach (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2023b; NCAA, 2024). NCAA Financial Report Forms provided

for this research from Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications found over the same time that 81% of the total men's team severance pay was attributed to football coaches. The same NCAA Financial Report Forms provided by the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Data Project showed less than 5% of the total amount of NCAA Division-I coaches' severance pay was provided to women's coaches (Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Data Project, 2023; NCAA, 2024).

## Conceptual Framework

To better understand the phenomenon in this study, four concepts were used to frame how different factors affect the compensation of women's teams' coaches compared to coaches of men's athletics teams: (1) rational choice theory, (2) the concept of the "coaching carousel," (3) the concept of masculinity leadership, and (4) sexism.

Rational choice theory is useful to consider how individuals review choices and make decisions based on their preferences because it can be used as a policy concept in the investigation of college sports finances. The policy of having sports at America's universities is to use competition in sports, particularly football, for institutional prestige (Bok, 2003; Duderstadt, 2003; Toma, 2003). Prestige from sports is expected and used as the "front porch" of America's major universities. An American example of the "front porch" is at the University of Alabama, where the Crimson Tide football team comes to mind before its academic programs. When the university considers its financial decisions each year, a rational decision by leaders is to fund sports. Sports provide academic opportunities, but sports moreover create prestige. Pope and Pope (2014) found successful sports on a college campus improved an institution's application rates. Leaders at institutions make a rational choice to invest financial resources into having a successful sports program by raising prestige through prominent winning athletic teams.

The movement of coaches from school to school, known as the "coaching carousel," is best discussed by reviewing football success because of the stress to win expected with investments of millions of dollars into the sport. Investing in football at the highest competitive level also means the decision to pay high salaries for coaches to compete with the best. High salaries include potentially significant severance pay in a coach's contract to attract the coach to their institution. Rational choice theory then contends that leaders at institutions make a rational choice to invest financial resources into having a successful sports program by raising prestige through prominent winning athletic teams. Since a coach's success/failure is evaluated primarily based on the team's results, if those results are not satisfactory and the coach is fired, he or she may not be able to get a new job with a top program (or, at least, not right away; Thomas & Van Horn, 2016). Previous literature suggests that, commonly, Division I universities sign a five-year contract with a head coach; however, on average, coaches spend only about 4.6 years with one program (Thomas & Van Horn, 2016). Such circulation of football coaches (the "coaching carousel") is one of the reasons driving coaches' salaries up (Brook, 2023; Hoffman, 2015; Lacoste,



2024; Lens, 2024). An example of these golden parachutes for football coaches is Jimbo Fischer, the football coach at Texas A&M University from 2018-2023, who was paid \$75 million to terminate his contract early due to lack of team success (Khan, 2023). This exemplifies a significant risk for coaches. Since severance pay is often calculated along with negotiating ever-growing coaches' salaries, severance payments grow as well. Notably, very few women's team's coaches receive any type of severance pay in their contracts (Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Data Project, 2023; NCAA, 2024).

The concept of masculine leadership is useful to determine how and why leaders make certain decisions on compensation affecting women. Leadership in higher education is often associated with a masculine lens (Burkinshaw, 2015), and the male perspective is more prominent because of the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Gaines, 2024; LaVoi & Wasend, 2018; Women's Sports Foundation, 2016). This is particularly acute in college sports, in which the masculine role is historically dominant in positions of leadership (such as program management and coaching; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Staurowksy, 1990) and dominant in those who participate in sports (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Kraft et al., 2021; Messner, 1988). Women are and have been historically minimized in college sports leadership. Lapchick (2024) found women held 41.3% of Division I head coaching positions for women's sports and only held 4.5% of the head coaching positions for men's sports. Despite the increasing popularity and media contracts across women's sports, the employment gap mirrors the pay gap for women coaches compared to men coaches. As such, a look at women's teams can help provide some degree of the level of support or discrimination in compensation for women coaches as compared to men.

Sexism is another viewpoint to understand gender discrimination in equal pay. Sexism against women is considered as any prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination of women. In the context of intercollegiate athletics coaching, women often face sexism in various forms, including misidentification as non-coaches, differential treatment compared to their male counterparts, feelings of isolation, tokenism in hiring practices, and discrimination based on motherhood. The extensive literature on sexism in sports demonstrates its historical and current nature as it impacts women (Carson et al., 2018; Kokkonen, 2019; Musto et al., 2017; Sabo et al., 2016; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). For instance, a 2020 qualitative investigation of college women swimming coaches found sexism played a primary role in unequal pay to women's teams' coaches compared to men's teams' coaches (Siegele et al., 2020). Sexist actions against women across all areas sport (leadership roles, administrators, coaches, college athletes, media, alumni and fans) included not receiving equal pay for equal work (Cooper et. al, 2020). Exposure to sexism and unequal pay leads to career dissatisfaction, resulting in less women attaining leadership roles than men (Cooper et al., 2020; Sabo et al., 2016). This circular reality means women are less likely to be involved in coaching, and fewer women are encouraged for leadership roles, resulting in male perceptions that women's abilities are not equal to men, resulting in lower pay for women.

To review, higher education leaders make rational choices to invest in high-profile programs like football to improve their prestige. At the most competitive level of the NCAA, Division I-FBS, success in football helps to build institutional prestige, and that success is dependent on hiring good and expensive coaches. Often, institutional leaders include multi-million-dollar severance packages to lure football coaches to their campuses. With football success and prestige comes massive amounts of revenue that are used to help pay both men's teams' coaches and women's teams' coaches in non-revenue sports. Women's sports are becoming increasingly popular and more financially lucrative, but not enough yet to slow the pay gap between women and men. This may partly be due to college sports leaders of male hegemony making sexist decisions to improve prestige through football success at the cost of women's sports. This study is one way to help quantify the outcome of sexist actions treating women's team coaches differently by investigating how women's teams' coaches are paid compared to men's teams' coaches. This framework will also help understand how decisions at different levels of competition impact differences in pay (and pay growth) between coaches of men's teams and women's teams, and identify how much men's teams' severance pay impacts women's teams' coaching salaries. Taking male-centric football out of the equation will further help us quantify football's impact on women's teams' coaching salaries.

Based on the direction proposed for this study, the following research questions were used to collect and analyze data:

*RQ<sub>1</sub>*: What is the difference between the growth rate of salaries for men's teams' coaches compared to women's teams' coaches from 2014 to 2021 for the institutions in FBS?

*RQ<sub>2</sub>*: What is the difference between the growth rate of men's teams' coaches compared to women's teams' coaches' salaries from 2014 to 2021 for the institutions in FBS?

*RQ<sub>3</sub>*: To what extent does the level of competition in FBS impact the pay of women's teams' coaches, men's teams' coaches, and severance pay of men's teams' coaches?

*RQ<sub>4</sub>*: Without football, what is the level of pay equity between men's teams' coaches and women's teams' coaches in FBS college sports?

## Method

To answer the research questions, the research team analyzed data from 104 public institutions of the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). The data was collected from universities' NCAA Financial Report forms through the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Data Project (Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Data Project, 2023; NCAA, 2024). NCAA-member public higher education institutions are required to make the NCAA forms available to the public except in states with explicit exemptions. The data used for this study include annual compensation for men's and women's teams' coaches and annual men's teams' coaches' severance pay as reported on individual line items in NCAA Financial Report forms. For this study,

researchers collected data over several months from NCAA financial reports through public record requests directed by the Knight-Newhouse Data Project. There were no complications with access to the data because the authors are intricately involved with the administration and research agenda of the Knight-Newhouse Data Project and helped to create and administer the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database. The research team's roles in directing and managing both the Knight-Newhouse Data Project and the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database include the specific use of NCAA Financial Reports as the primary data component necessary to collect for the projects. To be clear about how the data is organized, there is a difference between using the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database and accessing data from the NCAA Financial Reports. The Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database (2023). The analyzed data exclude third-party compensation, such as golf club memberships, cars, and coverage of moving expenses that universities provide their coaches. Third-party data was excluded because it is reported inconsistently and is notoriously challenging to identify based on the nature of the contractual relationship.

All ten conferences of NCAA Division I-FBS (American Athletic Conference, Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big XII Conference, Conference USA, Mid-American Conference, Mountain West Conference, Pacific-12 Conference, Southeastern Conference, Sun Belt Conference) were selected to collect data from the academic years 2013-2014 to 2020-2021. Eleven schools that had missing data on the salaries for the men's or women's teams' coaches at any given year were excluded from the sample. The schools without data on severance pay did not include any spending on severance in the official reports because they did not pay any severance that given year. For those cases, a "0" was assigned to missing severance data. Therefore, the analytical sample includes data on 93 public schools (45 colleges from the Power conferences and 48 from others in FBS) for the years 2014 through 2021.

As is well articulated in the national discussion by the news media and scholars, the billions of dollars in revenue attributed to football in the FBS Power conferences are not available to institutions in the other FBS conferences (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2021), leading to significant differences in revenue and institutional prestige. Therefore, data were separated into Power and Non-Power groups.

The time period was chosen purposefully to inspect how compensation changed over eight years and to test whether those changes were equal for the salaries for men's teams' coaches versus the compensation for the coaches of women's teams. In addition, particular attention was paid to the shifts that happened during 2014 – 2016 and 2019 – 2021. The years 2014 – 2016 are of particular interest for this study because of the establishment of the College Football Playoff to determine a national football champion. It was hoped data from 2019 – 2021 would provide insights into the impact of COVID-19 on coaches' salaries and severance payments. Of note, 2021 data was not used for the longitudinal comparison because of COVID-19; rath-

er, 2021 data was only used for the latter purpose of identifying its specific impact on salaries from 2019-2021.

SPSS Statistical software was used to capture the results for all analyses. Growth rates were gathered from 2014 to 2021 using salary data of all men's and women's teams' coaches (head and assistant coaches) and severance data of all men's teams' coaches (head and assistant coaches) from the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Data Project based on NCAA Financial Reports (2024). Data were subsequently loaded to SPSS and t-test results were calculated by year and separated by Power and Non-Power affiliation based on the conference affiliation in each year. The research team applied descriptive statistics to analyze the data and show the changes in the salaries of men's and women's teams' coaches' and severance pay of men's teams' coaches over the course of eight years. To conclude the data analysis, t-tests were used to compare and determine whether the differences were statistically significant. Initial data and results were reviewed by each researcher and subsequently discussed to identify potential anomalies or data entry errors: no anomalies were found.

## Results

A look at averages from public institutions in NCAA Division I-FBS from 2014-2021 proved useful in trying to determine the relationships between men's and women's teams' coaching salaries and men's teams' coaching severance pay (see Table 1). From 2014 to 2021, the average Power conference women's teams' coaching pay increased 33%, while the average men's teams' coaching pay increased 55% (see Table 2 and Figure 1). During the same period, the average Non-Power conference women's teams' coaching compensation rose 25% while the average men's teams' coaching compensation rose 37%. Interestingly, the average men's teams' coaching severance pay for Power conference schools increased by 208%, while the average men's team severance pay for Non-Power conference schools rose by 64%.

Fewer graphs of the average women's and men's teams' coaching salaries (see Figure 2), the mean for women's teams' and men's teams' coaching salaries of all teams except football (see Figure 3), and average men's teams' coaching severance pay (see Figure 4) for both the Power conferences and Non-Power conferences from 2014-2021 were created as a visual attempt to identify growth rates and peaks and valleys in the data. Notably, football is considered the "front porch" of our nation's universities due to the popularity of the sport, the significant financial commitment, and its impact on the perceived prestige associated with our largest and most iconic institutions of higher education (Bok, 2003; Duderstadt, 2003; Toma, 2003). Thus, another understanding of the level of pay equity between coaches of men's and women's teams in college sports would include the removal of football from this discussion. In other words, without football, what is the level of pay equity among coaches in big-time, Division I-FBS college sports?

**Table 1**  
*Average salaries for coaches of men's team and women's team, men's team coaches' severance pay, NCAA Division I -FBS, Power and Non-Power conferences, 2014-2021*

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Power conferences								
Men's Team Coaches' Salaries	\$12,197,658	\$13,425,069	\$14,358,744	\$15,338,136	\$16,792,117	\$17,834,901	\$18,601,140	\$18,876,721
Women's Team Coaches' Salaries	\$3,865,851	\$4,097,267	\$4,348,369	\$4,626,662	\$4,965,929	\$5,246,055	\$5,307,881	\$5,125,611
Men's Team Coaches' Severance	\$574,188	\$834,550	\$826,173	\$982,476	\$2,423,519	\$1,566,716	\$1,257,374	\$1,767,469
Non-Power conferences								
Men's Team Coaches' Salaries	\$4,049,146	\$4,247,669	\$4,464,369	\$4,597,992	\$4,931,981	\$5,389,592	\$5,505,723	\$5,528,091
Women's Team Coaches' Salaries	\$1,638,279	\$1,741,662	\$1,773,607	\$1,866,061	\$1,976,256	\$2,044,562	\$2,112,488	\$2,047,391
Men's Team Coaches' Severance	\$107,855	\$79,572	\$134,977	\$227,092	\$156,299	\$161,943	\$197,152	\$177,207

**Table 2**

*Growth rates in men's team coaches, women's team coaches, and men's team coaches' severance pay, NCAA Division I-FBS, Power and Non-Power conferences, 2014-2021*

	Power	Non-Power
Men's Team Coaches' Salary	55%	37%
Women's Team Coaches' Salary	33%	25%
Men's Team Coaches' Severance	208%	64%

**Figure 1**

*Growth rates in men's and women's team coaches' salaries, men's team coaches' severance pay, NCAA Division I-FBS, Power and Non-Power conferences, 2014-2021*

**Percent change among public NCAA Division I FBS, 2014-2021**



Two-tailed t-tests (see Table 3) conducted using SPSS demonstrated that the annual salaries for the coaches of men's teams at Power conference schools ( $M = 15,928,061$ ,  $SD = 4,686,929$ ) were significantly different from the salaries for the coaches of men's teams at Non-Power conference schools ( $M = 4,839,320$ ,  $SD = 1,896,432$ ),  $t(742) = 42.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ; the salaries for the coaches of women's teams at Power conference schools ( $M = 4,697,953$ ,  $SD = 1,251,584$ ) were significantly different from the salaries for the coaches of women's teams at Non-Power conference schools ( $M = 1,900,038$ ,  $SD = 601,287$ ),  $t(742) = 39.24$ ,  $p < .001$ . Severance payments for the coaches of men's teams at Power conference schools ( $M = 1,279,058$ ,  $SD = 2,622,788$ ) were significantly different from the severance payments for the coaches of men's teams at Non-Power conference schools ( $M = 154,749$ ,  $SD = 347,396$ ),  $t(742) = 8.32$ ,  $p < .001$ .

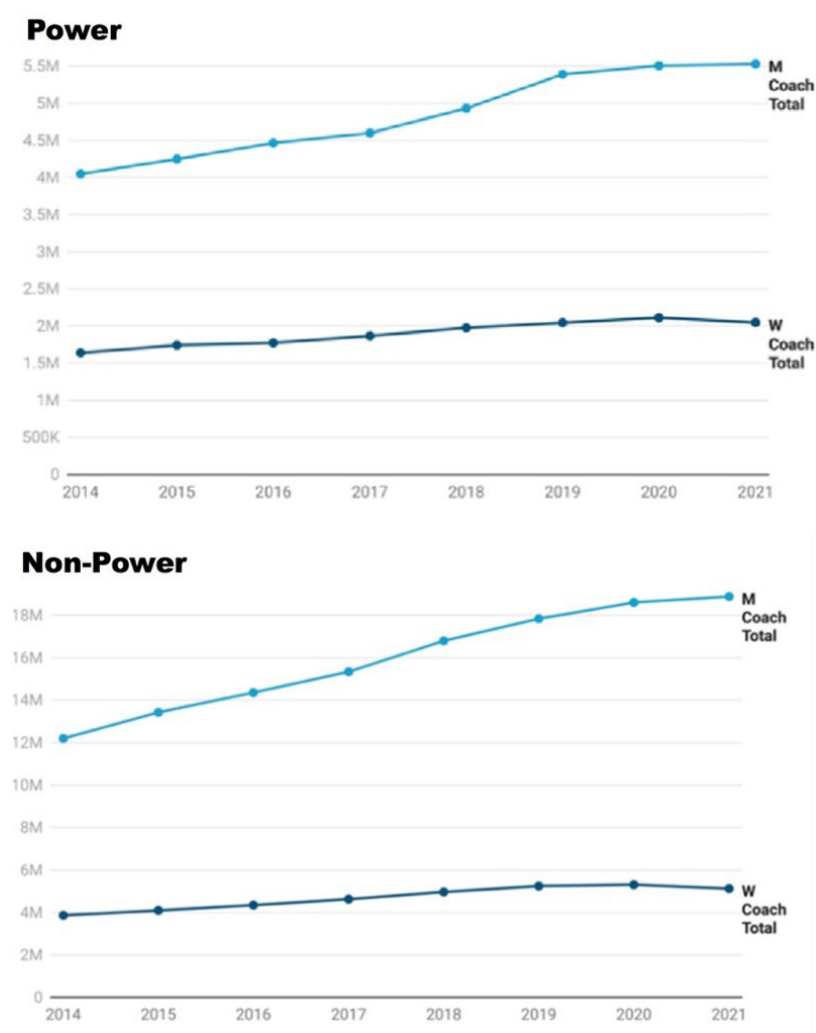
## Discussion

The results of the study demonstrated a large gap between the average salaries for the coaches for women's and men's college teams, and this difference was exacerbated as competition increased from Non-Power to Power conference institutions. Football is often referred to as a reason for a disparity between the average pay for the coaches of men's and women's teams. There is an anecdotal argument that if a football team cannot pay for itself, then it cannot pay for

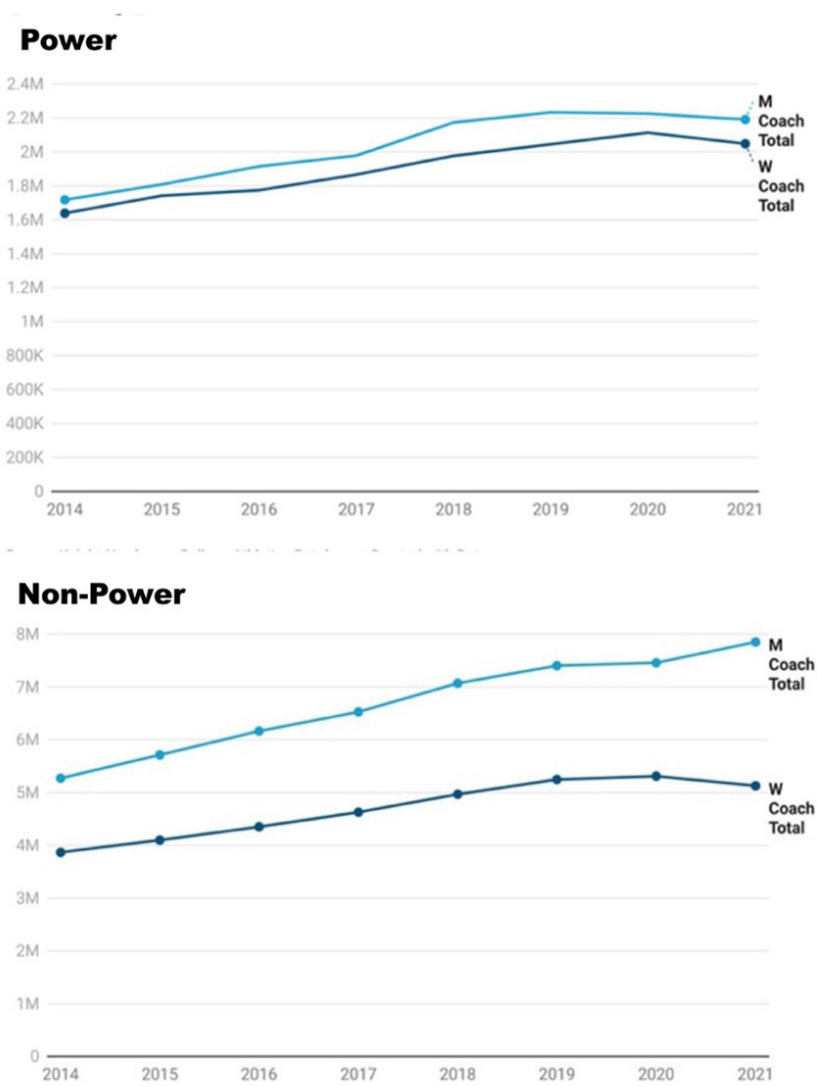


Figure 2

*Average salaries for men’s and women’s team coaches, NCAA Division I-FBS, Non-Power and Power conferences, 2014-2021*

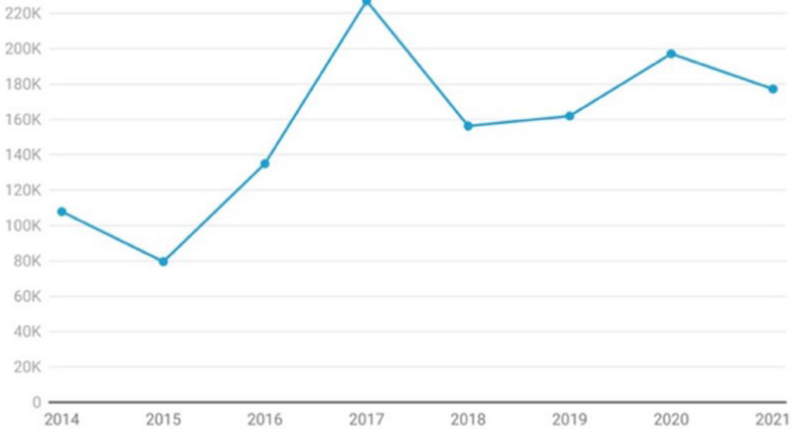


**Figure 3**  
*Average salaries for men's and women's team coaches (excluding football), NCAA Division I-FBS, Non-Power and Power conferences, 2014 - 2021*



**Figure 4**  
*Average men's team coaches' severance payments, NCAA Division I-FBS, Non-Power and Power conferences, 2014-2021*

**Non-Power**



**Power**



Table 3

*Results of two-tailed t-tests for men's team and women's team coaching salaries, men's team coaches' severance payments, NCAA Division I-FBS, Power and Non-Power conferences, 2014-2021*

	Power		Non-Power		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Men's Team Coaches' Salaries	\$15,928,061	\$4,686,929	\$4,839,320	\$1,896,432	42.778**
Women's Team Coaches' Salaries	\$4,697,953	\$1,251,584	\$1,900,038	\$601,287	39.243**
Severance Payments for Men's Team Coaches	\$1,279,058	\$2,622,788	\$154,749	\$347,396	8.323**

\*\*p<.01

non-revenue sports, including women's team sports. But, this study found the level of competition made it more viable to pay for women's teams. Data reported by 101 public Division I-FBS institutions to the NCAA (2024) from the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Data Project and Database (2023) demonstrated in 2020, over 50 football programs in the Power conferences made more money from football than they spent, while only one Power conference football program spent more money than the football team made. In other words, in 2020, more football programs in Division I-FBS (59) made money from football than lost money (42). The primary reason for football's financial success in the Power conferences are primarily due to football receiving massive conference media contracts, ticket sales at large stadiums, and large alumni donations compared to the lack thereof in the Non-Power conferences (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2021; Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Data Project, 2023; NCAA, 2024). Since football programs provide its institutions with prestige, leaders make the rational choice to invest more resources in football. When football coaches' salaries were removed from our analysis, the gap between the average pay for the coaches of men's and women's teams became smaller; however, the gap remained. The coaches' compensations were greater for Power conference schools than for Non-Power conference schools because football revenue was nearly five times greater for the Power conferences. These sports-rich schools used their football revenue to help pay much larger salaries for both men's teams' and women's teams' coaches; but in the Non-Power conferences, big revenue from football was not available, and thus all coaches' salaries were smaller.

It is important to understand this happens in most colleges because leaders choose the rational financial choice to spend more money on men's sports for prestige despite increasing revenue and popularity in women's sports, and inequality in pay for women's teams' coaches. Notably, there is a popular belief that college athletics programs are moving towards equality because of increased popularity and information that the salaries of coaches of women's teams are increasing every year (Schnell, 2024). Although the results of our study found coaches of women's teams on average were paid more every year from 2014-2021 (with the exception of the COVID year of 2020-2021), the findings also demonstrated that salaries of the women's teams' coaches grew at a slower rate than the salaries of men's teams' coaches and severance payments.

The huge increase in men's severance payments means male college coaches in football and basketball are receiving large payments for being fired. Data show for the Non-Power conferences, the average growth rate of "golden parachutes" for men's teams' coaches was 64% since 2014. For institutions in the Power conferences, the average growth rate of the severance pay for men's teams' coaches' was 208%. In other words, men's team coaches' severance pay was 5.3 times larger than the growth rate of women's coaching salaries of 33% over the same period. The data were not controlled for extraneous factors such as turnover of coaches, athletics directors, administrators, community sentiment, media perception, or changes in financial climate. Men's teams coaching severance pay is dominated by football coaches, as 81% of all men's team coaches' severance pay from 2014-2021 can be attributed to football.

It is important to acknowledge that many of the coaches receiving severance pay in our analysis signed contracts before their performance was known, thus binding athletic departments into long-term contractual obligations with uncertain outcomes. This underscores a critical issue: there is no guarantee for success, and athletics leaders should reconsider investing significant amounts of potential "dead money" without knowing possible outcomes. Instead of focusing on extravagant salaries and severance offers to lure football coaches, athletic departments could redirect those funds towards increasing salaries for women's teams' coaches. This would foster gender equity within coaching and create a more attractive career path for more women in college coaching. The cost to athletics departments to better improve or equate women's coaches' salaries to men's coaches is one of the financial choices that may require administrators to find new ways to raise more money. Potential solutions could include reallocation of resources. Additionally, refocusing athletic department hiring priorities to align with academic missions emphasizing gender equity can create a more equitable environment. Another interesting finding was the significant increase in men's teams' coaching severance pay in 2017, 2018, and 2021. Major revenues from the College Football Playoff, which began in 2014-2015, are likely a factor in golden parachute payments increases (particularly for football coaches) by the time of the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 academic years. In addition, despite significant revenue problems during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, both men's teams' coaching salaries and severance payments were insulated from any reduction. Rational choice theory would posit that leaders of higher education

institutions view investments in sports, particularly football, to elevate their prestige and financial standing. Coaches are paid well because of the prestige and revenues that men's sports (especially football) create. This finding is even greater by Power/Non-Power level of competition where greater success provides greater revenue to reinvest into the football enterprise instead of into women's coaches' salaries. The growing pay gap favoring men's teams' coaches over women's teams' coaches is concerning, especially with increased popularity and revenues from women's sports. These findings support the premise of a male-dominated American sports culture built on sexism, where men make decisions to pay men more than women and the decisions exacerbate the pay gap.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations to this study should be taken into consideration, including for future research. First, only public institutions in Division I-FBS were used for this study. It may be worthwhile to learn about the difference between public and private institutions and severance pay; however, a Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (2015) analysis of aggregate data from the NCAA in 2015 showed that private institutions typically spent their money in a similar way as public institutions. It is also worthwhile for future research to consider Division I-FCS or No-Football to learn if the same trends of men's dominance in coaching and severance pay are as significant as in Division I-FBS.

To further explore the issue, future research could combine the quantitative findings with qualitative interviews of athletics and university leaders and ask about their perceptions of decisions affecting compensation in athletics. This would reveal whether there is an alignment between the actual outcomes and desired goals. Such data would provide insights as to why decisions are made and suggest how best to guard against societal or cultural bias in favor of big-time men's revenue sports.

Future research should expand beyond the coaching ranks to investigate whether the same gender pay disparities exist within athletic administration. Given that staff compensation has risen in parallel with coaching salaries (Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database, 2023; NCAA, 2024), analyzing hiring and compensation practices for administrative staff could reveal if Title IX compliance is being upheld consistently across all athletic department roles. This broader examination would offer a more comprehensive understanding of gender equity in college athletics.

## **Conclusion**

Because of its social attraction, media attention, and significant financial impact, intercollegiate athletics today is in the crosshairs of Congress, federal courts, state legislatures, sports media, and even the public. This study is significant because it demonstrates that athletics and education leaders at the most competitive level in the NCAA (Division I-FBS) are failing to follow higher education's values and investment of gender equity in compensation. Instead, masculine hegemony and sexism remain alive and well in college sports. Despite Title IX providing the legal requirement as well as its intent for gender equity in education and college sports, this in-



vestigation found a significantly larger growth in men's teams' coaches' salaries and men's teams' coaches' severance pay compared to women's teams' coaches' salaries – both for those with larger revenue due to football (Power conferences) and those without access to major football revenue (Non-Power conferences).

Women's sports are experiencing significant growth in popularity and revenue generation that can impact institutional prestige, but the compensation of women's teams' coaches is not being realized for most. While the commercialized market powers surrounding football and men's basketball may impact media attention and prestige for an institution's entire athletics program, there is no excuse under the intent of Title IX not to compensate women's teams' coaches at the same level as men's teams' coaches of similar sports. College leaders agree to pay millions of dollars to male coaches to lead high-profile athletics teams as a common way of seeking institutional prestige. As revenues soar, increasingly larger sums of money are reportedly spent on keeping or luring coaches to win games, particularly male coaches in high-profile sports of football and basketball. When high-profile male coaches are fired for losing, they receive million-dollar paydays from severance pay, a form of compensation rarely provided to women's teams' coaches. And, even when economic pressures (such as COVID-19) seemingly would reduce spending more on coaching salaries, men's teams' coaches' salaries severance pay increased at a rate that significantly surpassed any increase in women's teams' coaching salaries.

Leaders of higher education and intercollegiate athletics would be well served to identify their need to lead by their stated values in support of gender equity by paying women's team coaches the same as men's team coaches for the same sport. Instead, college and athletics leaders lead with their actions which ignore sexism and financially support the hegemony of masculinity in college sports.

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# An Illustration of Hope: An Anti-Deficit Approach to Understand the Lived Experiences of Black Women Athletic Administrators

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Being that Black women account for less than five percent of those who hold Assistant and Associate Athletic Director positions, their access to power, status, and influence within NCAA Division I (DI) athletics is limited. While Black women's sport participation has increased, there are still limitations in gender and racial diversity amongst college sport leadership. Existing scholarship has highlighted and addressed these barriers. This study, however, implements an anti-deficit approach to examine the work experiences of Black women in college athletic leadership roles and focuses on their support structures and positive experiences to provide insights on how they achieve success in their respective roles. The purpose of this study is twofold: (a) discuss the strategies and supports utilized to overcome workplace barriers and (b) spotlight the positive experiences and advantages that this group's identities provide within the workplace. To bolster the anti-deficit lens, intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought frameworks serve as the analytic framework. Using semi-structured interviews and participant surveys with  $N = 10$  participants yielded five (5) themes: (a) credibility, (b) role model/representation, (c) communities of support, (d) mindset, and (e) moving with purpose.

**Keywords:** Black Feminist Thought, intersectionality, athletics administration, liberation

## Introduction

Sport continues to be a reflection of society by illuminating the disparities in resources and social supports. Historically and contemporarily, Black women are subject to these disparities – within sport too. This is seen through misogynoir-laden discourse (Razack & Joseph, 2021), sexualization (Biefeld et al., 2021), and the limited opportunities to assume leadership positions (Keaton, 2022). While the field has acknowledged these issues and contributed to inciting change (Keaton, 2022; Newman, 2014), few have utilized an anti-deficit approach which centers the experiences, tools, and methods used to challenge and overcome the structural disparities faced by Black women.

To contextualize the disparities regarding access to leadership within college athletics, data from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) found that of the DI Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Autonomy Conferences, only 3% of Athletic Director (AD) positions and 3.5% of Assistant and Associate AD positions were held by Black women (National, 2021). For DI FBS Nonautonomy Conferences, no Black women held the role of AD and only approximately 4% of Assistant and Associate ADs were Black women in 2020 (National, 2021).

These numbers are alarming considering the importance of the AD and the Assistant and Associate AD positions coupled with the growing presence of Black women across all sectors of college athletics. There has been consistent growth over the last 40+ years, a credit to the passage of Title IX; however, women in athletic administration have not experienced similar growth patterns (Lapchick, 2022; Welch et al., 2021). Previous research addressed this by focusing on the barriers and challenges that Black women face when pursuing and navigating leadership roles within college athletics (Bruening, 2005; Keaton, 2022; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; McDowell & Cunningham, 2009; Walker & Melton, 2015). This study, however, addresses the issue from a different perspective. By acknowledging the inherent challenges Black women endure while also considering the support structures and positive experiences of Black women athletic administrators as a way to improve the recruitment and retention of this underrepresented group. Furthermore, this anti-deficit approach provides a framework and method for scholar-practitioners to continue advancing equity work within college athletics. Through merging an intersectional lens with an anti-deficit approach, this study forges a new path that extends beyond acknowledging the experiences of Black women due to intersecting oppressions within the structure of college athletics, and highlights their responses to these oppressions.

Over the years, there have been calls for sport management scholars to reconsider research methods. The hope is that this study serves as the launch for a deliberate shift, particularly in illuminating and understanding narratives in the journey towards creating solutions through a two-fold approach (Chalip, 1997; Frisby, 2005). Singer (2005) requested that when conducting research related to persons of historically marginalized races and ethnic groups, there is a need for sport management research that utilizes race-based epistemologies. Additionally, researchers have made a call

for deeper exploration into the supporting factors and positive aspects of college athletics that have helped women and racial minorities persist in their respective roles (LaVoi et al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Inspired by the work of McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017), this study implements an intersectional lens in conjunction with Black Feminist Thought. In detail, this study is designed to acknowledge the existing scholarship and contributions that expose the presence and persistence of intersecting oppressions within college athletics - with an emphasis on the experiences of Black women working within college sport. Building upon this, this study reframes the inquiry and analysis through an anti-deficit lens to better understand the methods to build and maintain success implemented by Black women in athletics administrative roles. In doing so, the findings and proposed implications center on pathways of success and opportunity, as opposed to oppressive structures and the narratives impacted by this.

The purpose of this study is two-fold: (a) to discuss the strategies and supports utilized by Black women to overcome workplace barriers and (b) spotlight the positive experiences and advantages that Black women provide within the workplace. To achieve this, the study was conducted utilizing the following research questions: 1) How does race and gender impact the work experiences of Black women in collegiate athletics administration?, and 2) How do Black women navigate the positive and negative aspects of a career within collegiate athletics?

## **Literature Review**

### **Barriers that Impact Women's Experiences in Sports**

To properly address the supports and positive involvements that Black women athletic administrators experience, it is imperative to recognize the factors that serve as barriers for entry and retention within the workplace for groups with similar identities (i.e., women and/or racial minorities). Previous research has outlined different explanations for the underrepresentation of women in coaching and athletics administration to include family-work balance, sexism, and male hegemony (Norman, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Welch et al., 2021). Additionally, researchers considered the lack of diversity from a multilevel perspective (Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2010; Cunningham et al., 2019; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Taylor & Wells, 2017). Cunningham (2010) noted that "sport organizations are multilevel entities that both shape and are shaped by a myriad of factors" (p. 396), therefore, a multilevel approach is appropriate when considering the underrepresentation of women in college leadership positions.

Research at the micro-level focuses on how individuals analyze their experiences and understand power (Burton, 2015). Specific factors include, but are not limited to age, occupational tenure, race, identity and intersecting identities, gender socialization, human capital, and social capital investments (Cunningham et al., 2019; Taylor & Wells, 2017). Moreover, various factors and demographic characteristics can interconnect and influence the opportunities and experiences for women within sports organizations (Borland & Bruening, 2010; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). For example, Bergman and Henning (2008) explained how in male-domi-

nated organizations, racial and gender minorities can be viewed as organizational intruders, thus limiting their chances of receiving the benefits of the hegemonic and historically exclusionary group.

Factors at the meso-level analyze how certain structures and processes preserve or challenge the lack of diversity in intercollegiate athletics leadership positions (Cunningham, 2010). Within sport management, researchers have followed Blau's (2007) approach of linking an individual's attitude/behavior towards their careers to their respective organizational experiences and opportunities. Cunningham and Sagas (2004) argued that, "it is possible that individuals generalize their poor (or good) work experiences within an organization as indicative of how work is experienced in other organizations throughout the occupation" (p. 239).

Other meso-level factors include organizational policies, organizational culture, and leader biases (Cunningham et al., 2019). In terms of organizational culture, sport organizations are institutionalized in that the culture involves the marginalization of women without question or critique (Cunningham, 2019). Cunningham et al. (2019) argued this leads to women leaving sporting organizations at a higher rate than men. Leader biases can also serve as a meso-level barrier (Cunningham et al., 2019). Common examples of such as utilizing masculine descriptions and linking leadership with masculinity, and offering subgroup members (i.e. racial and gender minorities) less resources, rewards, and opportunities than the dominant group within sports (i.e. White men; Burton et al., 2009; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008).

From a macro-level perspective, Burton (2015) argued for the recognition of sport as a gendered institution when reviewing the lack of diversity in athletic administration. As such, masculine hegemony and systemic sexism are macro-level factors that can have a negative impact on women's experiences (Burton, 2015). These gender ideologies are not only embedded within society, but also entrenched within sport and sports organizations (Cunningham et al., 2019). One final macro-level factor are external stakeholders (Cunningham, 2010; Cunningham et al., 2019). Within sports organizations, external stakeholders are often key in the hiring of upper-level administrators and high-profile coaches. Unfortunately, many stakeholders within college athletics possess and accept gender stereotypes which lead to the underrepresentation of minority groups in leadership positions (Staurowsky et al., 2017).

### **Factors that Impact Black Women's Experiences in Sports**

There is a limited but growing body of research related to Black women and their lived experiences in and through sport. Existing work has focused on college athletes (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2015; Cooper et al., 2020), coaches (Borland & Bruening, 2010), and athletic administrators and their marginalized identities (Armstrong, 2007; Bruening, 2005; Keaton, 2022; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; McDowell & Cunningham, 2009; Price et al., 2017; Walker & Melton, 2015). These studies provide noteworthy insights related to the experiences of African American athletic administrators and information regarding the marginalization of this group.

Many Black women athletic administrators say they face various challenges such as concerns and doubts related to their qualifications and abilities, disfavor from colleagues because of their respective positions, and have to assume roles to prove

themselves (Abney & Richey, 1991; Keaton, 2022). Such challenges lead to extensive pressures, anxiety and stress, and sometimes the unintentional confirming of certain stereotypes (McDowell & Cunningham, 2009). Furthermore, while in pursuit of athletic leadership positions, this group has also expressed experiencing racism, sexism, the inability to access the ‘good ole boy’s network,’ feelings of isolation, limited role models and mentors, and tokenism (Abney & Richey, 1991; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Wells & Kerwin, 2017). Unfortunately, such barriers often lead to Black women not being considered for leadership opportunities (Collins, 2000; Rosser-Mims, 2010).

Notwithstanding the barriers that exist for this particular group, less work has addressed supports and positive aspects for Black women in sport administrative/leadership positions (Armstrong, 2007; Price et al., 2017). In Price and colleagues (2017) study on Black women administrators in intercollegiate athletics, participants noted increased exposure and the opportunity to serve as role models to college athletes as positive aspects that their status as a Black woman provided. Taylor and Wells (2017) identified inclusive environments, human capital, and social capital as supports in their study on DI ADs. Additionally, while they can sometimes serve as barriers, the following factors may also serve as supports for these women: power, stakeholders, organizational demography, organizational culture, and family-work life (Taylor & Wells, 2017). Similarly, Keaton’s (2022) work on Black women Athletic Diversity and Inclusion Officers (ADIOs) illuminate how participants’ positions as outsiders within their predominantly white athletic departments fueled their understanding of organizational inclusivity and their desire to cultivate this. Specifically, Keaton (2022) suggests, “...Black women ADIOs move beyond being more aware of their social plight and enact this consciousness to inform their job responsibilities, which demonstrates critical praxis” (p. 11). Finally, Armstrong (2007) spoke to how women in sports leadership often possess the ethic of caring for other Black women. Specifically, many participants were motivated to partake in their respective roles to help uplift and serve as mentors for others within their community.

Despite the above review, a keen focus on the experiences of Black women in college athletic administrative positions is warranted. Specifically, more scholarship is needed to consider the support structure and positive experiences of this group (Cunningham et al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017).

## **Analytic Framework**

### **Intersectionality**

As described by Carter-Francique (2020), intersectionality is “an analytical tool utilized to identify, analyze, and transform the cultural, political, and structural dynamics within institutions” (p. 456). Coined by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality considers the experiences of marginalized groups and individuals in environments that perpetuate social inequities. However, intersectionality considers the overlapping and intersecting aspects of an individual’s racial, gendered, sexual, social and other identities (Collins, 2000). Crenshaw (1991) illustrated that the intersecting im-

pact of both racism and sexism on Black women's lives cannot be understood by solely reviewing race and gender dimensions; but instead must consider "the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color" (p. 1244).

Structural intersectionality considers the way in which power structures and social categorizations meet and leaves marginalized individuals with an adverse experience. For example, the lack of racial and gender diversity within sport can be attributed to those who hold the majority of the power continuing to hire and promote those within their same social category (Melton & Bryant, 2017). Building upon structural intersectionality, political intersectionality explores how individuals that possess multiple social identities must consider various political agendas, they may likely be discouraged from expressing their beliefs to avoid offending his or her other social group, e.g. an African American executive's decision to be timid with her advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights so that she will not offend her other social group (Melton & Bryant, 2017). Finally, representational intersectionality is the effect that stereotypes and cultural demonstrations have on those with multiple identities, such as the large representation of White men in leadership positions in sport preserves the belief that this group is the standard for leadership when compared to their counterparts (Melton & Bryant, 2017).

When considering the unique and cultural nuances of Black women's perceptions, McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) and Price et al. (2017) utilized intersectionality as a tool to analyze this group's experiences. Melton and Bryant (2017) contended that a large portion of both general and sport management research focuses on single aspects of diversity. As such, it is recommended that scholars who wish to add a critical perspective to their research should consider a qualitative approach when examining the multiple points of an individual's intersecting identities (Melton & Bryant, 2017). Within the athletics realm, existing work has taken an intersectional approach when reviewing the race, gender, and/or sexual orientations of their participants (Keaton, 2022; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Price et al., 2017; Walker & Melton, 2015; Welch et al., 2021). Moreover, Collins and Bilge (2020) remind us that intersectionality is not merely a tool for critical inquiry but also for empowering people (i.e., critical praxis). There is much potential to draw upon the latter as Keaton (2022) put out a call to action, challenging sport scholars to be more intentional in implementing this. Thus, to maximize the utility of this framework, both aspects should be considered.

### ***Anti-Deficit Framing of Intersectionality***

Building upon the role of intersectionality as a central component of the analytic framework, the decision to investigate and analyze through an anti-deficit lens was intentional and necessary given the existing scope of literature regarding the experiences of Black women within sport. Following the explanation provided by Crenshaw, who explained that intersectionality is a prism that should be used to a) understand problems and b) to use that understanding to undergird intervention and promote equitable outcomes (National Association of Independent Schools, 2018) -



the researchers believe the anti-deficit framing will assist in following Crenshaw's explanation. In detail, the anti-deficit framing extends beyond understanding the existing and compounding structures of racialization and gendering in college athletics leadership and centers the experiences of Black women in college sport leadership to resist, intervene, and promote the development of equitable spaces. While the anti-deficit intersectional lens is rather novel, the unique utilization of this approach in existing works mirror the goals of this manuscript. To note, Scheese (2018) used this approach when exploring and illuminating the experiences of college students with chronic illnesses. Within their work, Scheese noted that the impact of an anti-deficit intersectional approach shifts the research narrative from the existing oppressive structures and highlights the community responses despite those structures. Going further, Gonyo (2018) and their integration of an anti-deficit framing alongside an intersectional lens served to extend beyond the existing literatures explored the oppressions working against Black LGBTQ+ individuals on college campuses. In sum, while an intersectional lens is undoubtedly important in understanding the experiences of Black women within college sport leadership, the deliberate shift in the research narrative to focus on their strengths, outcomes, and methods to success illuminates a much-needed path towards equity and liberatory-driven scholarship.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Black Feminist Thought "attempts to discover and expose dominant ideologies, practices, and beliefs which restrict Black women's freedom" (Armstrong, 2007, p. 5). Historically, Black women have long taken on an "outsiders" perspective within society. For example, Collins (1986) painted the image of Black women who served in domestic roles for White families who were allowed to nurture their children and offer advice; however, despite having access to the family unit, Black women often remained "outsiders". This status, which Collins (1986) described as outsider within has "provided a special standpoint on self, family, and society" (p. 514) – as well as unique ways of assessing reality from both outside in and inside out (hooks, 1984).

Despite its similarities to critical feminist theories, Black Feminist Thought shifts the focus from unfair power relations, to placing the responsibility for Black women to be both self-defined and determined (Collins, 2000). Additionally, Collins (1986) contended that regardless of the challenges that exist, Black women can sometimes benefit from their status. Collins (2000) described this as a Black woman's racial and gender oppression serving as a source of inspiration and creativity. In turn, the significance of such an approach "may lie in its ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice" (Collins, 2000, p. 269).

Used to illustrate the nature of Black women's leadership in sport, Armstrong (2007) highlights concepts of Collins' Black Feminist Thought: (a) ethic of caring, (b) situation of struggle, and (c) internal empowerment. The first dimension relates to Black women's nature of nurturing and caring for others. The second relates to Black women's ability to manage and deal with racism and sexism without clear teaching or conscious learning. Finally, internal empowerment relates to Black wom-

en's ability to find a self-defined voice to "contend with domineering or subversive environmental conditions...by creating internally safe spaces as sites of resistance" (Armstrong, 2007, p. 6).

The existing literature provides strong support for using Black Feminist Thought as a guiding theoretical framework. By allowing Black women to be seen and their experiences to be understood, this allows researchers to analyze the experiences of this group through their respective narratives and addresses the need for supportive spaces despite the oppression that their racial and gender identities often cause them to face (Collins, 2000).

## Methodology

### Participants

The participants consisted of ten Black women athletic administrators (see Table 1). Purposeful sampling was utilized to select the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The criterion was: (a) identify as a Black woman, (b) be employed at a NCAA DI member institution, and (c) have experiences as an athletic administrator as defined through Myles' (2005), that is, someone holding positions within college athletic departments that can involve leadership, human resource management, financing, fundraising, media relations, academics, compliance, ticketing, marketing, donor relations, and facility management responsibilities. For the sake of this study, those who work in the aforementioned areas and hold the title of Assistant AD, Associate AD, Deputy AD, Senior Woman Administrator (SWA), and/or the equivalent of these titles were included within this study as these positions work closely with ADs and are pipelines to the AD rank (Lapchick, 2022). Snowball sampling was used to gather participants.

### Data Collection

Two rounds of data collection were used. First, a background questionnaire was distributed to participants to collect demographic information (see Table 1) and assist with building rapport. Ensuring anonymity of the participants was imperative for the research team. Thus, participants were given a pseudonym, which was used throughout the research process. Second, qualitative semi-structured interviews were utilized to provide researchers with flexibility and structure (Patton, 2002). The interviews took place virtually through the use of video calls and lasted from 1-2 hours. Members of the research team took observation notes and maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection process.

### Data Analysis

The researchers utilized a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) - primarily due to the lead researchers' proximity to the research topic and ability to provide in-depth analysis of the participant responses through their shared identities (Braun & Clark, 2019). RTA places a heightened emphasis on researcher positionality and role of reflexivity within the data analysis process (Braun & Clark, 2019). Going further,

**Table 1**  
*Participants' Background Information*

Name	Marital Status	Children	Current Title	Total Years in College Athletics	Current Institution Type	Previous Institution(s) Type
Laurn	Never married	No	Associate Athletic of Internal Operations/SWA	7	PWI	HBCU
Jill	Never married	No	Associate AD/Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer	10	PWI	PWI
Mary	Married	No	Assistant Vice Chancellor Deputy AD	27	PWI	PWI, HBCU
Monica	Never married	No	Associate AD for Administration	10	PWI	PWI
Brandy	Never married	No	Associate AD for Compliance	8	PWI	PWI, Conference Office, National Office
Ari	Never married	No	Senior Associate AD/SWA	10	PWI	PWI
Anita	Married	Yes	Deputy AD for Internal Affairs	21	PWI	PWI, HBCU
Erykah	Divorced or separated	Yes	Athletics Chief Operating Officer	20	PWI	PWI, HBCU, MSI/HIS
Jennifer	Married	No	Senior Associate AD Administration/ Chief Diversity Officer	24	PWI	PWI, HBCU
Whitney	Never married	No	Executive Senior Associate AD/SWA	17	MSI/HSL	PWI, Conference Office, National Office

Note. PWI= Predominantly White Institution; HBCU= Historically Black College or University; MSI/HSL=Minority Serving Institution/Hispanic Serving Institution

as explained by Braun and Clark (2006), RTA allows the development of codes and themes without the expectation for repetition of key words or phrases by emphasizing the researchers' ability to analyze and conceptualize the data. When reviewing the scope, purpose, and conceptual framework for this study - the RTA approach serves as the ideal analytic tool.

The RTA process consists of six unique phases: familiarization, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and developing themes, refining, and the final write-up (Braun & Clark, 2006). To gain *familiarization* with the data, the lead researcher transcribed the participant responses and gathered data from background questionnaires and website biographies. Next, participants were given the opportunity to review their transcribed interviews as a form of member checking to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition the lead researcher leveraged their identities and experiences as a Black woman within college sports to take notes of patterns and key language. Building upon the familiarization phase, the remaining researchers reviewed the data and gained knowledge within the theoretical and conceptual frames to ensure accurate alignment prior to further analysis.

Next, the researchers implemented the *initial coding* and *initial theme generation* by grouping data by similarity through language used, then further analysis by exploring meaning and context - resulting in the early development of themes. To further *review and develop themes* and establish intercoder reliability, the researchers first reviewed and consolidated the early themes through individual-then-group discussion. To *refine and define themes*, the researchers selected core excerpts from the participant responses and leaned heavily on the anti-deficit framing to ensure the themes and definitions accurately met the goals of the study. The current manuscript serves as the *final write-up* for the RTA process.

## Positionality

Milner (2007) contended that, "Researchers, in particular, are challenged to work through dangers and to reconsider their own and others' racialized and cultural positionality in conducting research" (p. 397). Within qualitative research, it is common for researchers to share similarities and be a part of the social group that is being investigated (Moore, 2012). This is true for the current study as the first author has an insider's perspective as a Black woman, former college athlete and who was serving as an athletic administrator at the Division I level. Multiple steps were taken to ensure the researcher's biases were minimized throughout the process. That said, this in-group membership helped build rapport with participants and appeared to be advantageous. Additionally, the other authors served primarily in an advisory position throughout this process. To note, each of the authors provided additional insights with integrating the anti-deficit framing throughout the analysis and the development and explanation of the themes. The combination of in-group membership and scholarly expertise assisted in accurately understanding, analyzing, and presenting the narratives within this manuscript.

## Findings

Data analysis yielded five emergent themes that highlight the unique experiences and approaches used by Black women in college sport leadership. Table 2 provides the definitions developed for the emergent themes while highlighting similarities within the participant responses. Through the RTA approach, a key component of the theme development, refining, and write-up is that each theme accurately responds to both research questions. In detail, the themes directly respond to RQ2, while the analysis, supplemental quotes, and further discourse within this section directly responds to RQ1. As the themes were developed, the researchers found it necessary to connect each theme to either an old adage within the Black community or to a cultural artifact that has become a component of the Black lexicon.

**Table 2.**  
*Definitions of Emergent Themes*

Themes	Definitions
Gotta Be Twice as Good	The perceived need or expectation to have exceedingly high credentials (education, experience, etc.) than their non-Black women peers within the field; this element is often communicated by non-Black women peers
All Eyez on Me	The additional professional, personal, and social expectation to serve as a role model or agent of representation due to the identity of being a Black woman in a white and male dominated field
It Takes a Village	The diverse and all-encompassing network of supporters ranging from colleagues, friends & family, and professionals in other sectors/industries
Staying Locked In	An internal guidance system implemented to address 1) the tumultuous nature of college athletics and 2) the racialized and gendered experiences of being a Black woman working within college athletics; this system centers on faith, mental fortitude, and self-empowerment
Ain't No Half-Steppin	A form of professional and personal operation that emphasizes intrinsic intentionality, strategy, and professional acumen to ensure ideal outcomes across all fronts

### Gotta Be Twice as Good

Gotta Be Twice as Good stems from the common phrase, ‘you gotta be twice as good to get half as much.’ This phrase initially highlighted the perceived need to excel in professional acumen, academic credentials, and practical experiences - largely due to the racialized and gendered barriers Black women faced in society. However, through deeper analysis and reflection, this theme reclaimed the first half of the saying and presented it as a badge of honor. The participants highlighted their desire

to earn various credentials and professional experiences as a way to break through racialized and gendered barriers and claim their spaces within college sport leadership. To note, Jennifer, who was born and raised in the rural South, spoke about how she was socialized to think about her intersecting identities as a Black woman. These lessons informed how she moved personally but also her understanding of the inherent challenges present for Black women professionally. From a young age her family preached the value of education in opening up opportunities and ensuring credibility. But for Jennifer, this wasn't enough. "You can't just walk into the profession, you have to prove yourself" she said. For Jennifer, this meant establishing a niche as she spoke of her track record revamping sport programs that had been plagued by poor academic metrics and the impact of this success on her career:

I had to prove that I could get [school name removed] football team off of academic probation and we have a good APR. I was known for being someone who could get your football team straight from an APR standpoint.

Jennifer further asserts that (in comparison to her peers) her professional performance held a considerable role in her being validated as a leader, whereas contemporaries received inherent credibility due to their title within the organization. "I also had to be known for something and be good at it first technically in the industry, before people could see me also as a credible leader" Jennifer expressed. Echoing similar sentiments, Whitney signals the perceived need of professional experiences to gain credibility and be seen as reliable:

When you look at just my career in a snapshot, what you're going to see is that I really, I try to coin myself as a 360 administrator, the person who knows what it's like to be on campus, in a conference office, and in the national office.

For Whitney, this need to go above and beyond stemmed from first-hand experience and witnessing incidents where women of color were not appreciated for who they are or the skills they possess. "As I got into my career, I felt like there were instances where I may not have been given opportunities because either I was young, or I was female or I was Black or all the above," she mentioned. Therefore, establishing a niche helped to counteract this reality.

Participants established that not only are they qualified for the positions in which they currently hold/are pursuing but they are highly educated as well. As evidenced in Table 1, all of participants earned postgraduate degrees – with four of the women having earned a doctorate. In addition to excelling in experience and education, many women within this study spoke to the need to excel in their role and exceed other standards too. Lauryn said, "I think as a Black person working for, you know, predominantly White institutions, you actually got to be above and beyond what would normally meet the requirements to be looked at." Whitney supported this as she argued:

We have to show up, we have to be better, we have to be smarter, we have to be more polished, we have to accomplish more, just to be considered half-way equal to what they may be able to offer. We are expected to be better.

In sum, the need for credibility within this sector of college athletics points to the long-standing exclusionary nature of sport administration – specifically towards Black women. As noted by Keaton (2022), intercollegiate athletics has not been the most receptive towards Black women as professionals. The participant responses mirror the findings highlighted by Keaton. Another essential component within the participant narratives is the tone and overall pride behind their professional and academic achievements. Within the interviews, the participants relished in their accomplishments, largely because they knew barriers were shattered because of their academic and professional prowess. This underlying tone of pride and success is why the theme centered on being twice as good, as opposed to the latter that center the existing problematic culture of college athletics.

### All Eyez on Me

Representation is key and visibility is essential. When developing this theme, the researchers wanted to highlight the participants' communicated importance of being a role model and mode of representation. Even more so, the participants exhibited an aura of pride and an empowering braggadocio that came along with this heightened visibility and responsibility. An homage to the 1996 2Pac album, *All Eyez on Me*, this theme centers the embraces 2Pac's response to the immense visibility on him and his career primarily focusing on setting the tone for those around him while also proving his doubters wrong (Evans, 1995). Similarly, even with the challenges present, Whitney recounts the impact of her role model in shaping her path:

The SWA at my alma mater, played a very instrumental role in helping me decide that working in college athletics was something that I would want to do but even with that, I didn't see any women of color working in the space.

Likewise, Brandy recalled a time she was able to serve as a role model for another Black woman who was a part of her staff. In her early years breaking into the field, Brandy recalled feeling stifled and pressured to assimilate to certain standards of professionalism in the workplace. Now as a senior staff member, there is more leverage to push back against this for herself - and also others. Through her presence and conscious choices about fashion and hair (i.e., natural hair, head wrap) she strives to lead by example and curate a space where Black women can feel a sense of belonging.

It is now my responsibility, because I remember what it was like coming up and feeling like I had to look like everybody else in the office...She actually said like, thank you for creating a space where I can be myself and I was like *oh my goodness*.

Mary opened up about how serving as a representative figure in her role can be a complex task, particularly when mediating between groups – “I think it is a responsibility on my part to stand in this space because everybody is not equipped to stand in it.” She shared. With 27 years of tenure, Mary reflected on her triumphs and tribulations as a Black woman working in the white male dominated college sport space - and the wisdom acquired working in PWI settings. While beneficial at times, Mary went on to explain the strain that can take:



Obviously in the last two years with all the social justice awakening, shaking up, there have been times where different people have looked to me to be that person and luckily I am for it. And I feel a bit maternal for our staff. We have about 41 staff of color...I do feel a little bit like 'Get behind me I got this!'

It is worth noting that participants within this study not only served as role models and representatives for other colleagues within the industry, but for their athletes too. For example, Monica noted, "so knowing I'm having an opportunity to start to sit at tables where I can speak up, keeping those student-athletes in mind is what keeps me going." Specifically, she explained that this advocacy is increasingly important for student-athletes from marginalized communities and educating colleagues on the importance of meaningful diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

Lauryn compared how representation may look differently at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) versus Historically White Colleges and Universities (HWCU). "Being at a HBCU and being a Black woman and you [get to] see, you know the potential of different people in different roles on that campus of what you could be.". Conversely, when speaking about her role at an HWCU, Lauryn mentioned, "because it's like [students at PWIs] don't see that [Black professionals in leadership positions] all day long versus like [HBCU students who] see a ton of Black people...so I think it's more impactful there."

As communicated by the participants, their increased visibility played a pivotal role across multiple fronts. The increased visibility amplified their efforts within positively impacting the culture and operations of their spaces for future Black women and other historically excluded communities. Going further, the concept of other-mothering (Collins, 2022), is readily evident in the participants' desire to work beyond their position and serve role models for Black women students and college athletes on their respective campuses.

### **It Takes a Village**

As explained by Peay (2020), *It Takes a Village* is an old adage that has been established in the black community as a message for deeper support and community involvement to help achieve goals. The concept of having a village was key for the participants to achieve success and gain support as they matriculated throughout their careers. Jill, with whom community was paramount, advised others to "find your tribe." Specifically, she mentioned:

You know, I've talked about community, and the importance of that. For me, early on my community involved a lot of men. But in being in a male-dominated field, the boys are the ones I still dap it up with, and in some instances are going to be the power brokers, that's shifting a little bit...but being able to find, establish, grow, sustain that community over time is really important.

Meanwhile, Erykah contended that, "You can't do it alone. You got to find your network. You got to find your people, your tribe. You got to find your executive staff; your team that's going to help keep you all the way together."

Emanating from this village, mentorship was mentioned by several of the participants as a game changer for helping spark and develop successful careers within college athletics. Jill vividly recalled women who made a difference early in her career.

All of these really strong women who I've met throughout my tenure they poured into me early on and it's given me an opportunity to pay it forward... and all of that is so key to how I survive, how I continue to thrive in this field...I'm very much a product of the women who have poured into me.

But more importantly, the Black women who saw something in me early on.

Distinctly different, Whitney touched on how sponsorship has benefitted her career and allowed her to advance within the industry. According to Randel and colleagues (2021), sponsorship is a component of mentorship that involves the intentional exposure of the mentee/sponsee to networks and professional opportunities. "Every single job that I've held, I did not blindly apply for. Someone had advocated for me and that someone was someone that did not look like me." Whitney mentioned. Anita also provided insight on this – particularly the community within professional organizations like Women Leaders in College Sport (WLCS) and Minority Opportunities Athletic Association (MOAA). "That helped me create networks and relationships that can get me to where I am and people can, they know who [Anita] is, and they can speak for me in that room and recommend me for different things." she shared.

The experiences of the participants truly highlight the impact and importance of a village. The communal support from those within and outside their professional spaces were key in offering a sounding board, professional guidance, and general interpersonal support within their respective endeavors. While the white male centeredness of college athletics administration presents challenges, the impact of those challenges are greatly diminished due to the work of the participants' respective villages. Going further, the availability and ease of access to a village through professional networks, industry initiatives, campus communities, and Black Greek letter Organizations (BGLOs) illuminates a pathway for success for current and future Black women within college athletics administration.

### **Staying Locked In**

In order to *Stay Locked In*, participants alluded to faith, mental fortitude, and empowerment as tools to navigate highs and lows of college athletics. For instance, when assuming her role as the first Black person to hold a senior position within her institution, Anita said she had to rely on her faith: "I literally had to run the show and had never been at [this level of an institution] before. I'm like, what am I doing but Lord, Ima faith it till I make it."

Additionally, several of the participants celebrated the mental fortitude developed from life and career experiences. For instance, Jennifer spoke about how she is now able to encourage her student-athletes – "I tell our student athletes all the time, it's not how you start. It's how you finish and you can be disciplined enough to get to where you need to be, regardless of what the circumstances present." Mary's

description of her determined nature can be attributed to the desire to prove people wrong from an early age:

I feel like the experiences I had growing up...being told by my parents that I couldn't do certain things because I was a girl have fueled me my whole life... People are not going to tell me what I can't do.

This inexorable attitude was common amongst other participants too. Such as Whitney who declared, "...I can definitely think through the course of my career where being a woman of color has not always been accepted or appreciated. But I don't let it stop me."

By empowering themselves and others, participants were able to overcome challenges that are common for women broadly and Black women in college sport and beyond. For instance, Anita spoke to her efforts to empower other women within the industry:

As women, we don't always get the credit that we deserve. And I think that's why you see me on social media as much as you do. Now granted, I'm a former SID so I love telling other people's stories, but I love highlighting women and highlighting Black women and the work that we're doing because we don't do it enough for each other. So if I can be the one voice that puts it out there then that's what I'm going to do.

Furthermore, she added, "When you're having bad days, recognize that we have a responsibility particularly as Black women to help each other out." For Jill, empowerment involved a different approach. Specifically, she expounded on the important of self-empowerment:

I think far too often as women, and then far too often as Black women, we are conditioned to like, minimize our light for others, or over accommodate, autocorrect for somebody else - because they don't know how to handle us. It's not a 'me' problem. And I hate to see us in this, I'm also probably talking to myself in this instance, to like dimming my light because it's shining in somebody else's life. They need to put sunglasses on.

*Staying Locked In* held an integral role for the participants as they navigate their personal and professional paths. Whether presented as faith, mental fortitude, or empowerment – each of these elements speak to processes that amplify the effects of the aforementioned themes.

### **Ain't No Half-Steppin'**

Much like the 1988 golden age hip-hop classic, *Ain't no Half-Steppin'*, the participants navigated their professional and personal lives with a clear and concerted effort to operate at maximum capacity. Throughout their narratives, the participants spoke to personally and professionally navigating with strategic intentionality and leveraging opportunities as it related to self-care, professional opportunities, and expanding professional networks.

The necessity and intentionality of self-care was evident in Erykah and Whitney's narratives. While Erykah highlighted the importance of devotionals, meditations, and inspirational readings to combat stress and anxiety stemming from their

work environment; Whitney explained how she works to prevent burnout and advocates for others to find their means of remaining centered through flexibility and self-prioritization. Both participants understood the importance of using self-care as a way to persist and perform within their respective roles.

Building on this, Erykah spoke to her network diversification strategies. Rooted in confidence, consistency, and authenticity her approach focuses on cultivating meaningful relationships with leaders and administrators at different institutions. Similarly, Whitney argued, that seeking out opportunities to connect with people outside of your circle (i.e., different disciplines, divisions, associations) can be beneficial – personally and professionally. As highlighted within existing scholarship (Burton et al., 2009; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008) college sport is still a ‘male dominated industry.’ In turn, Anita advised:

“You have to have people that are able to speak for you when you’re not in that room. And sometimes it’s going to be people that don’t look like you and I don’t mean just in terms of race, but also in gender.”

This speaks directly to the importance of professional allyship that extends into the broader social sphere. Colleagues who can serve as power brokers and challenge existing structures and norms are essential to creating safe and equitable spaces for Black women within sport.

Participants provided countless examples of strategic work-related decisions that have helped them persist and find success working in college athletics; Like Ari, who noted the importance of critically assessing the organization one is pursuing – particularly operations and workplace culture. Alignment of values and ability to be oneself is not always taken for granted, and therefore, something Ari felt Black women should be cognizant of. Jennifer provided a slightly different, but equally important strategy:

So I will say it is possibly better for folks in our industry to rock the boat but not fallout...In my opinion, you can be radical about this thing of race and be in this profession. But you have to be tempered with it from the standpoint of understanding your surroundings in a way where you know how much you can push.

Several of the participants made reference to how they leverage opportunities by utilizing national organizations, taking on tasks outside of their expertise, and maximizing opportunities when presented. For Jill, this began before she actually worked in college athletics. “It comes from just being my authentic self, being an active participant in the world around me, where that opened up so many doors for me that I didn’t even know.” She explained. For Jill, participating in WLCS and Women’s Leaders Symposium as a college athlete helped her get connected within athletics administration at her institution and beyond.

Other participants recalled times when they took on tasks that were not a part of their sole duties as a means to grow and advance within the industry. For instance, Monica talked about a time in graduate school where she enrolled in a class taught by the AD and utilized this opportunity to highlight her professional competencies to an industry leader who would eventually become a considerable point of contact in her career.

In sum, *Ain't No Half-Steppin'* is a broad and complex theme that the participants encourage future professionals to implement early and often in their career. The emphasis on intentionality and concerted effort assists with persisting and overcoming the inherent challenges of working with a dynamic professional field. When considering the importance of avoiding burnout, professional development, and expanding professional networks - integrating a lifestyle devoid of half-steppin' is essential.

## Discussion

As displayed throughout the manuscript, maintaining the anti-deficit and liberatory framing of the discussion is paramount. In alignment with these guiding frames, the central discussion highlights a foundation of liberation and uplift that celebrates the progression, contributions, and experiences of Black women within college sport leadership. The findings from this study support the literature related to structural intersectionality (Melton & Bryant, 2017), which considers the ways in which marginalized individuals are impacted by the meeting of certain power structures and social categorizations. This serves as a barrier for many Black women who attempt to enter and advance within the industry, as the overwhelmingly majority of power holders within athletics are not typically within the same social categories as these women (Cunningham et al., 2019). While the aforementioned scholarship notes the inequity of power and representation within college sport leadership this study works to expand this perspective.

The anti-deficit framing directly challenges long-held scholarly perspectives regarding historically excluded communities. With attention to political intersectionality - as presented by Crenshaw (2013) and contextualized within sport by Melton and Bryant (2017) - predominant perspectives focus on the domineering power of socially dominant and exploitative groups on the operation and navigation of historically excluded communities. The findings challenge this approach being that the participants shared how they proudly and gladly embrace and advocate for not only other Black women, but other individuals with whom they shared identities. Through advocating with and for these communities, participants offer a fresh perspective on how political intersectionality is experienced and addressed.

In alignment with anti-deficit framing, Black Feminist Thought transfers the focus from external, oppressive factors to Black women and their self-determination (Collins, 2000). Several findings provided support of the existing literature relative to Black Feminist Thought and its uses in the sport/athletics realm. Collins' (1986) powerful image of Black women's 'outsider within' status was discussed. Based on the responses from a number of participants, it appears this reality still exists for many Black women within college athletics. For instance, Whitney recalled a time when she was referred to as "girl" while working in a new position. Despite her success that allowed her to step into this particular role, she was still viewed as an outsider. To directly challenge existing racialized and gendered dynamics within the department, Whitney shifted her perspective and considered the role and example that she may set for other student-athletes and colleagues who may have shared similar experiences.

Another concept of this relates to Black women's ethic of caring, or their nature of nurturing. Stemming from the relationship between enslaved African American women who assisted other mothers in caring for their children, Collins' (2000) conceptualization of othermothering was evident in the findings. According to Collins (1986), "Nurturing children in the Black extended family networks stimulated a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African American women who often feel accountable to all the Black community's children." (p. 129). Within the context of higher education, scholars highlight the ways in which Black educators go above and beyond the call of duty to provide holistic care for students - in regard to their academic needs and more (Case, 1997; Flowers et al., 2015). Furthermore, this was also apparent amongst participants' narratives and gives the impression that this phenomenon also manifests in college athletics. The themes *It Takes a Village* and *All Eyez on Me* supports this area of the literature as each spoke to the ways they have expressed care to those within and outside of their respective organizations. For many, this was a labor of love - ensuring they were intentional about assisting and advocating for others. To note, Erykah proudly shared that although she was the first Black woman to reach a particular leadership role, she would ensure that she was not the last. In another example, Brandy expressed the joy she feels being there and serving as a good role model for one of her Black female staff members. Although two different examples, the underlying message remains clear - (while not without emotional labor) the Black women within this study choose to care for and contribute to the wellbeing of others with joy and a sense of urgency.

An additional area of Black Feminist Thought involves Black women's internal empowerment (i.e., self-definition) rather than from external powers and social institutions (Armstrong, 2007). Guiterrez's (1990) definition of empowerment involves: (a) increasing self-efficacy, (b) developing group consciousness, (c) reducing self-blame, and (d) assuming personal responsibility for change. From the findings that emerged, each of the participants show elements of empowerment. Through various processes, these women rejected the norms of college athletics and created realities for themselves and others. This was apparent in their intentionality and themes *Staying Locked In* and *Ain't No Half-Steppin'*. These aspects were especially vital in the ability to recognize and adapt to workplace barriers and sustain the energy to address them - serving as a catalyst to incite change and make an impact.

College athletics involves "good decisions, tough decisions, and empowering people and teams." said Erykah. For Black women, this provides an opportunity to shape and impact other colleagues and college athletes. Jill said her desire for others to feel valued and seen stems from her not always feeling valued and seen as a Black woman in America. This intentional act of resistance and choice to provide better experiences for others is the essence of empowerment and closely supports Collins (1990) assertion that "[by] making the community stronger, African-American women become empowered, and that same community can serve as a source of support when Black women encounter race, gender, and class oppression" (p. 555). By incorporating this mindset, Black women continue to challenge systems of oppression both in and out of college athletics. While much of the findings and the

nature of empowerment can be considered positive, it is important not to dismiss the emotional labor that many of the women in this study must employ to exist and advance within college athletics. Thus, we must be mindful of the burden that many Black women carry.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

As a response to Cunningham et al. (2019) and McDowell & Carter-Francique's (2017) requests, this study sought to consider the support and positive experiences of Black women in athletics through an intersectional, anti-deficit, and liberatory lens. One direction for future research is to focus on additional identities for this group such as age, sexual orientation, relationship status, and social class status. Several of the participants made reference to a number of these areas. By concentrating on identities in addition to race and gender, researchers may be able to better understand the holistic identity and experiences of Black women in DI college athletics administration. Next, over half of the participants within this study are members of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO), commonly referred to as the Divine Nine. Throughout the data collection, several of the women made mention of how their sororal connections helped as they navigated college athletics. Future research should focus on Black women in athletics administration and investigate how they may utilize their respective BGLOs as a professional and personal resource throughout their careers. As noted by Ross (2000), the Divine Nine has a longstanding history of dismantling barriers and serving as agents of change for the Black community – in addition to other historically excluded communities.

Another way forward is to continue to draw from the anti-deficit approach, which allows researchers to consider the positive influences that lead to success, rather than focusing solely on negative factors (Howe, 2020). As proposed by Cooper and colleagues (2017), incorporating an anti-deficit lens while exploring the experiences and positions of Black women in college athletics could “identify and create effective holistic supports for this subgroup and more broadly demonstrate a stronger commitment to equity in education and sport” (p. 131). Future research should continue exploring the experiences of Black women in athletics administration from an anti-deficit perspective as a way to disrupt hegemonic systems and ultimately shift the culpability from the victims to the oppressive structures, policies, and practices (Davis & Museus, 2019, p. 119).

Regarding practical application, it is our hope that these findings will serve as a framework and navigational resource for Black women and others as they seek entry and advancement opportunities within the industry. Additionally, employers or those in positions of power, should also use this as an informal guide on ways to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) efforts as they work to recruit and/or retain Black women and other marginalized groups. As evident from the findings, the participants shared invaluable examples of next steps and considerations that can be implemented at the individual level.

Additionally, this work provides insights that can be used at the organizational level. For example, employers should consider both explicit and implicit practices



that shape the experiences of employees. Several of the participants credited their involvement with national groups and professional development programming as ways in which they established credibility, expanded their networks, and found communities of support. Institutions should consider ways to financially and structurally support individuals within their organizations by providing them with opportunities to engage with groups such as the NCAA, National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) and subgroups such as MOAA and WLCS. Employers should also consider local and institutional groups that they can connect their employees with to gain vital professional development (i.e., local leadership teams and institutional fellows' programs).

In addition to assessing their current practices, those who possess the decision-making powers within athletics can make intentional efforts to organically expand and diversify their networks to include individuals outside of their normal social groups. This could happen by agreeing to serve as mentors, joining professional organizations outside of the generally utilized groups, or simply engaging with a member within the athletic department that they normally would not. If power holders continue to engage with only those who possess similar identities and social statuses as them, it will make DEIB efforts purposeless.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study offers a meaningful contribution to the existing literature. By centering attention to the voices of these women while utilizing an anti-deficit approach – this work extends scholarship and provides a better understanding for the challenges present but also celebrates the success stories and navigational strategies that have helped Black women persist and sustain fruitful careers in college athletic spaces. The hope is that these findings, as well as the recommended implications for research and practice, will serve as a blueprint for Black women in athletics - and also other underrepresented groups - as they seek entry and advancement within college athletics. Furthermore, employers and power holders within athletic departments and organizations can utilize these findings as a tool to assist with improving the recruitment and retention efforts of Black women in college athletics.

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# The Effects of Postseason College Football Bowl Games on Recruiting: A Discontinuity-Based Approach

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Many colleges with National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) programs lose money by participating in post-season bowl games. Despite these losses, most colleges are eager to accept invites to play in bowl games on the premise that playing in these games brings increased attention and notoriety to their institution. In particular, football coaches often state playing in a bowl game positively impacts their ability to recruit future student-athletes. This study used regression discontinuity design to estimate whether bowl game participation affects recruiting class quality. Contrary to previous research, I found no statistically significant relationship between bowl game participation and recruiting class quality.

**Keywords:** student-athlete recruitment, quantitative methods, college football bowl games

Postseason bowl games are one of the most iconic traditions in college football. Since the first bowl game was played in 1902, thousands of student-athletes have participated in the pageantry and spectacle of bowl games. For years, bowl game invites were given to only the most elite college football teams. According to Sportsreference.com, in 1970, there were only 11 bowl games, meaning only 22 of the 123 (17%) colleges in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) University Division (currently called Division I) received invites to play in bowl games. In recent years, the number of bowl games has dramatically increased. After the 2022 – 2023 season, 42 bowl games were played. This meant 64% (84 of 131) colleges participating in the NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) received invites to bowl games.

One of the more interesting facts about college football bowl games is many come with significant financial risk. Many colleges lose money by participating in postseason bowl games. The University of Connecticut, for example, reported a \$1.8



million loss from playing in the 2011 Fiesta Bowl (Malafronte, 2011). Auburn University lost \$140,000 by participating in the Birmingham Bowl in 2021 (Crosby, 2022). Indiana University lost about \$44,000 playing in the 2020 Gator Bowl (Blau, 2020). Around 70% of public FBS colleges reported postseason bowl game financial losses from 2015 – 2018 (Brook, 2022).

Bowl game participation is not mandated. Colleges can choose not to accept a bowl game invitation if the financial costs outweigh the benefits. Most colleges and athletics departments, however, cite the positive non-financial impact of bowl games as their reason for participation. College administrators believe participating in a bowl game can positively influence student admissions, donations, and the overall academic reputation of a college (Art & Science Group, 2011). Coaches believe participating in a postseason bowl game rewards student-athletes for their hard work during the season. Coaches also proclaim the extra practices teams can have in preparation for a bowl game can serve as a springboard for success in the next football season (Call, 2018; Hoover, 2022). Finally, coaches believe participating in a bowl game helps them in their ability to recruit high-level athletes to their football program (Schlabach, 2010; Vozza, 2008). Jay Hopson, former head football coach at the University of Southern Mississippi, stated “When you can go to bowl games, you get the opportunity to get that national recognition...It is a chance for recruits across the nation to see our program and that is something you cannot put a monetary value on” (Jackson, 2019, para. 5).

While many football coaches believe bowl game participation boosts recruiting, little statistical evidence supports this belief. Only one published, peer-reviewed article (Brook, 2022) has examined the relationship between bowl game participation and recruiting class quality. However, the Brooks’ (2022) study uses a statistical methodology that only allows for estimating the correlation between bowl games and recruiting. The analysis presented in this paper sought to expand knowledge in this area by taking advantage of the NCAA bowl game eligibility rules and regression discontinuity to estimate the causal effect of bowl game participation on team recruiting quality. This study answered the following research question:

- Controlling for other factors, what is the impact of playing a postseason bowl game on recruiting class quality?

I hypothesized that playing in a postseason bowl game would positively impact recruiting class quality.

## Literature Review

### Research on College Football Recruiting

College football recruiting is a well-researched topic within sports economics. Much of this research can be put into two categories. First are studies exploring the impact of recruiting on football team success. Peer-reviewed studies from Herda et al. (2009), Caro (2012), Langelett (2003), Bergman and Logan (2016), and Dronyk-Trosper and Stitzel (2017) each looked to explore whether the quality of a college’s recruiting class impacted football on-field team performance. Most of



these studies find a positive relationship between recruiting and team success. Herda et al. (2009) and Caro (2012) used Pearson product-moment correlations and found positive, statistically significant correlations between recruiting quality and team success. Langelett (2003) and Bergman and Logan (2016) used more advanced regression models and found evidence that a better recruiting class led to more on-field success. However, Dronyk-Trosper and Stitzel (2017) argue that much of the previous research finding a positive relationship between recruiting and team success is driven by misspecification in econometric modeling techniques. In their study of recruiting and football success, they found evidence that the positive effects of recruiting are mainly derived from the ability of a team to harness and improve the ability of recruits rather than the quality of recruits coming out of high school. Even with the findings of Dronyk-Trosper and Stitzel, the preponderance of evidence suggests recruiting higher-quality athletes leads to greater on-field success for college football teams.

The second category of studies examines the factors that influence the recruiting success of a football program. Dumond et al. (2008) and Mirabile and Witte (2017) each looked to econometrically model the factors that determine where a recruited football student-athlete chooses to enroll in college. In both studies, the student-athlete recruit was the primary unit of analysis. Each study found different variables that served as the primary predictor of a recruit's college decision. Dumond et al. (2008) found that geographic distance between the recruit and the college, a team's recent football success, and a team's conference affiliation were the primary determinants of where a recruit chose to attend college. Mirabile and Witte (2017) also found team success and conference affiliation were crucial in predicting where a recruit will enroll in college. Mirabile and Witte (2017) also identified that receiving a scholarship offer, attending a college's football camp, making an official visit, and having a family member who has attended the college in the past significantly predicted where a recruit enrolled.

Harris (2018) and Pitts and Evans (2016) examined factors that influence recruiting from an institutional perspective. These studies looked to model what factors determined the overall quality of a team's football recruiting class using the college as the primary unit of analysis. Harris found that conference championships, bowl game wins, being in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), and being under probation or sanctions from the NCAA significantly increased the share of top 100 football recruits a college enrolled in a given year. Pitts and Evans (2018) found several variables that correlated with the quality of a team's recruiting class, such as team on-field success, having a new coach, conference affiliation, athletic department revenues, and being banned from a bowl game.

In summary, the research above on college football recruiting offers an essential context for the analysis presented in this paper. Previous research establishes how recruiting is important for college football teams' on-field success. Teams that can recruit the best student-athletes tend to have more success on the field. Therefore, institutions would be expected to engage in activities they believe will help them recruit better student-athletes (such as participating in bowl games despite the possibility of losing money). Previous research also helps establish that specific team/

institutional characteristics predict a college's ability to field a higher-rated recruiting class. These findings helped in the identification of covariates for the empirical models used in this analysis.

### **Research on the Impact of Bowl Game Participation**

Two recently published manuscripts have directly explored the role of college football bowl game participation in institutional outcomes. Curs et al. (2023) used fuzzy regression discontinuity to estimate the effect of bowl game participation on team academic and on-field success. The researchers used data from the 2003 – 2018 football seasons, a total of 1,958 team-year observations. Curs et al. (2023) found bowl game participation had no statistical impact on team retention rates, next year's team winning percentage, or next year's likelihood of a team participating in a bowl game. However, there was a small, but statistically significant, effect of bowl game participation on team eligibility rates and team academic progress rates. The Curs et al. (2023) paper offers an excellent model for how regression discontinuity can be used to estimate the causal impact of bowl game participation.

Brook (2022) estimated the correlation between bowl game appearances and team recruiting using OLS regression, using data from NCAA FBS universities between 2010 and 2018 and operationalizing recruiting quality using the Scouts college football recruiting index. The estimation model built by Brook (2022) included covariates to control for the quality of previous recruiting classes, athletic department financial resources, head coach experience, and the adoption of an early signing period for football recruits. Models also included fixed effects and clustered standard errors. The estimation showed going to a bowl game was associated with a statistically significant 10.9 point increase in the quality of a team's Scouts recruiting index score. However, this increase of 10.9 points was minimal, representing only about 1/14 of the average recruiting index score over the sample period. Despite the size of the relationship, these findings led Brook (2022) to argue that bowl game participation has positive spillover effects for a team and a university despite the potential for direct financial losses.

Brook (2022) and Curs et al. (2023) motivated the current study. As I noted earlier, the Brook (2022) study used an estimation strategy that only allows for estimating correlational effects. We cannot make causal claims about the impact of bowl games on recruiting from Brook's (2022) study. In addition, the fixed effect model used by Brook relies on within-institution variation in bowl game participation. However, given the competitive imbalance within college football, it is likely there was limited year-to-year variation in bowl game participation in the sample. Brook (2022) acknowledges this in the paper by noting 18 colleges in their study either went to a bowl game yearly or never went to a bowl in the nine seasons studied. Using a methodology similar to that used by Curs et al. (2023) to investigate the impact of bowl game participation on recruiting would be a valuable extension of knowledge on this topic. This study used the methodology proposed by Curs et al. (2023) to investigate the relationship discussed in Brook (2022).

## Conceptual Framework

Based on findings from previous research and anecdotal comments from football coaches, I hypothesized that team recruiting quality would be better for colleges that experienced the bowl game treatment than colleges that did not. Two mechanisms likely drive this positive relationship: increased media exposure and signaling of team quality.

NCAA Division I FBS bowl games are typically announced in early December and played between mid-December and early January. Millions of spectators each year attend and watch these games on television. In 2019 - 2020, the 38 postseason bowl games averaged just over 5 million television viewers per game (College Football Foundation, 2020). Among these viewers are likely high school students being recruited by teams playing in bowl games. Playing in a bowl game increases a team's exposure to potential recruits. This exposure might be especially important because the bowl season (mid-December to early January) coincides with a 'dead period' according to the NCAA football recruiting calendar. During a dead period, it is not permissible for a college football program to make in-person recruiting contact or to permit official or unofficial visits by prospective student-athletes to the institution's campus. (NCAA, 2024) During this dead period, where contact with recruits is limited, bowl game participation gives colleges a mechanism to indirectly connect with and create awareness for their college among recruits (Smits, 2016). Thus, increased media exposure through bowl game participation might help a college recruit better student-athletes.

Bowl games might also signal the quality and success of a football program for recruits. Multiple studies have noted that team on-field success is important in determining where a recruit enrolls in college (Dumond et al., 2008; Peltier, 2016). Because bowl games are typically reserved for teams with the best on-field performance during the regular season, they indicate program success and upward trajectory. If two teams have similar regular season records, but one plays in a bowl game, recruits might believe the program playing in a bowl game is stronger and positioned for greater future success. This perception might positively impact the overall recruiting class quality for a program that goes to a bowl game.

## Research Methods

This study used regression discontinuity to answer whether participation in a bowl game impacts recruiting class quality. Regression discontinuity is a quasi-experimental evaluation technique that measures the impact of an intervention or treatment by applying a treatment assignment mechanism based on a continuous eligibility index variable with a continuous distribution. This technique attempts to determine the causal impact of a program by taking advantage of the fact that access to the program in question is determined by an arbitrary cutoff that is exogenous to subjects (Imbens & Lemieux, 2008).

For this study, the treatment in question is playing in a postseason bowl game. Eligibility to play in a postseason bowl game is determined by a team's on-field success in the regular season. According to NCAA Bylaw 18.7.2.1:

Postseason bowl games provide a national contest between deserving teams. A "deserving team" shall be defined as one that has won a number of games against FBS opponents that is equal to or greater than the number of overall losses (p. 18).

Most FBS colleges play 11 or 12 regular season football games against other FBS schools. Therefore, teams with six or more wins against FBS schools are considered "deserving" or "bowl-eligible" teams. For this study, having six or more regular season wins against FBS schools was the forcing variable.

With sharp regression discontinuity, the forcing Variable determines whether a subject gets the treatment in question 100% of the time. With college football, however, there is some non-compliance in bowl game participation around the eligibility cutoff. Some schools with less than six regular season wins against FBS opponents are given special exemptions to participate in a bowl game because some schools with six or more wins against FBS opponents decide not to participate. A fuzzy regression discontinuity design can be employed when an exogenous eligibility rule is highly correlated with the actual treatment status but does not fully explain the treatment (Lee & Lemieux, 2010). Fuzzy regression discontinuity uses a two-stage instrumental variables design to estimate the impact of a treatment. In stage one, actual treatment status is predicted based on eligibility to receive that treatment. In the second stage, an outcome variable of interest is estimated by the predicted treatment variable from the first stage estimation. For this study, the first stage analysis estimates bowl game participation as a function of total wins in a given regular season, an indicator of whether a team was bowl-eligible (the team had six or more wins against FBS competition), and a year-fixed effect:

$$Bowl_{it} = \alpha + \delta(Eligible)_{it} + \lambda f(Wins_{it}) + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

The second stage predicts recruiting class quality (the outcome of interest) using predicted bowl game participation (from the first stage model), total wins in the regular season, and a year-fixed effect:

$$Recruiting\ class\ quality_{it+1} = \alpha + \beta(\widehat{Bowl})_{it} + \lambda f(Wins_{it}) + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

The  $\beta$  coefficient within this second stage model can be interpreted as the causal impact of bowl game participation on recruiting class quality the following year.

As noted by Curs et al. (2023), the base models presented in equations (1) and (2) are capable of estimating the unbiased effect of bowl game participation on recruiting class quality without the inclusion of control variables. However, adding covariates to a model can increase the efficiency of regression discontinuity estimates (Angrist & Pischke, 2009). Therefore, a vector of team and institutional covariates (described below) predicted to correlate with a college football recruiting class quality were included in model estimates.

The sample for the study includes data from the 2010 -2011 through the 2019 - 2020 football seasons. The 2010 – 2011 season was selected as the first year for this study due to data availability. The first year that composite football team recruit-

ing class rating data were available was 2011 (after the 2010 – 2011 season). The 2019 – 2020 season was selected as the last year of the dataset because it was the last full college football season before the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly altered bowl game participation in subsequent seasons. The number of teams in FBS changed during the period used in this study, from 120 in 2010 - 2011 to 130 in 2019 – 2020. After removing data from the U.S. Military Academies (these colleges were removed due to a lack of available data on football expenditures), the total number of team-year observations in this study was 1,232.

The dependent variable for this study was a college football team's recruiting class composite ranking score from 247Sports. 247Sports is an industry leader in college sports recruiting content. The company was founded in 2010 and is currently part of CBS Interactive's website platform. Each year, 247Sports calculates a composite rating of the quality of each FBS college's football recruiting class. This rating uses a Gaussian distribution model that weights the value of each recruit signed by a college based on the quality of that recruit. Using this model, the highest-rated recruit in a college's class is worth 100% of his rating value towards a college's overall team score, the second-highest-rated recruit is worth nearly 100% of his rating value, down to the last recruit who is worth a small fraction of his rating value. This formula ensures all commits contribute at least some value to the team's score without heavily rewarding teams with several more commitments than others (247Sports Staff, 2012). The formula returns a total recruiting points value for each college in a given year. In this dataset, points ranged from 45.41 to 323.87, with higher scores representing colleges with higher-quality recruiting classes. I used Python programming to scrape recruiting class scores for FBS colleges from the 247Sports website from 2011 – 2020.

I collected data from the College Football Sports Reference website to calculate the forcing Variable (bowl eligibility) for this study. The website provides game results and final season standings for every FBS college since 1869. An important feature of data from College Football Sports Reference is that it highlights games played against non-FBS colleges. Therefore, I was able to calculate the regular season record of FBS teams against FBS opponents. Teams with six or more wins against FBS opponents were identified as bowl eligible, while those with fewer than six wins were identified as not bowl eligible.

Four control variables were included in model estimations. First, I included a control for the number of college football national championships a team won since 2000. Previous research from Dumond et al. (2008), Mirabile and Witte (2017), Harris (2018), and Pitts and Evans (2016) note that a team history of on-field success is a significant predictor of recruiting class quality. I proxy a college's tradition of football success by counting their recent national championships. I obtained national championship data from College Football Sports Reference.

A second control variable was total football operating expenses during the season lagged by one year ( $t - 1$ ). Colleges with greater direct investment in college football can likely spend more money recruiting student-athletes. News articles have noted the wide disparities in the amount of money spent on college football recruit-

ing (Chavanelle, 2021; Weiszer & Berkowitz, 2023). Spending more on recruiting is likely correlated with the quality of recruits secured by a college. I used total football operating expenses as a proxy for spending on football recruiting. I collected these data from the Equity in Athletics Data Analysis (EADA) database from the Office of Postsecondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education.

A third control variable used in this study was an indicator of whether there was a change in the head football coach at a college, lagged by one year. Pitts and Evans (2016) found a coaching change can have a significant impact on the quality of a college football recruiting class. Megargee (2021) also notes that coaching changes, which typically occur just before college football National Signing Day, can create disruption and uncertainty around recruiting. I used data from the Coaches Database website (<https://www.coachesdatabase.com/>) to identify whether a college experienced a football head coaching change in a given year.

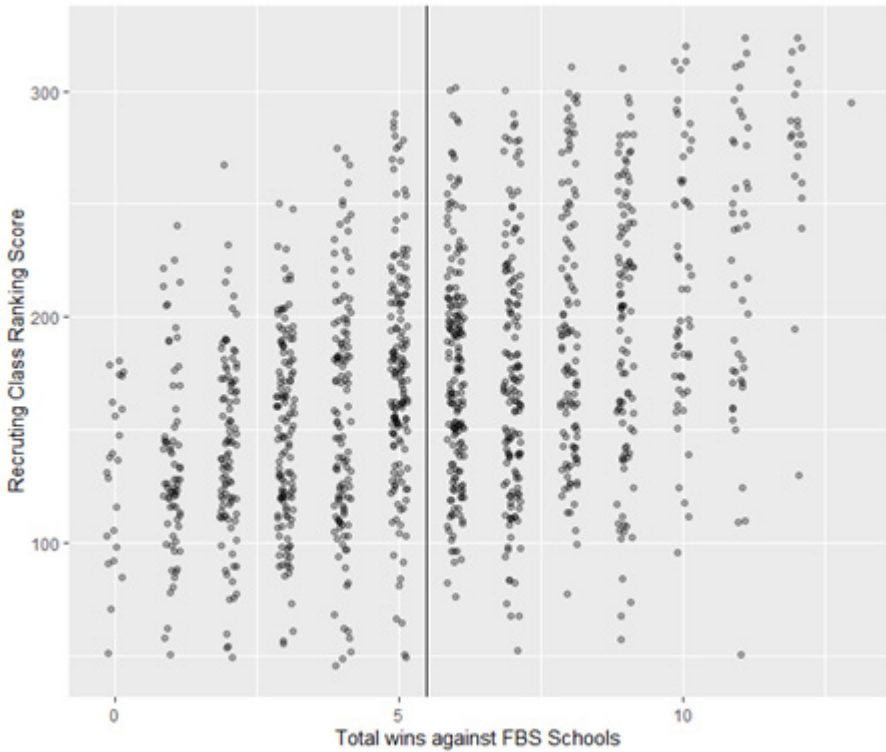
The final control variable in estimation models was an indicator of whether a team was a member of a Power 5 NCAA Conference (i.e., Atlantic Coast Conference, Big 12 Conference, Big Ten Conference, Pacific 10 Conference, or Southeastern Conference) during a season, lagged by one year. Harris (2018), Pitts and Evans (2016), and Christovich (2021) note that colleges in Power 5 conferences are typically able to recruit higher-rated student-athletes to their institutions. Given the financial resources, tradition, and national exposure from playing in a Power 5 conference, this indicator was expected to correlate with recruiting class quality. I obtained conference affiliation data from College Football Sports Reference.

### Checking Assumptions of Regression Discontinuity Design

Two conceptual concerns are essential when considering the internal validity of a regression discontinuity design. First is continuity of the outcome-forcing variable relationship. To obtain a robust outcome from a regression discontinuity design, there must be evidence that there would be a smooth relationship between the outcome variable and forcing variable at the treatment cutoff value in the absence of the treatment. For this study, it would mean that in the absence of bowl game participation, there would be a smooth relationship between wins and recruiting class quality at the treatment cutoff of six wins. Without this continuity, there is concern that something other than the intervention is responsible for the observed treatment impact.

The continuity condition cannot be directly assessed. However, Schochet et al. (2010) suggest an indirect method of evaluating continuity using scatterplots of the outcome and forcing variables. Schochet et al. (2010) note the continuity standard can be satisfied if there is no graphical evidence of “an unexplainable discontinuity in the outcome-score relationship at score values other than at the cutoff value” (p. 6). Figure 1 displays a scatterplot of team wins and recruiting class ranking scores. This graph shows little evidence of discontinuity in the outcome-forcing variable relationship at values other than the bowl game treatment cutoff. Thus, I believe there is evidence this study satisfies the continuity criterion for regression discontinuity designs.

**Figure 1:** Scatterplot of forcing and outcome variable to check continuity standard of regression discontinuity designs



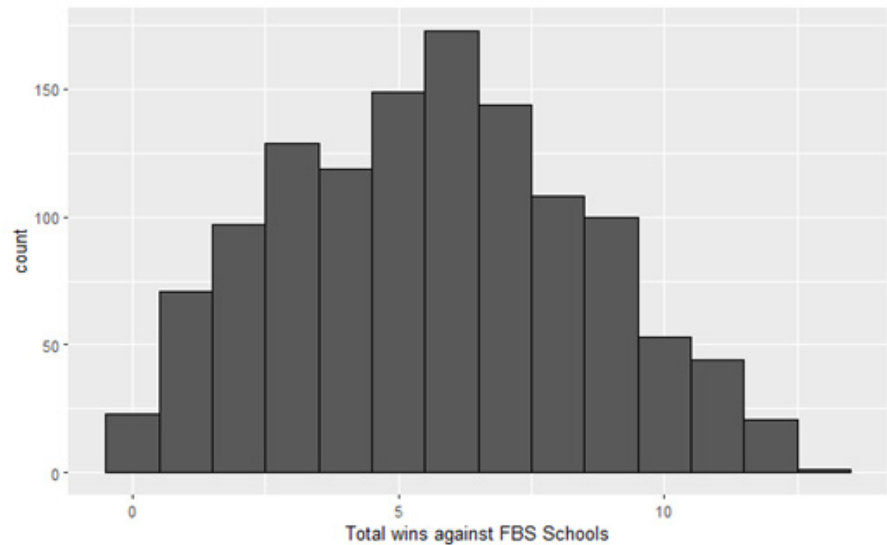
The second key condition for regression discontinuity designs is the integrity of the forcing variable. To produce unbiased estimates of effects using regression discontinuity, there should be no systematic manipulation of the forcing variable. For this study, if football teams just below the six-win cutoff put extra effort into winning games toward the end of the season in order to gain bowl eligibility, there could be some concern about manipulation of the forcing variable. However, teams near bowl eligibility putting extra effort into games do not guarantee they will reach the six wins needed. Other teams they are competing against also have incentives to put extra effort into late-season games, such as their own bowl eligibility or to qualify for a higher-profile bowl game. Therefore, like Curs et al. (2023), I argue the competitive nature of college football makes it difficult for teams around the bowl eligibility cutoff to independently manipulate their records in a way different than their ability to manipulate their record at any point in the wins distribution.

To visually inspect the integrity of the forcing variable, McCrary (2008) and Curs et al. (2023) recommend examining the density of the running variable for clear signs of discontinuity around the treatment cutoff. Figure 2 presents a histogram of team wins against FBS competition for the sample used in this study. The distribu-



tion of wins against FBS teams appears normally distributed with no apparent discontinuities around the six-win bowl eligibility cutoff. This offers further evidence of the integrity of the forcing variable for this study.

**Figure 2:** Histogram of team wins against FBS competition



## Findings

Figure 3 visually represents the need for fuzzy regression discontinuity for this study. Of 644 teams who were bowl eligible in a given season, 96% played in a postseason bowl game. Of the 588 teams not bowl eligible in a given season, 18.4% played in a bowl game. This shows some non-compliance with the bowl eligibility guidelines and, therefore, the need for fuzzy discontinuity. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Figure 4 visually represents the potential relationship between bowl game participation and recruiting class quality. This figure shows a sharp discontinuity with local linear regression lines below and above the bowl game eligibility cutoff. The discontinuity at the bowl eligibility cutoff is the visual effect of the bowl game eligibility. At the discontinuity point, there is a slight drop in the recruiting class ranking score, suggesting the local intent-to-treat effect of going to bowl on recruiting might be negative. However, the 95% confidence intervals of the linear projects appear to slightly overlap. This visual suggests no significant relationship exists between bowl game eligibility and recruiting class quality.

The results of the fuzzy discontinuity presented in Table 2 confirmed bowl game participation did not impact recruiting success. In the fully specified model, the beta coefficient for bowl game participation was 2.39 with a standard error of 22.76. This can be interpreted as the local average treatment effect for treatment compliers.

In other words, the causal effect of going to a bowl game for colleges who complied with bowl eligibility rules was an increase in recruiting class rankings score of around 2.4 points. This was not significantly significant. As a sensitivity test, I also ran models that restricted the bandwidth of the assignment variable to colleges that won between 4 and 8 games in a season and colleges that won between 2 and 10 games in a given season. These findings are presented in columns 2 and 3 of Table 2. The beta coefficient for bowl game participation in each model was also not statistically significant. It did not appear bowl participation had a causal effect on the quality of a college football recruiting class in the following year.

Figure 3: Bowl game participation based on bowl eligibility status

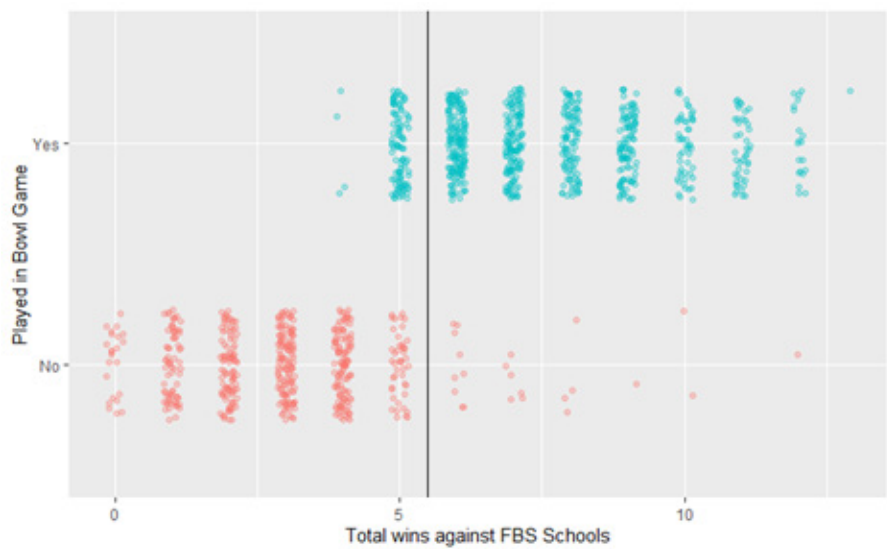
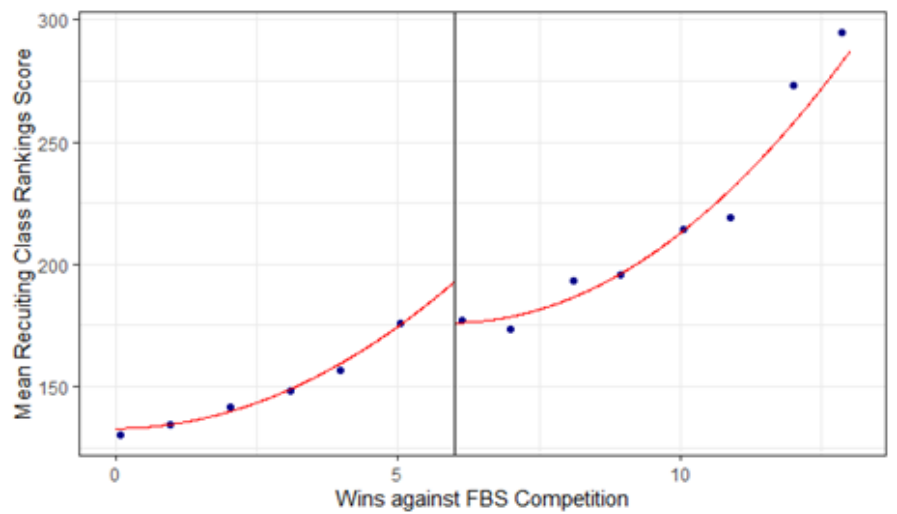


Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
<b>Outcome Variable</b>			
Recruiting Class Ranking Score	173.19 (57.18)	45.57	323.87
<b>Forcing and Treatment Variables</b>			
Wins against FBS Competition	5.65 (2.85)	0	13
Bowl Game Participation	.59 (.49)	0	1
<b>Control Variables</b>			
National Championships	.13 (.52)	0	5
Member of Power 5	.51 (.50)	0	1
Coaching Change	.19 (.40)	0	1
Football Expenditures in Millions (\$)	18.51 (11.27)	2.95	69.71
Number of Observations	1,232		
Number of Colleges	129		

**Figure 4:** Visual representation of the effect of bowl game eligibility on recruiting class quality



**Table 2:** Fuzzy regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of bowl games on recruiting

	Full Model	Full Model (bandwidth 4 – 8 wins)	Full Model (bandwidth 2 – 10 wins)
Bowl Participation	2.39 (22.76)	-10.95 (17.06)	2.80 (10.26)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1232	693	1072
R-squared	.73	.72	.75

Note. Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses, \*\*\*p < 0.001 \*\*p < 0.01 \*p < 0.5

Dependent Variable: Next year’s recruiting class ranking score

Like Curs et al. (2023), I conducted a sensitivity analysis of the estimates in Table 2 by reestimating my regression discontinuity model with a quadratic functional form of the assignment variable. These findings are presented in Table 3. The inclusion of the quadratic term typically increased the treatment effect of bowl games on recruiting class quality, but the treatment effect remained insignificant.

**Table 3:** Fuzzy regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of bowl games on recruiting with quadratic functional form

	Full Model	Full Model (bandwidth 4 – 8 wins)	Full Model (bandwidth 2 – 10 wins)
Bowl Participation	2.54 (6.58)	17.33 (34.08)	4.12 (10.88)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quadratic Form	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1232	693	1072
R-squared	.77	.73	.76

Note. Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  \*\* $p < 0.01$

\* $p < 0.5$

Dependent Variable: Next year's recruiting class ranking score

## Discussion

Participation in a postseason college football bowl game for many colleges and universities comes with financial risk. Many colleges incur financial losses when their football team accepts a bowl game invitation (Thelin, 2016). Despite this potential financial loss, most colleges are eager to participate in bowl games because they believe playing in them has positive non-financial benefits to a college or football program. In particular, many college football coaches believe playing in bowl games helps them in their ability to recruit high-level athletes to their football program. However, empirical evidence of a statistical relationship between bowl game participation and football recruiting class quality is limited. Only one published, peer-reviewed article (Brook, 2022) has examined the relationship between bowl game participation and recruiting class quality. This study aimed to expand knowledge in this area using regression discontinuity design to estimate the causal effect of bowl game participation on recruiting class quality.

While Brooks (2022) found a small, statistically significant correlation between bowl game participation and recruiting class quality, I found no evidence that going to a bowl game has a causal impact on recruiting class quality. Given the methodological rigor of this analysis relative to Brooks (2022), the findings from this study offer a more empirically valid estimation of bowl game effects on recruiting. Colleges should not expect positive spillover effects from bowl game participation in terms of the quality of their recruiting class.

I hypothesized bowl game participation, by increasing team exposure and signaling team quality, would positively impact athlete recruiting. This hypothesis was proven incorrect. One could speculate as to why this hypothesized relationship failed to manifest. Recruited student-athletes are exposed to much information about college football programs through recruiting packages and campus visits. Therefore, the extra exposure from playing in bowl games might do little to change recruits' overall

knowledge of a college football team. Because of their knowledge of college football teams, recruits also have many direct and indirect signals of program quality they can lean on to gauge team quality besides bowl games. This might limit the power of bowl games as a signal of a team's current or future quality for recruits.

It is important to note that interpretations of regression discontinuity designs are restricted to those subjects close to the policy treatment cutoff. Thus, the results of this study are valid for those teams with around six FBS regular season wins. Teams with an average regular season record (between 5 and 7 wins) are unlikely to be invited to play in (or would turn down invites to play in) bowl games with high payouts, such as the bowls associated with the New Year Six. These teams are, instead, more likely to get invited to bowl games that come with a higher risk of financial loss. Therefore, these findings are restricted largely to examining the impact of participation in lower tier bowl games on recruiting success. Extrapolating the findings to suggest that participating in a high visibility, high payout bowl game would have no impact of recruiting class quality would be beyond the scope of this study.

The results of this study will be helpful to college presidents, athletics directors, and coaches of teams around the bowl eligibility cutoff who are weighing the costs and benefits of accepting a bowl invite. Every institution has unique organizational and contextual circumstances that impact whether it is "worth it" to participate in a bowl game. When weighing this decision, the findings here will hopefully ensure the notion that playing in a bowl game helps student-athlete recruitment is dismissed from consideration. There is no viable evidence to support this idea. If you are a team with five or six wins that plays in a low payout bowl game that results in your college losing money, you should not expect to recoup these financial losses through the quality of your recruiting class.

The findings here do not suggest other positive spillover effects cannot come from bowl game participation. For example, Curs et al. (2023) found bowl game participation leads to positive academic outcomes for student-athletes. Future research should further explore how bowl game participation impacts student, team, and college outcomes. Using a methodology similar to the one used in this study, researchers could explore how bowl game participation affects future game attendance, applications or donations to a college, student-athlete transfer decisions, or other outcomes. The goal would be to create a large body of evidence administrators can use to determine the direct and indirect effects of playing in a bowl game.

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# Lost in Translation: Why Sport-based and Grassroots Activism May Be the Path to Equity in NIL Opportunities for International College Athletes

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International students have been tracked in U.S. higher education since 1924 (Witt, 2008). Today, nearly one million international students are studying at U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs), including more than 25,000 international college athletes (ICAs) who compete at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions (NCAA, 2023b). On July 1, 2021, the NCAA officially suspended its amateurism principle, and states began passing legislation to allow college athletes to monetize their Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL), bringing some closure to a more than a century-long debate over college athlete compensation (NCAA, 2021b). However, more than 25,000 NCAA ICAs are often left behind, unable to capitalize on most NIL opportunities due to work restrictions placed on F-1 student visas imposed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the visas nearly all ICAs are granted (Witt, 2008). Although HEI administrators, athletics departments, and industry professionals have previously advocated on behalf of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020), there has been little effort to push for changes to visa restrictions that would provide ICAs equitable access to NIL opportunities, and more broadly, expand work-force experiences for international students. Therefore, the authors note the need for self-activism through a combined grassroots and sport-based model (Cooper et al., 2019) to achieve equitable and fair access to the workforce and NIL opportunities.

**Keywords:** athlete activism, international college athletes, NIL, international students, immigration policy and visa laws,

International college athletes (ICAs) are unique individuals with distinct national, racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, and social identities at U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs). They are full-time students who compete in institutional varsity athletic programs (Hong, 2018). In 1999, there were 3,515 ICAs enrolled at NCAA Division I (DI) institutions. By 2016, the number grew to 19,500 (NCAA, 2023b). Today, the total number of ICAs at NCAA member institutions of all levels (i.e., DI, Division II [DII], and Division III [DIII]) is roughly 25,000 and makeup nearly 13% of college athletes at the DI level (NCAA, 2023b). ICAs are a subgroup of U.S. higher education's vast number of international students who pursue higher education degrees in the U.S. in large numbers (Figure 1). According to U.S. News and World Report, more than one million international students enrolled at U.S. HEIs during the 2023-24 academic year (Durrani, 2023). Except for the 2020-2021 academic year, primarily defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of international students has remained above one million and tripled over the last three decades (Bound et al., 2021). From the 2022-23 academic year to the 2023-24 academic year, the international student population saw a 12% growth, nearing pre-pandemic numbers and demonstrating the most significant single-year increase in 40 years (Durrani, 2023).

Although the number of international students, including ICAs, is back on the rise, the support, advisory, and administrative systems on campus and within U.S. policy do not adequately cater to this population. Restrictive visa and immigration policies allow international students to study in the U.S. but restrict their ability to work (Sethi et al., 2022). Conditional employment options like the Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and Optional Practical Training (OPT) that do exist for this population are highly scrutinized before approval by Designated Student Officers (DSOs) within international student services offices at HEIs (Cole & Maldonado, 2021). Both CPT and OPT are granted upon completion of additional paperwork and can only be pursued if one chooses to work in their field of study. OPT costs between \$400-600 and requires ICAs to navigate additional employment challenges before gaining approval based on their country of origin and visa type. This process adds complexity, restrictions, and financial burden on ICAs, with no guarantee regarding their ability to work in the U.S. as paid interns during enrollment or post-graduation. The lack of professional opportunities and experiences throughout their academic careers can make it challenging for this population to gain employment upon graduation in an already highly competitive workforce (Sethi, 2024). This issue is further complicated for ICAs, who are often limited even with CPT opportunities due to a nearly year-round training and competition schedule (Sethi, 2024).

One way that many college athletes have earned income made professional industry connections, and gained professional experience in marketing and personal branding has been through opportunities provided by the NCAA's suspension of the Amateurism Principle on July 1, 2021. This move allowed individual states to pass Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) legislation, which allows college athletes to earn income and further develop professional networks even with the time limitations placed on them by full-time school and athletics (Sethi, 2024). However, due to the U.S. visa and immigration policies mentioned previously, ICAs are largely left be-

hind, primarily due to the employment restrictions placed on this population by their student visa status (USCIS, 2020). These employment experience options must be related to international students' academic degrees, eliminating the option to pursue NIL deals under these exemptions as the law currently stands (Sethi et al., 2022; USCIS, 2020).

Student visa and immigration policies have existed since 1965 and have, for the most part, only become more restrictive in the years since (South American Digital Archive, 2015). Renewed scrutiny over the provision of and restrictions on student visas occurred in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Johnson, 2018; Urias & Yeakey, 2009). After the attacks, international student visa issuance became a part of the antiterrorism and immigration reforms undertaken by the Bush administration (Johnson, 2018). As part of the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2001 (EBVERA), student visas faced tighter restrictions and regulations, including some that the Donald J. Trump Administration would eventually use to attempt to prevent international students from remaining in the U.S. during the outbreak of COVID-19, in 2020 (ACE, 2020).

It was during the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic that HEIs, college athletics departments, and related organizations came together to quickly and efficiently advocate on behalf of international students and their ability to remain on campus. Although NIL, unlike tuition dollars from international student enrollment, provides no direct monetary gains for institutions, these same HEIs, professional organizations, and intercollegiate athletics stakeholders must assume an advocacy role to fight for broader access to NIL opportunities for ICAs. These organizations can and should utilize their available capital to put pressure on the DHS, ICE, and federal lawmakers to move for the reformation of student visa policies or exempt categories for ICAs that will pave the way for this often-overlooked population (Lever, 2021b).

However, in the three years since the NIL floodgates opened, little work has been done by these institutions on behalf of ICAs (Sethi, 2024; Sethi et al., 2022). A limited number of workarounds have been explored by legal experts, compliance officers, and athletic departments, some of which are highlighted in Table 1.

Some institutions have worked to find passive income solutions – a way in which any international student can earn money without jeopardizing their immigration status (Jara-Pazmino, 2024). The idea of finding an on-campus employment workaround was also suggested by Solomon et al. (2022), although it is unknown if universities have put this theory into practice. Additionally, as shown in Table 1, many top DI institutions with resources to do so have deliberately scheduled pre-season trips and non-conference tournament play for sports, including men's and women's basketball, outside of U.S. jurisdiction to allow star international players the opportunity to engage in NIL deals (Krest, 2023). All of these, however, have been limited in scope and scale, and are not a practical reality for all athletic departments and/or ICAs due to resource limitations. Senators Pete Ricketts and Richard Blumenthal introduced legislation in October 2023 to add a sub-category to the F1 visa that would specifically allow ICAs to gain compensation from NIL (Ricketts,

2023). Congresswoman Valerie Foushee and Congressman Mike Flood introduced the House’s companion bill in April 2024 (Foushee, 2024). As of May 2024, neither bill has made it to the floor.

**Table 1**  
*Select examples of NIL earnings by ICAs*

Athlete	University	Sport	Description of Activity
Oscar Tshiebwe	University of Kentucky	Men’s Basketball	Completed NIL deals while on a team trip to the Bahamas, as work performed outside of the U.S. does not jeopardize student visa status <sup>a</sup>
Various	All	Football	College athletes can opt into EA Sports NCAA Football video game for the use of their likenesses. Because athletes simply grant the company rights to their NIL, this is considered passive income, which is allowed under F-1 visa guidelines.
Hansel Emmanuel	Northwestern State University/ Austin Peay	Men’s Basketball	ICA worked with immigration attorneys to attend college on an O-1 temporary work visa, which allowed him to earn NIL money because he received a different visa type that permits employment.
Zach Edey	Purdue University	Men’s Basketball	The team scheduled a game in Toronto, Canada (Edey’s home country), to allow him a few days to complete NIL deals while there.
Various	Various	Men’s Basketball/ Women’s Basketball	As reported in the North State Journal, in the summer of 2023, 59 women’s and 96 men’s NCAA DI basketball teams traveled abroad, with teams that traveled abroad averaging 2.5 ICAs, while those that did not travel abroad averaged 1.6. The University of Louisville women’s coach explicitly stated this was an NIL trip.

*Note.* Examples are abbreviated from Axson (2023), Christovich (2023), Krest (2023), Myers (2023), and Williams (2022).  
*\*Some attorneys have argued that this poses additional issues, as other countries have their own work restrictions that ICAs may violate if working on foreign soil (Myers, 2023).*

This paper, therefore, argues the importance of activism by college athletes themselves to bring more widespread awareness to these inequities and push for amendments to F1 student visa restrictions. First, it will explore the history of international students and ICAs and how nationalistic politics have contributed to increasingly restrictive policies surrounding their employment. Then, by examining previous activism efforts by immigrant, student, and athletics groups, this paper aims to understand how collective action through those with a significant public platform – like college athletes – can lead to substantive change. Finally, we will utilize aspects of the college athlete activist framework developed by Cooper et al. (2019) to encourage both ICAs and their domestic peers to use their platforms to promote change by forcing institutions and government agencies to listen through both the grassroots and sport-based activist models. Without a broader public awareness and understanding of the issue or a willingness by institutions themselves to advocate, substantive change appears unlikely. Widespread activism by the college athletes themselves can, and for now, may be the only way to push for change and equity for ICAs, and perhaps international students in the U.S. writ large.

## Literature Review

### International Students in U.S. Education

The number of international students attending U.S. HEIs has been increasing for more than a century, with more than a quarter of all students globally who leave their home country for foreign education arriving at U.S. HEIs (Altbach, 2010). Therefore, any shift in U.S. student visa policies has global implications (Pottie-Sherman, 2018). International students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic made up around 5% of total enrollment for most states' college populations, totaling more than 1 million students and roughly \$2.5 billion in tuition dollars annually (Startz, 2020). That percentage dropped slightly to 4.6% in the wake of the pandemic. Once most HEIs returned to in-person classes in Fall 2021, there was a 68% increase in the number of new international students who enrolled for the first time after the 46% decrease for Fall 2020 (Saul, 2022). By the 2022-23 academic year, that number once again climbed above 1 million students (Durrani, 2023).

A global pandemic, however, is not the only thing that has shaped the number of international students studying at U.S. HEIs, nor their experience. Historically, the U.S. government has responded to foreign attacks or perceived threats from abroad with acts of exclusionary immigration policies, from the 1882 Chinese Exclusionary Act (Johnson, 2018) to Trump-era visa restrictions. However, changes to student visas over the last three decades have directly created specific employment exclusions that prohibit ICAs from fully participating in NIL activities today. As outlined below, in a select number of examples, political and social forces have routinely caused changes to visa and immigration policies and, thus, policies related to international students studying in the U.S. Although the actions that caused them, including terrorism and a global pandemic, may be extraordinary, the reactions to these events caused long-term, broad-reaching repercussions.

### *International College Athletes*

As the number of international students has broadly increased, so has the number of ICAs competing in NCAA athletics (NCAA, 2023a). Between 2015 and 2020, the number of ICAs competing in NCAA DI member HEIs increased by nearly 32% (NCAA, 2021d). While ICAs are represented across NCAA DI-sponsored sports, some are approaching or crossing the 50% mark, including men's tennis (64%), women's tennis (61%), women's ice hockey (41%), and men's ice hockey (38%), while sports including men's soccer, men's and women's golf, women's field hockey, and men's and women's water polo all at or above the 20% of participants mark (NCAA, 2023b). These numbers demonstrate the competitive (and financial) value ICAs represent for U.S. HEIs, whose numbers have also rebounded from the 2020-21 COVID drop, and now exceed 25,000 as of 2023 (NCAA, 2023a).

A vital factor to consider when studying the ICA population is that, while they are often lumped together as one singular group, they are incredibly diverse in terms of their race, ethnicity, primary language, and country of origin (Sethi et al., 2022; Sethi, 2024). Between 2017 and 2022, ICAs represented 207 different countries. This diversity dramatically impacts their collegiate experience and brings varied cultural, financial, and political capital complications to their transition to and experience at U.S. HEIs.

Additionally, while critics note that the vast majority of ICAs appear on rosters of non-revenue teams whose NIL value is significantly lower than that of revenue sports, both research (Kunkel et al., 2021) and anecdotal evidence (Sutherland, 2024) shows all college athletes have NIL earning potential, particularly with their social media platforms. According to reporting by Sutherland (2024), some of the top NCAA swimmers who work with Opendorse to obtain NIL deals charge upwards of \$1,000 for sponsored shoutouts or content on social media. Kunkel and co-authors (2021) analyzed the social media accounts of all athletes at four NCAA DI institutions (two categorized as Power 5, two mid-major). Their findings suggested that, on average, college athletes' value on social media was around \$5,000.

The ability to earn even a nominal income through NIL is not insignificant. Existing literature surrounding ICAs and their non-athlete international peers notes the perceived value of employment, networking, and financial support and resources while adjusting to life at U.S. HEIs. Pierce et al. (2011) found that ICAs from all countries, including those that are more culturally similar to the U.S. (e.g., Canada, the United Kingdom), had difficulty transitioning into colleges and universities when compared to the adjustment concerns experienced by their domestic peers. As a part of that adjustment struggle, Newell (2016) found, in response to a question about support services ICAs would like to see offered on campus, they were significantly more likely to indicate that additional merit-based scholarships would better assist their transition to college when compared to their domestic counterparts. While there may be a perception that DI college athletes receive full scholarships, that is only true for a limited number of sports and athletes, and many ICAs come to the U.S. to compete while paying at least part of their tuition (Coakley, 2017; Sethi, 2024).



That cannot be supplemented by additional scholarship monies from HEIs, as current visa restrictions prohibit ICA (and non-athlete) international students' access to merit-based scholarship dollars. Therefore, any access to additional money, even just a few hundred dollars from minimal NIL sponsorship deals, could assist with ICAs' financial ability to travel home or help parents travel to the U.S. (Sethi et al., 2022; Newell & Sethi, 2023; Sethi, 2024).

Another narrative consistent throughout ICA literature is that this population sees the purpose of their competing at NCAA institutions primarily as an academic one and that continuing to play the sport they love is a bonus (Jolly et al., 2023; Popp et al., 2011). Thus, some may argue that F1 visa employment restrictions – even the restrictions they create that bar ICAs from most NIL opportunities – are irrelevant, as ICAs have no interest in obtaining jobs while competing (Newell & Sethi, 2023). However, a critical understanding that arose from studies like Popp et al. (2011) is that while sport was a bonus to the educational opportunities U.S. intercollegiate athletics provides, the college experience was also a steppingstone into professional opportunities outside of sport, some of which can be stymied by the visa restrictions discussed previously. Additionally, a lack of access to these opportunities can be seen as harming their academic experiences and career preparedness. As NIL can provide athletes with valuable business connections and personal branding experience, ICAs are robbed of this opportunity, even as many indicate their desire to live and work in the U.S. post-graduation (Sethi, 2024).

Finally, ICAs have spoken out in the popular press about their dissatisfaction with being unable to monetize in the U.S. under NIL and the frustration of sitting idly by while teammates become some of the highest-paid athletes in sports (Sports Business Journal, 2021). Therefore, HEIs and athletics departments must provide more significant advocacy efforts to this exclusion, perhaps only spurred through greater ICA activism to give voice to this issue.

## **ICA Activism and Advocacy**

Aside from ICAs advocating for changes in visa laws that would permit them to engage broadly in NIL deals and activities, universities and local communities have economic incentives to keep international students overall in the U.S. to contribute to workforce development, particularly in underserved STEM fields (Peri & Basso, 2016). The lack of broad advocacy on behalf of ICAs, and thus international students, to amend F1 visa laws to allow more comprehensive access to professional development and work opportunities while enrolled at U.S. HEIs has been in contrast to the advocacy from higher education leaders in the wake of the Trump administration's policies directed at this student sub-population in 2020 (Sethi, 2024). Presently, the need to advocate for ICA NIL access is limited, particularly when it comes to HEI administrators and the NCAA. While NCAA President Charlie Baker has advocated for national-level laws and NCAA guidelines for NIL and has noted the need to make the current system more equitable for women's athletics (Lederman, 2023), he has not made any public statements about the need to enact change to include and fairly treat ICAs.

In a study on college athletics administrators' perceptions of the legal limitations of NIL and ICAs, Newell and Sethi (2023) found that most respondents were, for the most part, unconcerned with its impact on their athletic departments and teams. While one administrator quoted in their study noted that it was embarrassing that the industry was so focused on enabling NIL to come to fruition, there were no conversations with government stakeholders for guidance as to how this would impact the ICA population (Newell & Sethi, 2023). Though a few participants in the study noted that advocating for ICAs in the NIL space was necessary, the majority felt the earning potential of this population was too limited to be of any significant concern:

“International student-athletes are looking for the opportunity to leave their homelands and change their lives through a free education and a higher level of play that can prepare them to compete at the highest level as professionals when they return home. NIL would be icing on the cake, but most students are bettering their lifestyles by accepting a scholarship and living in the United States for 4-5 years” (Newell & Sethi, 2023, p. 352)

Given the lack of substantive advocacy efforts on behalf of the ICA population, it may, therefore, be critical and the only way to push for changes to the F1 visa program that allows the majority of ICAs to compete at U.S. HEIs today.

## **History of Student Visas in the U.S.**

The F-1 student visa was first established in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. Still, in the nearly 75 years since, the visa has been through numerous revisions, and varying levels of scrutiny by the U.S. government have been seen (Ruiz, 2014). Although work restrictions on F-1 visa holders have existed since its conception, the oversight of this has changed substantially due to geopolitical changes, particularly since the 1990s (Ruiz, 2014). The 1993 World Trade Center bombing by a terrorist who was in the U.S. on an F-1 visa led to changes that would increase the tracking of international students (Allen & Bista, 2022). Then-President Bill Clinton signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 into law as a reaction to terrorism concerns, which mandated new documentation, tracking, and reporting of international students (Allen & Bista, 2022). This included the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) for tracking international students in the U.S., though it was not utilized widely at the time. However, a more organized and government-level way of monitoring all activities of international students began at the turn of the 21st Century.

### ***Student Visas and 9/11***

Student visa issuance came under increased scrutiny once again in 2001 in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and it was revealed that one of the 19 hijackers involved in the attacks entered the U.S. on a student visa (Johnson, 2018). In passing the Patriot Act, then-President George W. Bush called for an end to the “abuse of student visas” (U.S. Office of the President, 2001, para. 12). The events of 9/11 led to a complete overhaul of immigration policy in the U.S., including policy related to international students (Witt, 2008). However, some argue that the restrictions

placed on student visas in the months and years following the attacks have prevented legitimate students and scholars from entering and remaining in the U.S. (Urias & Yeakey, 2009).

Although Congress authorized SEVIS in 1996, it was only broadly implemented and utilized in the years following the 9/11 attacks (Mittelstadt et al., 2011; Witt, 2008). The system, which tracks international students studying in the U.S., had the participation of 10,293 schools and contained more than 8.1 million records as of 2010. This system tracks every student application and every student that enrolls (Witt, 2008). The system monitors international students' entry and exit from the country, course enrollment, address changes, and personal financial information. This rapid implementation led to delays in students' arrival in the U.S. and even the denial of visas to students who had previously been admitted to HEIs in the U.S. (Witt, 2008).

The most notable post-9/11 change to the student visa process was the transfer of student visa oversight from the Department of State (DOS) to the newly created DHS, signaling that the issuance of such visas was a matter of national security, not a matter of diplomatic relations (Urias & Yeakey, 2009). In doing so, the new multi-layered approach to security screenings, paperwork, and record-keeping means that international students are some of the most scrutinized and monitored nonimmigrants in the U.S. today.

### ***International Students in the Trump Era***

When the Trump administration took office in January 2017, roughly one million international students were studying in the U.S., contributing an estimated \$35 billion to the U.S. economy (Bhattacharyya, 2017). From the onset, there were concerns about the impact of the administration on international student enrollment, which had declined slightly between 2010 and 2015. When White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer announced the administration was considering an overhaul of the H-1B visa program, which allows employers to sponsor international employees and which many international students seek at the expiration of their OPT visa (Bhattacharyya, 2017). As such, many feel the increasing difficulty of obtaining approval for OPT and H-1B visas post-graduation has and will continue to impact international student enrollment at U.S. HEIs.

Researchers have noted that the 3% drop in enrollment in the first year after Trump could be based on several unrelated factors, including the increasing price of education in the U.S. (international students enrolled at U.S. HEIs often pay up to three times the amount in tuition as domestic students), increased global competition from institutions in other countries, and a decrease in scholarship dollars offered to this population (Laws & Ammigan, 2020). Although some noted there was a lack of progress made by the administration in its goals of overhauling immigrant visas, despite early setbacks, many of the changes proposed which impacted immigration were successful and may have impacted international student enrollment and the international experience on campus in a significant way (Pierce, 2019; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Regardless of the actual policy implications, Laws and Ammigan (2020)

argued that the narrative developed and delivered internationally through the news media was enough to have an impact on international student enrollment, and feelings of whether or not attending a U.S. HEI would be a safe decision.

Although not explicitly tied to Trump administration immigration policies, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and policies dictating whether international students could remain on U.S. campuses as education shifted online, the country saw a 45.6% decrease in new enrollments (Moody, 2021). Whether that enrollment shift was primarily due to COVID-19 or, more specifically, to concerns over whether or not students would be able to enter and exit the U.S. without getting stuck on one side of the border or the other, cannot be determined. However, like concerns from international students who got stuck in their home country after 9/11-era visa modifications by the Bush administration (Witt, 2008), students may have been alarmed by the Trump administration's initial reaction to ban international students from campus as education moved online.

On July 6, 2020, the Trump administration issued federal guidance that stated that international students attending U.S. HEIs would have to return to or remain in their home country if their university, as many did, decided to operate entirely online in the Fall 2020 semester (Treisman, 2020). The news came via ICE's Student and Exchange Visitor Program, which, as mentioned previously, tracks an extensive amount of international student data via the SEVIS system. The release by the department indicated that HEIs would have ten days after deciding on fall delivery modalities to update their information in SEVIS. By July 14, 2020, that decision had been reversed due to swift and concerted advocacy from HEIs on behalf of the international student population (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020).

As reported in *The New York Times* (2020), just two days after the policy was announced by the administration, both Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology filed lawsuits that sought to block the policy, which would strip visas from students who did not show up for in-person classes on campus. Those suits were joined by attorneys general from 20 states, along with countless other universities who put support behind the litigation to block the measure (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020). Pressure on the administration came to a head when technology companies, including Google, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as 15 Republican members of Congress, came out with statements backing international students' right to stay in the U.S. amid the pandemic (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020). This swift advocacy on behalf of international students by HEIs, lawmakers, and industry was successful in changing policy in less than ten days.

Although the Trump administration's changes to visa policies and subsequent response were more pressing in that they meant the potential deportation of thousands of international students from the U.S., it exemplifies the power of collective activism on behalf of this group. Indeed, international students themselves were concerned with the initial decision from ICE; however, as noted by Witt (2008), the ability of this vastly diverse group to collectively act in any quick manner is both complex and unlikely, making advocacy efforts from more politically influential groups like higher education administrators all the more critical.

## **International Student Employment**

The increasing number of international students, including ICAs, yet to promote change or reform in outdated immigration policies present in the U.S. Even today, F-1 student visa holders are only allowed to work 20 hours per week on campus during the academic year in positions that are not funded by Federal Work Study dollars (USCIS, 2020). During the summer, international students can work full-time but are still limited almost exclusively to those same on-campus opportunities (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017).

Additionally, international students who wish to complete paid internships or co-ops related to their program must get their CPT approved by the international student services office on campus (Sethi et al., 2022; Sethi, 2024; USCIS, 2020). This approval can only be used for employment purposes when the activity/internship being performed is aligned with or required for their academic degree/program, and standards for qualified experiences can be strict (USCIS, 2020). Otherwise, international students are denied the ability to gain any additional experience in the U.S. workforce, something that hinders their networking and social capital-building abilities (Sethi, 2024).

After graduation, international students still have severely limited opportunities due to visa restrictions and availability (Sethi, 2024). One of the most common employment options—OPT, allows international students, including ICAs, to find a job upon graduation in their area of study and work for up to three years in the U.S. while continuing to navigate a highly competitive workforce (Sethi et al., 2022). It should be noted that while students graduating from STEM-qualified programs can receive three-year OPT clearance, those in non-STEM fields are limited to single-year OPTs. The limited opportunities for career development throughout their education can put international students at a disadvantage in their search for OPT-qualified employment, as they may not have as well-developed networks as their domestic peers (Sethi, 2024).

This approach to international students is, in fact, rare. Other countries that receive international students are more likely to have two-step approaches to retaining these students in the workforce post-graduation, while pathways for international students to remain in the U.S. post-graduation are “akin to a labyrinth” (Pottie-Sherman, 2018, p. 34). As outlined in Table 2, Peri and Basso (2016) compiled the challenges international students face when attempting to work in the U.S. after graduation, which often requires the assistance of immigration lawyers – at their own expense – to navigate the process.

## ***International College Athletes and NIL***

As of July 1st, 2021, the NCAA announced that all student-athletes will be able to monetize their NIL (NCAA, 2021a). However, based on the above discussion of international student visas and ICAs, only some college athletes can engage in NIL activities if their actions are in line with state, institutional, and/or conference laws and guidelines, as well as the NCAA’s pay-for-play regulations. Currently, these do

**Table 2***Labyrinthine visa options for F-1 visa holders*

Visa name	For whom	Description	Limitations	Time
F-1	Trainees	Optional Professional Training (OPT) in a career field	Wage disparities	12-36 months (depending on field)
H1-B	Specialty occupation	Employer-sponsored application	Subject to caps and lottery	3 years
E-1	Treaty trader	Broker trade between the U.S. and home country	Must be from a treaty nation	2 years
E-2	Treaty investor	Invest capital in U.S. business	Requires “substantial” cash; must be from treaty nation	2 years
L-1	Intracompany transfer	Temporary work assignments	Need a job at a multinational company	1 year
“Green Card”	Legal permanent resident	Family relationship, exceptional professional ability, or lottery	Wait time of up to 24 years based on nationality	Permanent

*Note.* International student visa options as adapted by Peri & Basso (2016). Data from *The Washington Post*.

not allow college athletes to engage in any form of extra benefits—gaining anything of monetary value without acting above and beyond regular athletic commitments, although, in practice, the enforcement of these restrictions is unclear (NCAA, 2021b).

College athletes can monetize their image through large-scale endorsements and professional contracts or, for most, opportunities to receive minor NIL deals through autograph signing, Instagram promotions, and TikTok videos, for example (Sethi et al., 2022). However, the NCAA and its member institutions did not consider the unique situation of ICAs. Almost 13% of the college athlete population, or over 21,000, cannot monetize on any NIL opportunities on U.S. land—where they spend at least ten months training and competing in their sport and pursuing their degree on an annual basis, bringing tuition dollars and athletic success to their home institutions.

According to U.S. federal tax and immigration laws, since ICAs can only earn income through official employment statuses like the OPT and CPT, on-campus em-

ployment, and passive sources of income while residing in the U.S. (USCIS, 2020), they are nearly excluded from NIL opportunities. Passive sources of income can include investing in the stock market, buying a house, or investing in a startup—all of which do not require any substantial actions other than the first capital investment (Sethi et al., 2022). While some universities have found ways to utilize the passive income status, the NCAA and federal lawmakers remain quiet in terms of the legality of such deals (Sports Business Journal, 2023). Popular NIL deals like sponsored social media posts, restaurant promotions, T-shirt deals, sports camps, or party appearances, amongst others, are prohibited for this population. Unfortunately, they only get to watch their domestic teammates and friends monetize on such financial opportunities and build professional and social networks with potential future employers.

Today, the only guidance provided by a federal agency to all international students and ICAs since the passing of NIL in July 2021 is as follows:

“[The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP)] continues to coordinate with its government partners, including U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, to assess the number of impacted students and whether regulatory guidance is required to address this and related issues. SEVP will continue to monitor current and pending state and federal legislation on this issue and will provide additional updates through Broadcast Messages, Study in the States, social media, and SEVP field representatives,” (SEVIS SysAdmin, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

Several federal agencies like the ICE, SEVIS, and the DHS continue to ignore this situation and provide no clear guidance and communication regarding this issue. At an institutional and departmental level, compliance officers and athletic administrators continue to refer ICAs to external immigration attorneys for advice or ask them to refrain from NIL to be safe due to the high level of uncertainty this situation holds (Compliance Officer, personal communication, October 26, 2021). Often, athletic departments do not work with ICAs to find a way. Thus, it clearly shows how U.S. HEIs need to prepare and/or are ignorant towards ICA integration but instead prefer assimilation (Sethi & Hextrum, 2024; Pericak et al., 2023). Expecting ICAs to pay for pursuing legal guidance while providing free guidance to their domestic peers further perpetuates discrimination towards this population (Sethi et al., 2022).

Furthermore, it hurts ICAs' finances even more since they are often unable to monetize on NIL deals but have to “navigate complex and conflicting state and federal bureaucracies” on their own. (Sethi et al., 2022, p.8). For example, ICAs must pay for their consultations with immigration attorneys to navigate the U.S. employment options, which can cost anywhere from 200-400 dollars per hour. They also must pay out of pocket for their OPT application closer to graduation to even attempt to find work, which costs between 500-600 dollars. Thus, ICAs experience additional challenges and have decisions to make—either follow the NCAA's NIL policy that allows “all” college athletes to monetize NIL and risk visa revocation from the U.S. or abide by immigration and tax laws and continue to stay to pursue academic and professional careers (Lever, 2021a; Sethi et al., 2022). These young individuals are often expected to navigate such complex and challenging times with little to no help.



Thus, it is time that athletic departments begin to examine and then invest in support services and professional development for ICAs instead of only recruiting them in high numbers for institutional athletic gain, winning championships, and generating additional revenue (Holman, 2007). However, it may be necessary for ICAs and allies to self-advocate in order to bring the issue to the forefront of an already crowded collegiate athletics landscape. Presently, based on the minimal media coverage this issue has received, and the perceived ambivalence of administrators through initial studies (Newell & Sethi, 2023), this activism could be the key to moving issues related to NIL disparities for ICAs forward.

### ***College Athletes as Employees***

Another factor that could impact ICA visas in the future is the growing movement to get college athletes classified as university employees so that they can gain labor compensation (Dickson, 2024). Specifically, in March 2024, the Dartmouth College men's basketball team – a roster featuring four ICAs – voted to unionize (Maynard Nexsen, 2024). This team, compared to other DI institutions, is in a unique position, as its conference, The Ivy League does not grant athletic scholarships, however, the implications could be far-reaching. While the Regional Labor Relations Board approved the vote to unionize, Dartmouth filed an appeal to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to overturn this decision, citing precedent from a similar case when Northwestern University football players attempted to unionize in 2015 (Becker, 2024). Among the arguments the university brought forth is that ICAs reclassified as employees could lose their F-1 student visa status, particularly with the strict limitations provided for on-campus employment.

Similarly, in May 2023, the NLRB office out of Los Angeles filed a complaint against the University of Southern California (USC), the Pacific-12 (PAC-12) Conference, and the NCAA, claiming they violated labor laws by not classifying football and men's and women's basketball college athletes as employees (McCollough, 2023). The University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA) was also originally a part of the complaint but was dropped due to its status as a public HEIs.

Presently, attempts by students, non-profit organizations, and labor unions to advocate on behalf of college athletes' rights as employees have been limited to private institutions like USC, Northwestern, and Dartmouth, which are the only organizations with which the NLRB has purview (Becker, 2024). Previously, during the Northwestern case in 2015, the NLRB voted against the unionization attempt due to the athletics department's competition with public universities, over which they do not have purview, and the same case could be made for USC, which competes against mostly public HEIs. The Dartmouth case, however, is unique in that the entirety of the conference is comprised of private HEIs. With the NLRB ruling still forthcoming, the move by Dartmouth Men's Basketball is indicative of a growing call for college athletes to be classified and paid as employees of their respective institutions, which much of the discourse is led not by the institutions who are tasked with their well-being, but by the media and athletes themselves.

## **Immigration, Education, and Right to Work Activism**

Immigration is an integral part of the history of the U.S. from the Colonial period, when European immigrants colonized the native-inhabited North American lands, to today's intense political clashes over border security. Conflicting immigration narratives have been ever-present in the history of the country. Most recently, the crisis at the southern U.S. border, along with increasingly restrictive policies on immigration from some Middle Eastern and African countries, have dominated the news cycle, as have activist efforts to reform policy and ease the visa obtainment process, particularly for those seeking asylum (Reznick, 2022). In short, activism surrounding immigration is nothing new. To better understand the historical context of these efforts and to provide background and guidance on how ICAs can model future activist movements in alignment with Cooper et al.'s model of athlete activism, this section will look at specific activist movements that have involved diverse populations, collaborative efforts, and higher education to fight for immigration and/or labor reform.

### ***United Farm Workers***

Nearly 80,000 people of Mexican descent became U.S. citizens after the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846-1848, when much of the present-day American Southwest was annexed into the country from Mexico (Espinosa, 2007). Ever since, the population has led activist movements surrounding several issues, including immigration and workers' rights. Especially as the Latinx population in the U.S. continues to diversify – much like the ICA population – their education and grassroots-based activist efforts can be seen as a successful model for the ICA population in their quest for equal access to NIL opportunities.

In 1965, César Chávez and Dolores Huerta led and organized the United Farm Workers (UFW), a labor union whose activist activities included fighting for the rights of migrant workers from across the globe who found themselves in poor working conditions and severely underpaid across California (Rose, 1990). The activist strategies utilized by the UFW included utilizing the higher education experience held by leaders like Huerta to develop a robust political organizing group, which used resources to lobby for political change, something that will be necessary for ICAs in a push for changes in visa restrictions.

**Collaborative Efforts.** Within the UFW movement, collaboration with the Black Panther Party (BPP) in the city of Oakland was critical to activist efforts between 1968 and 1973 (Araiza, 2009). Although seemingly opposed in their strategies—the UFW being defined by its rural, Catholic, Mexican American membership focused on non-violent efforts, and the BPP comprised of urban, socialist, Black Americans utilizing more militant tactics—the organizations came together through their mutual oppression and class standing (Araiza, 2009). Although both of these organizations saw the path forward very differently and may have had more micro-level goals that differed significantly, their commonalities allowed them to come together as activists to fight for the underlying common need.

This collaborative model of activism is once again something ICAs can utilize in efforts to make their voices heard. ICAs represent the intersection of two much larger college populations: college athletes and international students. While the former holds more social capital in terms of exposure, working with both of these groups to increase the number of voices advocating for change could be crucial. Changes to the visa system, which dictates ICA's ability to capitalize on NIL, are the same that limit international students from many work opportunities during their time on campus. Additionally, domestic college athletes are some of the closest confidants of the ICA population. They are their teammates and see the competitive advantage these athletes bring to their sport. Utilizing these connections in a collaborative model like the UFW and Black Panther Party, along with harnessing the power of their personal platforms through sport-based activism (Cooper et al., 2019), could be beneficial in moving the conversation forward at a national level.

### ***DREAMers***

More recently, the so-called DREAMers, undocumented young people brought to the U.S. illegally by parents when they were too young to know they were breaking the law, have come out of the shadows and into the spotlight as they fight for a path to citizenship and access to higher education (Negrón-Gonzales, 2015). DREAMers are named for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, a bipartisan bill introduced in 2001 by U.S. Senators Dick Durbin and Orrin Hatch (National Immigration Law Center, 2010; Ojeda & Takash, 2010). Although introduced in several subsequent iterations, the legislation has yet to pass. In 2012, then-President Barack Obama utilized the framework put forth by the DREAM Act and announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program by executive order, which has registered more than 700,000 undocumented youth (Rascón-Canales, 2024).

One of the main goals of activists involved with DREAM and DACA is to offer greater access to higher education and the workforce for these undocumented youth, who are, due to their legal status, barred from access to federal financial aid and sometimes in-state tuition benefits (Getrich, 2021). Although seeking access for different reasons, the cost of education and the need to supplement what is not covered by athletic scholarships is a reason ICAs have previously indicated additional income sources could be incredibly beneficial to their transition into U.S. sport and higher education (Newell, 2016).

What makes activist movements started by undocumented youth in the U.S. unique is the incredible diversity of backgrounds represented in this group, including not just those from Latin American and Caribbean countries but those from the African and Asian continents as well (Schwartz, 2015). Some estimates have shown that this group, made up of children and now young adults brought to the U.S. as children – sometimes called Generation 1.5 – includes around 2 million people (Burciaga & Martinez, 2017). Due to their similarities in age, diversity, and non-citizen identities, understanding the successful activist efforts of this group could be critical to ICAs

and international students starting a movement to advocate for equity in educational experiences.

Scholars have noted that DREAMers' methods of activism have varied over the years, particularly as the political environment shifted (Burciaga & Martinez, 2017). Although the Obama administration was able to provide DACA benefits via executive order to more than 800,000 young people from the population, the Trump administration attempted to dismantle the program in 2017 (Getrich, 2021). From 2017 to 2020, the status of DACA recipients remained in limbo, and activist efforts by this population themselves and their allies helped force a government shutdown and contested the legality of Trump's cancellation of the order to the Supreme Court, which eventually decided that DACA as it currently stood could not be dismantled (Department of Homeland Security et al. v. Regents of the University of California et al., 2020). Although the decision upheld DACA, many feel progress was diminished due to the political environment that changed immigration enforcement policies during the Trump administration (Coutin et al., 2017).

During this heightened period of activism between 2017 and 2019, DREAMers saw progress from their traditional activist movements, with 19 states passing tuition equity laws designed to provide in-state tuition to children illegally brought to the state (American Immigration Council, 2019). However, while the more traditional, public forms of activism were covered heavily in the press, this was not the only way DREAMers could push forth legislative change. Getrich (2021) explored how activists employed forms of both traditional (e.g., community-based, public, and collective) activism and more private everyday activism to help move the dialogue forward. These public-facing and everyday activism efforts explored by Getrich (2021) echo this paper's call for using both grassroots and sport-based activism (Cooper et al., 2019) to help bring attention to NIL disparities created by federal visa policies. However, as noted by Stokowski et al. (2023), public-facing activism, no matter the form, puts college athletes at risk for public criticism, and possibly a lack of public support by making their calls for increased compensation public. In exploring the benefits of both types of activism, ICAs, with potential support from their domestic college athlete and non-athlete international peers, could utilize both strategies, embracing the unique platform given to them as elite college athletes and using personal stories at a more grassroots level to explore their experiences as international students and athletes in the way DREAMers were able to do.

Getrich (2021) noted that while activism is traditionally linked to "public, explicit, explosive, and sometimes even glamorous elements of political life," everyday activism is much quieter and individualistic while still promoting the same political agenda (p. 29). Mansbridge (2013) identified everyday activism as "actions in everyday life that are not necessarily coordinated with the actions of others, but are nonetheless caused, inspired, or encouraged by a social movement and consciously intended to change others' ideas or behavior in directions advocated by the movement." (p. 1) Strategies linked to everyday activism, as they appeal to a segment of the DREAMer movement, could also benefit ICA activism, mainly based on their non-resident status and perhaps fear of retribution by speaking out or engaging in

protest in more public ways. Utilizing platforms on college campuses or in other community safe spaces, ICAs, as DREAMers have, can share their personal experiences as testimony to help put a human face to the issue and show how the inequities impact the individual.

What helped make the DREAMer movement successful was its ability to emerge in a politically unfriendly environment for immigrants as a unified group with a distinctive voice and common agenda (Nicholls, 2013; Patler, 2018). For more than a decade, DREAMers kept the issue of their rights as undocumented people who had not explicitly chosen to come to the U.S. on their own in the foreground, even as the bipartisan legislation created to protect them continuously failed (Abrego, 2018). Through this “mixed methodology” of activism, employing both traditional and everyday activist strategies, the DREAMer movement has remained in the public eye as needed. Though the group has yet to achieve the ultimate goal of codifying DACA into U.S. law, substantial progress has been made even in a politically hostile environment to enact significant change. By adapting similar strategies, ICAs and their allies could increase public understanding of the inequities regarding their right to work and NIL and the potential for substantive legal changes. For this, however, ICAs, more specifically, will have to show courage and move beyond their fears related to potential immigration consequences. Fighting for one’s rights and fairness has seldom led to immediate deportation without cause of immigrants in this nation—it just remains an authoritative image portrayed by USCIS due to the power this office holds in the lives of immigrants.

### ***Grassroots and sport-based activism as a model***

As previously mentioned, the authors contend that a way forward for ICAs could include a combination of grassroots and sport-based activism (Cooper et al., 2019) through ICAs can help raise awareness not only of their exclusion from NIL opportunities but also of broader visa issues concerning all international students. Grassroots activism refers to “counter-hegemonic actions performed at the meso- and micro-level by activists, including individual relationships, community engagement, and statewide and association-wide efforts both within and beyond sport (Cooper et al., 2019, p. 170). Specifically, the idea of grassroots activism is applied to Colin Kaepernick’s protests focused on the injustices facing oppressed Black Americans and his subsequent Know Your Rights Camp, which has specific goals related to empowering would-be activists directly connected to the systems being challenged. Because NIL’s exclusionary nature is not tied to rules created by the sport organizations themselves but to the DHS and federal government visa policy, actions that specifically lobby for these governmental organizations for change are necessary.

Despite the actual exclusionary policy being in the hands of the federal government, not the NCAA or HEIs, sport-based activism, in tandem with grassroots activism, is likely necessary to gain broader advocacy on behalf of ICAs. According to Cooper and co-authors (2019), sport-based activism “refers to specific actions taken by athletes to alter and mitigate the hegemonic nature of structural arrangements, rules/policies/bylaws, and practices through sport organizations that serve

to reinforce subordination, marginalization, and exploitation of certain groups,” (p. 172). As noted previously, widespread advocacy on behalf of both ICAs and international students more broadly was exercised in 2020 when the Trump administration attempted to bar international students from remaining in the U.S. while a great majority of HEIs took education at least partially online (Moody, 2021). This brisk, concerted action led to quick changes that allowed this population to remain in the country throughout the pandemic without compromising their F1 visa status. As such, sport-based activism utilized to mobilize the intercollegiate athletic and higher education administrative community will be helpful and likely necessary to achieve meaningful change, especially in the lives of ICAs.

Based on the criteria presented by Cooper et al. (2019), activism should include (1) a clear opposition, (2) concrete disruption and challenging, (3) specific goals and objectives to assess progress, (4) a connection to broader social justice movements (p. 155). Connecting this to the issue at hand, ICAs’ near-exclusion from NIL opportunities, as well as the broader exclusion of international students in many career development and employment opportunities, have clear opposition in the federal government agencies that develop and maintain visa policies. They require concrete disruption of the existing structures in place, with the specific goals and objectives of changing the F1 visa policy to allow ICAs to freely participate in NIL activities and opportunities, especially on U.S. land.

Finally, all of these issues connect concretely to broader immigration and right-to-work concerns, especially considering that DREAMers and DACA students are considered by all counts in higher education to be part of the international population. Although the international student non-athlete population is undoubtedly greater than the ICA population, the unique platform ICAs are granted through their participation in sport – some on elite teams that earn media attention via championships and other high-profile performances – could be critical to spotlighting broader student visa concerns. As Witt (2008) noted, international students, while a growing population, are still a relatively small minority compared to the overall student population, and they come from various cultural backgrounds with countless languages spoken. The author noted these factors, coupled with the fact that visa issues are often dealt with for no more than a few years, make it unlikely that this cohort will unite and protest the policy changes. Instead, Witt (2008) noted the importance of institutions themselves advocating on behalf of this group. Therefore, we conclude that coupling grassroots activism by ICAs and sport-based activism, can gain adequate support from institutions. It is the best path forward to lobby for substantive immigration policy and visa changes.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

International students and ICAs are vital parts of U.S. HEIs. and the workforce. Estimates range widely depending on the year, but all show that international students contribute anywhere from \$22-41 billion annually to the American economy (Bhattacharyya, 2017; Hegarty, 2014). Graduates, particularly in the STEM fields,



provide much-needed expertise in areas of the workforce where the U.S. does not have and needs a sufficient number of qualified, skilled workers (Schuck & Tyler, 2010). In addition to their contributions to the economy at large, the income institutions generate via international tuition dollars is significant (Hegarty, 2014), especially as American HEIs broadly struggle with dwindling enrollment and financial concerns (Saul, 2022). In athletics, sports like tennis, in which more than 60% of the participants are ICAs (NCAA, 2023b), rely on the flow of foreign recruits to sustain programs and maintain success.

On a multitude of levels, preserving and growing international student (and ICA) enrollment, persistence, and cultivating workforce opportunities post-graduation for these groups is vital. Continuing restrictive visa practices will not sustain that growth and retention. Although NIL is still relatively new to the collegiate athletics landscape, and it remains to be seen how the NCAA will codify its existence in the long term, the time for advocacy on behalf of ICAs and activism by ICAs is now. While individual administrators may take issue with this exclusion or are in small numbers advocating on behalf of ICAs, there is no widespread, concerted effort to do so. As noted by the administrator in the study, so much was done on behalf of the NCAA to prevent NIL from becoming a reality, and little to no thought was given to the implications on subpopulations like ICAs. This lack of advocacy on their behalf necessitates future activist action by ICAs themselves to bring attention to their exclusion.

Although specific types of activism have been advantageous for the UFW and the DREAMers, similar benefits could extend to ICAs, provided they and their supporters actively participate in advocacy and activism initiatives. Recognizing the absence of significant activism and lobbying from major sports bodies such as the NCAA, conference offices, and individual member institutions, ICAs, akin to the DREAMers, must engage in daily activism by expressing their viewpoints and experiences regarding the unjust and unequal treatment they face. By narrating their personal stories as evidence, they can effectively demonstrate the personal and professional effects of these disparities. Increasing awareness within the community and among those interacting with this demographic and concerned about their development can highlight their exclusion from NIL rights and encourage HEIs and their stakeholders to support equitable policies.

As seen with the DREAMers, immigrants, including ICAs, who organize collectively with a coherent message and shared goals, may exert more significant influence and increase awareness among decision-makers (Nicholls, 2013; Patler, 2018). This collective action can prompt HEI staff and stakeholders to pressure the NCAA to engage in lobbying efforts to push for policy change of the F-1 visa overall or demand an ICA-specific waiver from the USCIS that allows them to monetize their NIL on U.S. land. Furthermore, institutions already advocating for ICAs through without the push from the NCAA, the governing body of collegiate sports, can leverage their relationships with Congress and policymakers to seek immigration reforms specifically benefiting international students, aiming to improve fairness and equality in ICA treatment in the U.S. as it relates to immigrant student employment policies.



Following the models of the UFW and the Black Panther Party, sports organizations like the NCAA, including its members and ICAs, can adopt a cooperative approach to activism that serves mutual interests in the long run.

### Authors' Note

This manuscript was originally written in the Fall of 2022 in a much different political environment for international college athletes and immigration policy and enforcement. Given the current administration's record of revoking student visas for students' political beliefs and/or participation in activism, the authors would not recommend front-facing activism like that of DREAMers as discussed in this piece. We are hopeful that moving forward, this type of activism will be possible for ICAs again.

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# Institutional Barriers Impeding Collegiate Sport Club Operational Effectiveness

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Collegiate sport clubs constitute an important sport outlet for college students, with club operations managed by member students serving in governing roles. While clubs are given autonomy to operate, they must navigate a complex institutional environment with regulative pressures that can impede club operations. This research explored the institutional barriers that impede collegiate sport clubs from operating effectively. Guided by a bioecological framework and social constructivist epistemology, we facilitated focus groups with 29 collegiate sport clubs, interviewed four recreational sport administrators, and collected 29 public documents pertaining to club operations across three universities in the United States. Thematic analysis across the data sources revealed three overarching themes, pointing to institutional rules, policies, and procedures (e.g., regulations on club eligibility, executive boards, resource allocations, financial activities, risk, travel, marketing); university constraints (e.g., limited university resources, organizational problems, interorganizational conflict); and club constraints (e.g., poor communication, poor planning and documentation, poor decisions, centralized leadership) as factors impeding club operations. Study implications include reducing bureaucratic red tape, training club leaders, creating a sport club council, supporting club resource acquisition, and increasing club's division of labor and communication.

**Keywords:** collegiate recreation; sport clubs; bioecological model; university bureaucracy; constraints

Higher education institutions across the United States (U.S.) saw the emergence of sport as part of the campus experience during the mid to late 1800s (Lewis, 1970). Initially, athletic competitions were set up by students for students and provided an outlet for those who wanted to engage in extra-curricular activities (Crowley, 2006; Smith, 2011). As time passed, these competitions evolved and faculty and university presidents soon took control, forming the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the U.S. in 1906, which was later renamed the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1910 (Smith, 2011).

The goal of the NCAA was to establish a national governing body that could regulate intercollegiate athletics and ensure college sport was in line with “the dignity and high purpose of education” (Intercollegiate Athletic Ass’n of the United States, CONST. art. II as cited in Carter, 2005, p. 221). Despite this shift, students continued organizing their own athletic teams and sporting events, establishing a second form of college sport labeled collegiate sport clubs (CSCs). These sport teams/organizations stood in stark contrast to the intercollegiate athletic programs the NCAA sought to govern. Unlike intercollegiate athletics, which lent universities a vehicle to attract positive attention and revenue (Smith, 2011), CSCs focused on serving the student population’s desire for athletic competition. That is, CSCs worked to unify students who had a mutual interest in specific sports (Czekanski & Lower, 2019) and provide those students with sport and social activities (Haines & Fortman, 2008; Lower et al., 2020) that might teach lifelong skills in “leadership, teamwork, dedication, and respect” (About NIRSA, 2018, para. 2).

As CSCs continued to evolve to fulfill this unique role within the U.S. higher education system, a distinctive sport model formed that currently guides clubs (see Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Springer, 2021). At the center of the CSC model is the club itself, which elects members (aka officers) to serve in leadership roles on the executive board and manage club operations (Lower et al., 2021). The executive board further establishes the club’s culture and sets goals it works to achieve (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). External to the club and its student executive board are numerous ancillary actors, such as the recreational sport department and associated sport governing bodies (SGBs), who provide various inputs like resources, guidelines, and policies that affect club operations (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). These interactions within and outside the club are essential to the CSC model.

For example, a club’s executive board members interact internally, holding regular meetings to manage the logistics of club operations (Czekanski et al., 2023). This includes setting up and running team meetings, tryouts, practices, social events, and more (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). Externally, a club’s executive board interacts with employees at their institution, teams from other universities, national governing bodies, vendors, officials, and alumni (Czekanski et al., 2023). As each club uniquely manages these interactions and relationships, individual cultures form across CSCs and change as athletes matriculate into and out of clubs.

Chief among the relationships that affect CSCs’ culture and operations is that between clubs and the university (Czekanski et al., 2023; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). CSCs are generally housed within the university recreational sport department -

which oversees recreational sport facilities, programs, and services—with an associate director and/or coordinator responsible for supervising the sport club program (Mull et al., 2019). Research has shown recreational sport club programs have significant interactions with the CSCs they oversee as they help train club officers in matters needed to manage and run a club (e.g., risk management, proper completion of university forms, First Aid/CPR), provide structure and guidance on operations (e.g., university rules, web support, booking travel), and help manage money (e.g., provide bank accounts, help with fundraising activities, approve budget) amongst other things (Czekanski et al., 2023; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2024).

While the interplay between an organization and external actors may bring positive outcomes, it might also create numerous obstacles. More specifically, Filo et al. (2015) noted in their discussion of community sport clubs in Australia how a power imbalance may form between a sport club and external governing organizations. This power imbalance can result in sport clubs facing various obstacles that might impact their ability to operate effectively. In examining CSCs specifically, Lower-Hoppe et al. (2021) remarked that since universities largely control sport club facilities, equipment, and money and set the general rules/structure for operations, clubs perceive the university as the biggest obstacle they face. However, the barriers brought by the relationship between CSCs and their university have yet to be examined, making it challenging to fully understand CSCs, their relationship with the university, and how the interplay potentially hinders a club's success.

As such, the primary purpose of this paper was to explore perceived institutional barriers impeding CSCs from operating effectively. To accomplish this goal, we first placed the current research purpose within Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2007) bioecological model, which suggests that development, growth, and maturation depend on interactions with external environments. This is followed by a brief discussion of the model and an in-depth analysis of how CSCs fit within its framework. We developed a semi-structured focus group protocol and conducted a series of focus groups comprised of CSC student officers. After completing the focus groups, we interviewed university administrators overseeing CSCs and collected publicly available documents (e.g., student organization handbooks, student code of conduct) to help provide additional context to the study. We analyzed and compared each qualitative dataset to answer the study's primary research question:

*RQ: What institutional barriers impede CSCs' operational effectiveness?*

## Theoretical Framework

Neo-institutional theorists posit that organizations exist within organizational fields and their growth and maturation depend on internal organizational operations and interactions with the external environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 1991). Further, organizations, like individuals, undergo developmental life stages (Piaget, 1952; Sirmon et al., 2011). Thus, it stands to reason that one can apply Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2007) bioecological model to examine organizational development (Berkeley et al., 1995). The model supports a multilevel analysis ac-

counting for internal and external elements shaping organizations' maturation and growth. This allows for a refined understanding of the influences on organizational development without requiring a granular focus on each component.

The bioecological model enables an exploration of how organizations interact with their immediate environment, adapt to external pressures, and evolve over time through the theory's focus on the complex interplay between process, person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Tudge et al., 2016). The process component considers interactions between an organization and its environment—much like proximal processes in human development—which are central to organizational change and adaptation. When adapted to organizations, the person aspect looks at an organization's unique characteristics—its culture, structure, and resources—which drive its engagement with various developmental processes.

The context element is particularly relevant for organizations, as it facilitates a multilevel formulation of an organization's micro-, meso-, and macro-environment, including the immediate operational setting and the broader sector it operates within. This extends the neo-institutional emphasis on environmental interactions to consider how multiple contextual layers impact organizational growth and behavior. Environmental interactions can either support or constrain an organization's operations, affecting its maturation and growth. Finally, the time component acknowledges organizational developments' dynamic nature, recognizing changes and adaptations occur in response to current conditions and as part of a longer historical and developmental trajectory.

In the CSC context, we are particularly concerned with organizational effectiveness as a proximal process promoting club development. CSCs exist in a plurality where various internal and external stakeholders (e.g., university administrators, governing bodies, club members, club officers) influence clubs' abilities to achieve their goals (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020). This positions individual sport clubs at the ecological environment's center or microsystem (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Springer, 2021). In light of previous scholarship that has identified the university as a prominent barrier to sport club operations (Lower et al., 2021), this paper focuses on how the university constrains club operational effectiveness. Pindek et al. (2018) defined organizational constraints as "aspects of the immediate... environment that inhibit the translation of motivation and abilities into effective performance" (p. 79). Research has found 11 prominent organizational constraints, including: organizational rules and procedures, supervisor, poor equipment/supplies, lack of equipment/supplies, inadequate training, other employees, interruptions by other people, lack of necessary information about what to do or how to do it, conflicting demands, inadequate help from others, and incorrect instructions (Pindek & Spector, 2016; Spector & Jex, 1998).

Internal to sport clubs, organizational constraints such as student turnover and conflicting demands likely shape CSCs' organizational dynamics, requiring club officers and members to adapt and innovate, navigating these challenges to maintain or enhance club activities (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Beyond these dynamics, clubs interact extensively with broader external environments. University administrators'

managerial approach to club oversight and influence on institutional policies and procedures governing clubs are key external factors impacting clubs' effectiveness, with restrictive rules and scarce resources considered major organizational constraints (Lower et al., 2021). Broadly, the club program and university represent the meso- and macrosystems, respectively. These larger systems influence clubs' immediate operational environment

To operationalize the bioecological model's temporal element, particular attention was given to time and timing. Data collection occurred pre-pandemic. Thus, time was contextualized as the socio-historical climate in higher education, which at the time was rife with increased resource competition due to reduced state funding and an increased focus on transparency and accountability related to program delivery (Franklin, 2013). Timing, which refers to a specific moment in time, was operationalized as our ability to understand the internal and external elements shaping clubs' organizational effectiveness (i.e., their current state). This insight then improves our understanding of the factors that facilitate or impede clubs' effectiveness and future growth and development. The subsequent review focuses on further defining the multilevel sport club environment.

## **Collegiate Sport Clubs**

CSCs represent one of the oldest forms of intercollegiate sport delivery in American higher education (Springer & Dixon, 2021). Clubs serve various purposes, including social integration (Haines & Format, 2008; Warner et al., 2012), holistic development (Dugan et al., 2015; Flosdorf et al., 2016), and an outlet for physical activity (Warner & Dixon, 2013). They offer a range of competitiveness—encompassing recreational to elite competition—and involvement levels—from casual participation to leadership roles tasked with balancing internal club operations and external governance (Mull et al., 2019).

### **Clubs**

CSCs offer an alternative intercollegiate sport model in American higher education, characterized by student-led executive boards that handle various operational tasks (Czekanski et al., 2023; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2012). While this centralized structure can expedite decision-making by reducing bureaucracy, it requires student officers to have a well-rounded understanding of club functions to address operational gaps effectively (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). It also requires student officers to contend with internal and external organizational constraints, such as team dynamics, regulations, and resource availability. Club officers may simultaneously hold leadership positions in multiple organizations or have competing priorities like work, courses, and family, stretching their ability to fulfill diverse club responsibilities. Additionally, frequent student turnover requires continuous recruitment and training efforts to ensure smooth leadership transitions and sustained club operations (Czekanski & Lower, 2019).

Clubs rely on the support of their universities and associated recreational sport club programs for critical resources and training (Czekanski et al., 2023), reflecting an ecological relationship spanning from the clubs (i.e., micro) to the recreational program (i.e., meso) and the broader university system (i.e., macro). Therefore, clubs' organizational development is considerably affected by their external environment (Basadur et al., 2012). To foster this development, club officers must combine internally generated resources with those obtained from these external entities. Officers must also be flexible and responsive to changes and constraints in the external environment to enhance club efficiency and sustainability—an alignment well-suited to clubs' inherently organic natures (Basadur et al., 2012; Czekanski & Lower, 2019).

### **Sport Club Program**

In recreational sport club programs, specific administrators are tasked with exclusively overseeing sport clubs or managing clubs in conjunction with other aspects of recreational sport (e.g., intramurals; Springer, 2021). This approach creates opportunities for inter-organizational conflict due to factors that include club-to-program and club-to-club interaction, decision-making, and competing personal and organizational incentives and motivations (Lumineau et al., 2015). Conflict may also arise because of the influence of institutional environments or the use of formal or informal governance mechanisms (Lumineau et al., 2015). Of particular interest are governance mechanisms categorized by Mull et al. (2019) as conservative or liberal, which critically shape sport club management.

In a conservative model, club officers are afforded minimal discretion over operational procedures, with institutions providing financial and infrastructural support through recreational sport club programs. Such support can constrain club leaders, requiring them to obtain approval for their travel schedules; club practices, competitions, and socials; and financial transactions. It may also necessitate appointing a faculty or staff advisor for additional oversight and entail creating and maintaining regulatory documents – such as a club constitution and by-laws - that enforce club compliance with program-level requirements.

In contrast, a liberal model gives club officers greater autonomy to determine club operations. Accordingly, clubs are largely self-financed, shouldering operations and equipment costs. Institutional support is minimal, compelling club members to independently secure resources like facilities, equipment, medical supervision, or insurance. While these models offer a useful framework for understanding sport club oversight, most recreational sport club programs likely implement practices that blend elements from either extreme. This governance spectrum reflects the broader context of the university environment, where bureaucratic structures and resource scarcity present additional layers of complexity and constraint for club operations.

### **University**

Bureaucracy is an intrinsic part of American higher education administration, shaping the external environment where recreational programs and sport clubs operate (Birnbaum, 1988; Manning, 2017; Springer, 2021). Bureaucratic systems are



inherently formal and thus prompt homogeneity of their internal components, those being recreational sport club programs and sport clubs. However, individual sport clubs are typically less formal (Czekanski & Lower, 2019), which may lead to resistance from clubs when navigating university-imposed bureaucratic processes and inter-organizational conflict between clubs and recreational sport club programs. Further, research has demonstrated differential goals across universities, recreational sport club programs, and individual sport clubs, which can contribute to interorganizational conflict. For example, universities depend on sport clubs to promote the university, recruit new students, and provide extracurricular opportunities for students (Czekanski et al., 2023), however sport clubs focus on improving operations, winning contests, and building their social network (Czekanski et al., 2019). The prevailing challenge of resource scarcity in higher education further compounds these issues. It places recreational sport club programs under increased pressure to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness to justify and enhance resource allocation. Consequently, club programs are tasked with evaluating the performance of individual clubs, utilizing various metrics to make informed decisions about resource distribution and program support (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2023). These circumstances reinforce the intricate ecosystem that exists between universities, sport club programs, and CSCs. The subsequent methods section provides insight into the strategies we employed to assess institutional barriers impeding clubs' operational effectiveness and thus affecting their ability to grow and develop within the university ecosystem.

## Methods

### Research Design

We approached the study from a social constructivist epistemology (Kim, 2010), using qualitative inquiry to explore the institutional barriers impeding CSC operations. The study was built from the perspective that perceived institutional barriers are socially constructed through an individual's interactions and experiences within the institution (Kim, 2010). Accordingly, we sought to interpret the social world of CSCs through the lens of key actors engaged in this setting. Within the context of CSCs, university recreational sport administrators and students serving as officers on the club executive board must navigate the institutional environment to operate sport clubs. Therefore, we explored the interactions, experiences, and perspectives of CSC administrators and officers to understand the influence of the recreational sport club program (meso-system) and university (macro-system) on sport club operations (micro-system).

### Participants

To capture a diverse sample, we selected three CSC programs across the U.S. for investigation and obtained administrative and institutional review board approval for the study. The CSC programs were housed within a large, public university in the Midwest ('University A'), a mid-size, public university in the East ('University B'), and a large, private university in the South ('University C'). Employing

purposive sampling, we recruited information-rich cases relevant to our research questions (Patton, 2002). Moreover, all student officers – responsible for managing individual sport clubs—and university administrators—responsible for overseeing the sport club program—at each of the three institutions were invited to participate in the study. A \$10 gift card was provided to student participants to incentivize their participation.

Across the three universities, 68 student sport club officers, representing 29 individual sport clubs and fulfilling various leadership roles like president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer participated in the study. The officers represented clubs that ranged in size (15-100 members), gender (women's, men's, co-ed), and competitive classification (competitive, non-competitive). Additionally, four recreational sport administrators, representing department director and CSC program director/coordinator roles, participated in the study. Demographic information is provided in Table 1.

## Data Collection

We developed a semi-structured focus group protocol and interview guide to explore institutional barriers within the CSC context (Kallio et al., 2016). Before developing the tools, we evaluated the appropriateness of our methodological approach to address our study's research question. Broadly, using semi-structured questions to solicit participants' interactions, experiences, and perspectives pertaining to CSCs was in line with our social constructivist research design (Creswell, 2013). We strategically employed focus groups for the student officer population given their confined roles, the cooperative nature of club executive boards, and the opportunity for officers to 'piggyback' off each other's ideas during the focus group conversation (Creswell, 2013; Leung & Savithiri, 2009). Comparatively, we elected to conduct interviews with the university administrators as this method is considered suitable for gathering in-depth information about meaningful and relevant issues to participants (Cridland et al., 2015).

We critically appraised the literature examining CSCs' bioecological environment to add to our theoretical and empirical knowledge, which informed the purpose of our study and associated research question (Kallio et al., 2016). The central topics guiding the formulation of the semi-structured questions consisted of university/program involvement in club operations, university/program communication with clubs, and university/program barriers to club operations. We developed main theme and pre-determined follow-up questions that were participant-oriented, open-ended, single-faceted, not leading, and clearly worded to solicit in-depth, unique, and vivid responses. Example main theme questions included: university/program involvement - 'How does the university provide resources and support to sport club teams?'; university/program communication - 'Describe your [recreational sport administrator] communication with sport club officers.'; and university/program barriers - 'What do you perceive as major hindrances or obstacles that keep sport clubs from operating at full capacity (e.g., university rules, regulations, or restrictions)?'. Note that we modified the main theme and pre-determined follow-up questions for

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of Sample*

Participants		Competitive Classification			Gender Classification		
Student Officers	University Administrators	Competitive Clubs	Non-Competitive Clubs	Co-Ed Clubs	Women's Clubs	Men's Clubs	
University A	38	2	11	2	8	3	2
University B	11	1	7	1	3	3	2
University C	19	1	6	2	4	1	3
Sports Represented Across Sample							
Baseball (2)	Equestrian (3)	Ice Hockey (1)	Quidditch (1)	Soccer (1)	Water Polo (1)		
Basketball (2)	Field Hockey (1)	Jude (1)	Rock Climbing (1)	Tennis (1)			
Bowling (1)	Fishing (1)	Lacrosse (1)	Rugby (2)	Triathlon (1)			
Crew (1)	Gymnastics (2)	Outdoor Adventure (1)	Running (1)	Ultimate Frisbee (3)			
Student Officer Roles Represented Across Sample							
President (27)	Secretary (7)	Fundraising (2)	Coach (2)	Discipline (1)			
Vice President (16)	Treasurer (7)	Social Media (2)	Safety (2)	Recruitment (1)			

the focus group protocol and interview guide to account for the unique population engaged. The content and construction of the tools were reviewed by eight experts in qualitative methodology and collegiate recreation, with slight revisions made to the order and framing of questions based on feedback received. The semi-structured nature of the tools also allowed us to ask spontaneous probing questions to encourage participants to clarify and expound upon their responses (Shenton, 2004).

Upon receiving written informed consent, we facilitated 29 focus groups, lasting approximately 60 minutes, with 68 student officers at their respective university campuses. Each focus group consisted of approximately three student officers representing one sport club. We also conducted individual in-person interviews with four university recreational sport administrators. The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed to enhance data credibility. The typed transcriptions were sent to corresponding participants for member checking, with participants instructed to review, clarify, correct, and/or expound on their responses (Shenton, 2004). In addition to conducting focus groups and interviews, we collected publicly accessible documents about CSCs on the universities' websites, such as student organization handbooks, sport club manuals, and student codes of conduct. These public documents provided contextual information to validate and illuminate participants' assertions and enhance the study's credibility (Shenton, 2004). We collected 29 documents across the three universities, outlining institutional rules, policies, and procedures impacting CSC operations.

## **Data Analysis**

We conducted thematic analysis, adhering to Braun et al.'s (2019) six-phase process, to answer our research question. Before coding the data, the first author and peer debriefer reviewed the transcripts and documents to get a sense of the data and note initial ideas pertaining to the research question. Next, the first author inductively coded the data at the semantic (i.e., descriptive codes) and latent (i.e., interpretive codes) levels to identify and label relevant text within the data. The preliminary codes were compared across data sources and modified throughout the coding process to better fit the data corpus. Each code was associated with a descriptive label, inclusion and exclusion criterion, example data excerpts, and proposed relationships to other codes. After coding, the first author looked for areas of similarity and overlap in the codes to identify meaningful patterns in the data, subsequently informing the overarching themes and subthemes. These (sub)themes were then reviewed concerning the associated data extracted and the dataset to ensure they meaningfully captured the data and addressed the study research questions. The final themes and subthemes were defined, with exemplar quotes identified. The first author engaged a peer debriefer throughout the analytic process, meeting regularly to discuss semantic and latent codes, relationships between codes, and constructed themes and subthemes until mutual agreement was met (Shenton, 2004).

### ***Trustworthiness***

The trustworthiness of the data was enhanced through strategies addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We accomplished credibility by collecting multiple data sources from diverse populations through student officer focus groups, university administrator interviews, and public documents to corroborate our findings; reflecting throughout the data collection and analysis process; and conducting member checks (Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010). To achieve transferability and dependability, we provide a rich description of the CSC programs and participants studied, data collection tools and procedures, and analytic techniques within this methods section. Further, we used peer debriefing to establish confirmability throughout the data analysis process.

## **Results**

We conducted thematic analysis across the data sources to explore perceived institutional barriers impeding CSC operational effectiveness. Three overarching themes emerged: 1) institutional rules, policies, and procedures perceived as both effective and ineffective for club operations; 2) university constraints perceived as barriers to club operations; 3) and club constraints perceived as barriers to club operations. The analysis illuminated the layers of bureaucratic red tape sport club officers must navigate, highlighting university and club constraints that exacerbate the impact of institutional barriers on CSCs.

### **Institutional Rules, Policies, Procedures**

When asked to describe sport club operations, club officers consistently juxtaposed internal operations within the context of institutional rules, policies, and procedures. The Basketball club from University B explained it best, “It’s trying to operate how you want but still meeting and following ... the guidelines that you have to follow.” Sport club officers articulated university regulations on club eligibility, executive boards, resource allocations, financial activities, risk, travel, and marketing (see Table 2), with resource management the most heavily discussed topic and risk management the least. When describing the institutional rules, policies, and procedures regulating sport club operations, some sport club officers explained the regulations as an accepted part of club operations. For example, a Rugby club officer from University C articulated, “We have to fill out paperwork with [University C] to reapply to have our field, to have our games set up, to make sure that we’re compliant with all of [University C]’s rules ...” This suggests university bureaucracy is not a perceived barrier to all clubs, but rather a necessary mechanism to operate effectively. However, many clubs spoke in frustration when describing university regulations, suggesting the institutional rules, policies, and procedures act as a hindrance to club operations and should be considered a university constraint. For example, an Equestrian Western officer from University A explained:

Everything has to be check requested online with an invoice ... it takes three to four weeks for that request to go through and be approved, and then it could take another three to four weeks for the check to be ready... and then by the time we pick up the check we might have already passed the event that we had to use that check for.

These frustrations were recognized by all recreational sport administrators, with sentiments such as: “in the beginning it’s probably very frustrating because it might seem like we’re a barrier” (University A); “sometimes there’s what feel as unnecessary hoops, or tape to jump through, but that’s just part of doing business” (University B); and “there are a lot of policies or procedures they have to follow that they’re not used to, having to ... cross the t’s and dot the i’s” (University C).

**Table 2**

*Institutional Rules, Policies, Procedures*

<b>Themes Identified</b>	<b>Clubs</b>	<b>Admin</b>	<b>Docs</b>
<b>University Regulation of Club Eligibility</b>			
Club coaches must be approved by the university	A		B, C
Clubs require faculty / staff advisor		C	A, B, C
Clubs required to maintain updated roster	B		A, B, C
Clubs require minimum club membership	B, C	A	A, B, C
Club membership restricted to eligible students	B, C		A, B, C
Clubs required to compete to remain active			C
Clubs subject to university adjudication process for infractions	B	B	A, B, C
<b>University Regulation of Club Executive Boards</b>			
Club officers required to fulfill standardized roles	A	A	A, B, C
Club officers required to attend university trainings / meetings	B	B, C	A, B, C
Club officers required to establish club as student organization	B, C	A	A, B, C
Club officers required to maintain a formal constitution	A		A, B, C
<b>University Regulation of Club Resource Allocations</b>			
University allocations determined by compliance / merit point system	C	C	B, C
Club budget request evaluated by sport club council		A	B

Club facility / equipment request evaluated by department	A, C	A, B, C	A, B, C
Club on-campus special events require university approval	C	A	A, B, C
New clubs must demonstrate financial viability during probationary year			B, C
Clubs required to match % of club budget through fundraising			B

#### **University Regulation of Club Financial Activities**

Clubs not granted access to financial account	B	A, B, C	A, B, C
Clubs required to uphold university cash handling procedures	A		A, B, C
Clubs required to submit receipts to get reimbursed	A	B, C	A, B, C
Clubs required to submit invoice for funding advance request	A	A, C	A, B, C
Clubs receive pre-paid credit card for club expenses	C	B, C	B
Clubs restricted to university approved fundraising activities	A	A, B	A, B, C
Clubs restricted to university approved vendors / sponsors / venues	C	A, B, C	A, B, C
Clubs use of finances restricted to university approved purchases	A	A, B, C	A, B, C

#### **University Regulation of Club Risk**

Clubs required to complete safety certifications (e.g., First Aid)			A, B, C
Clubs required to submit liability forms (e.g., waiver, insurance)		A, C	A, B, C
High-risk clubs required to complete concussion baseline testing		B	B
Clubs required to submit accident report form for injuries		C	A, B, C
Clubs required to uphold university's minors policy			A
Clubs required to uphold university code of conduct (e.g., hazing, discrimination)		C	A, B, C
Club contractual agreements require university approval			B, C



**University Regulation of Club Travel**

Club permitted vehicles restricted by driving distance	C		C
Clubs driving university vehicles restricted to qualified members		B	B, C
Clubs required to submit travel authorization forms prior to travel	A, B	A, B, C	A, B, C
Clubs required to submit post-trip / post-game report		C	A, B

**University Regulation of Club Marketing**

Club use of university trademarks regulated	A, B, C	A, C	A, B, C
Club promotional activities on-campus regulated by university			A, B, C

Sport club officers' identification of institutional rules, policies, and procedures regulating club operations was accurate, as all identified regulations were confirmed by either recreational sport administrators or university documents. Further, most regulations outlined in university documents were also mentioned by recreational sport administrators, illustrating their critical role in sport club governance. The regulations outlined in Table 2 illustrate the complexity of the university system, with some regulations constraining clubs – such as restrictions around use of university resources, some regulations adding administrative responsibilities – such as submitting required documentation, and a few regulations supporting club operations – such as the provision of a pre-paid credit card. All institutional rules, policies, and procedures identified by officers and administrators were explained in detail in publicly available university documents. For example, while the Hunter Jumpers club from University A broadly exclaimed, “You can only spend your allocation money towards what they tell you,” the university's Purchase Payment Request form and Student Organization Handbook provided specific instructions for how to get approval and guidelines for permissible vs. prohibited purchases. As a whole, university student organization handbooks - ranging from 43-88 pages in length – were the primary source of information for institutional rules, policies, and procedures. Given these regulations are largely created by the division of student affairs that oversees all student clubs, recreational sport administrators may have limited authority to reduce the university bureaucracy governing sport clubs.

The officers' evaluation of university regulations was often in contrast to administrators' evaluation due to incongruent values and unrealistic expectations, a lack of awareness of how regulations have improved over time, and a lack of understanding regarding the reasons for specific rules, policies, and procedures. For example, concussion baseline testing was viewed as a hindrance and inconvenient task by club officers at University B, yet articulated as a benefit by the administrators who described the practice as a progressive trend in the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation). Recreational sport

administrators were able to articulate a clear purpose or reason for many of the institutional rules, policies, and procedures discussed, highlighting justifications about university liability, competition for university resources, club sustainability, student protection, etc. An administrator from University A shared, “The more they work with us, they understand there is a reason why we’re doing things the way we are doing them.” The administrators alluded that increased club officer awareness and understanding of institutional rules, policies, and processes might mitigate perceived barriers.

### University Constraints

The potential burden of institutional rules, policies, and procedures was amplified by university constraints identified by sport club officers and administrators alike, with no indication of university constraints present in the documents analyzed (see Table 3). University constraints included: limited university resources, organizational problems, and interorganizational conflict. The greatest university constraint contributing to the bureaucratic red tape was the competition for scarce resources. Sport club officers and administrators identified money, facility space, equipment, transportation, and administrative support as the major resource constraints, with access to funding and facilities the greatest issue. For example, an administrator at University A explained, “All these clubs [are] expensive to run and manage... We have some minor funding that they are eligible for, but most of the funding for the operations comes out of their own pocket.” At University B, the administrator lamented, “We’re losing space every day it seems ... we started this year with two fields and one shared field with athletics. And now we’re down to one field.” They went on to explain the addition of a new varsity sport (sand volleyball) resulted in the loss of a club (rugby) field, highlighting the battle over university space.

Student officers from a few clubs across the three universities – including Quiditch, Outdoor Adventure, Baseball, and Rugby - had unrealistic expectations of the resources they were entitled to. For example, the Rugby club at University C, who stated, “We’re playing at a D1A level but ... we’re only recognized ... at a club capacity... We only get the club funding for the travel. We don’t get any equipment support; we don’t get any extra fundraising.” However, the majority of sport club officers and administrators lamented over the difficulty of operating with scarce resources for a club-level program, as the recreational sport administrators from University B shared, “this gets me a little fired up because ... this is my passion, this is my career, and I see us struggling.” The competition for resources necessitated resource allocation procedures, adding to the complexity of university regulations. To illustrate this, the administrators from University B explained:

[University] vans and buses, those are accessible to anybody on campus so those can get swiped up pretty quickly cause ... there’s only a few buses, so getting that stuff [travel authorization forms] in, in ample time allows me to accommodate them as best I can and get them the things they need when they travel.

**Table 3***University Constraints*

<b>Themes Identified</b>	<b>Clubs</b>	<b>Admin</b>	<b>Docs</b>
<b>Scarce Resources</b>			
Money	A, C	A, B, C	
Facility space	A, B, C	A, B, C	
Equipment	B, C	A	
Transportation	A	A	
Administrative support	C	A, B	
<b>Organizational Problems</b>			
Administrators' lack of knowledge	A		
Administrators' poor communication & coordination	A, C	A, B	
Administrators' disorganization & mistakes	A, B, C	A, B	
<b>Interorganizational Conflict</b>			
Poor relationships	A, B		
<b>Areas for Improvement</b>			
Enhanced organization & communication		A, B	
Increased leadership training		A	
Create sport club manual		A, B	
Promote / advocate for sport clubs		A	
Improve relationships with clubs		A, C	

There was only one university constraint that was described as intentional based on the sport club model – administrative support. An administrator at University A shared:

This [sport club] program is so unique compared to anything else we do because we want the leaders to do all the work... We can program tournaments and leagues and practices, we're not learning anything by doing that. But by them doing that ... they're learning. I think that's really the critical piece. It's not how many games they win and lose. It's how well they're learning.

Organizational problems and interorganizational conflict were additional university constraints associated with institutional rules, policies, and procedures. Sport club officers conveyed frustrations concerning the sport club administrators' knowledge of institutional rules, policies, and procedures, communication and coordination, and their ability to stay organized to avoid making mistakes that impede club

operations. For example, a Hunter Jumpers club officer from University A shared, “Sometimes when it comes down to it, the Rec isn’t the most helpful... When we have our stuff together, we’re expecting them ... to have their stuff together and it’s not always that way.” Poor communication was the most frequently discussed university constraint, recognized by both officers and administrators. The Judo club from University A exemplified this constraint when sharing, “It took them a month to get back to me about anything.” The administrator at University B provided helpful insight explaining delayed communication:

We rely on a lot of other departments on campus ... we work with transportation, we work with our accounts payable, etc... I have to rely on other people throughout the university to get things in line, so that your buses are ready, your travel card is amply loaded, because unfortunately I don’t have the capability, that’s just not what I’m allowed to do. There’s other people on campus that that’s their job.

Further, a couple clubs alluded to poor relations between the university and sport clubs, claiming: “the university for some reason doesn’t like us very much” (Baseball, University B); and “he was actually trying to shut us down” (Water Polo, University A). However, this was only perceived by club officers, not administrators.

While the recreational sport administrators primarily discussed how particular institutional rules, policies, and procedures—created at the university-level—acted as a barrier for their program to operate successfully, they also recognized opportunities for improvement within their program. Interestingly, the university with the most frequently cited constraints also reported the most strategies for improvement, demonstrating transparency and accountability. The recreational sport administrator shared, “We’ve been in a lot of transition ... we have our list of things that we know we need to do better.” The predominant areas of improvement discussed included enhancing organization and communication of program expectations, processes, and changes; increasing student leadership training; creating a sport club officer how-to manual; promoting and advocating for sport clubs; and improving relationships with sport clubs. For example, an administrator from University A shared:

I think we need to do a better job in the very beginning of the semester ... giving a review as to what’s going on, what our expectations are, and explaining the processes... But then I see the flip side of even when we do that it sometimes doesn’t sink in. So, we’re battling the knowledge.

## Club Constraints

Sport club constraints were also found to amplify the impact of institutional rules, policies, and processes on sport club operations (see Table 4). Though sport club constraints were only identified by recreational sport administrators, suggesting a lack of awareness among club officers for how their club impedes its own operational effectiveness. Administrators identified poor communication, poor planning and documentation, poor decisions, and centralized leadership with no succession plan as the major sport club constraints. While sport club operations depend on the voluntary work of sport club officers, the administrators recognized clubs prioritized

sports participation over club operations. An administrator from University A noted, “I think what I’ve noticed, the clubs love to practice, they love the competition, but it’s the communication and the behind-the-scenes stuff that isn’t there,” and shared the example, “sending an email when you want to do something tomorrow [is] not the best way to communicate.”

**Table 4**

*Club Constraints*

Themes Identified	Clubs	Admin	Docs
Poor communication		A, B	
Poor planning and documentation		A, B, C	
Poor decisions		A, B	
Centralized leadership with no succession plan		A, B, C	

With club operations treated as secondary, many clubs struggled with planning and submitting appropriate documentation on time, with an administrator from University C explaining, “lack of planning on their part doesn’t constitute an emergency on my part ... A lot of them don’t think that far ahead.” An administrator from University A shared an example of poor documentation, “If they decide to go down a cash payment option. Where, ‘hey, let’s gather the team, everybody got a couple bucks, let’s pay the official.’ And that official then says I never got paid, how do you prove it?” and then explained why clubs fail to document explaining, “I think it’s being done because of a few factors. One, it’s easier, two it requires time for us to get a check cut ... they are more worried about the game, sometimes than that administrative side of things.” However, recreational sport administrators consistently communicated sympathy for new sport club officers learning the institutional rules, policies, and procedures, as an administrator from University A shared, “Sometimes it’s their first time ever doing it ... So that’s where it’s not a frustrating thing to me, it’s they don’t know.” Outside of poor communication, planning, and documentation on institutional rules, policies, and procedures, administrators reported a few clubs make obvious poor decisions, impacting their experience of university regulations. An administrator at University C gave the example, “[Lacrosse team] had drinking incidences, they had hazing incidences, ... they spent about 5000 dollars on non-approved uniforms that they abruptly had to throw away...”

While poor communication, planning, documentation, and decisions appeared to be distinct incidences impacting club operations, a sport club’s organizational structure was found to holistically impact a club’s ability to adhere to institutional rules, policies, and procedures. Sport clubs adopting a centralized leadership structure were found least effective. An administrator from University B explained:

I think some operate [where] just the president does everything... The people that try and keep it all to themselves really struggle. Because it’s a lot to manage on top of probably having a job and taking ya know 15 credits.

The issue of over-extended students was reported across recreational sport administrators, with an administrator from University A sharing:

I get this sense that many of our clubs aren't taking that time [for club operations] because students get busier and busier ... our club leader is not just the soccer club president, they're also the secretary for their sorority.

The issue of centralized leadership was exacerbated when clubs lacked a succession plan to identify and recruit future leaders. For example, an administrator from University A described, "A lot of times we just have people like, 'hey I'm graduating, do you want to be the president?' 'Okay, no problem.' And so it just becomes a hand off kind of thing. And that's not typically very successful." The sport clubs suggested to be most successful divided responsibilities across several club officers, maintained communication with the administrators, demonstrated effective time management, and sought to understand and adhere to institutional rules, policies, and procedures.

## Discussion

The study's main purpose was to uncover any institutional barriers that impede the operational effectiveness of CSCs. Three main themes surfaced: institutional rules, policies, and procedures; university constraints; and sport club constraints. The subthemes that emerged from the data align with 10 of the organizational constraints outlined in the literature (Pindek & Spector, 2016; Spector & Jex, 1998), minus interruptions by other people. The most prominent organizational constraints reported were organizational rules and procedures and poor/scarcely resources. Further, a new organizational constraint was identified – mistakes and/or poor decisions. The following discussion is organized by the three main themes from our study.

### Institutional Rules, Policies, and Procedures

Applying Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2007) bioecological model, the bureaucratic structure of the university (context-macrosystem) manifested through institutional rules, policies, and procedures (process) and enforced by the recreational sport club program (context-mesosystem), was a perceived hindrance to sport club operations (context-microsystem) by club officers, yet a perceived benefit by recreational sport administrators. This finding is consistent with the literature (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Tudge et al., 2016). This incongruence may reflect the unique characteristics (person) of sport clubs at the program- and club-levels. Moreover, sport club programs have been characterized by a complex and formal organizational structure, with standardized processes that mirror the bureaucratic structure at the university level (Springer et al., 2024). Comparatively, individual sport clubs have been characterized by a simple organizational structure, with a low degree of formality to adapt within a changing club environment due to high officer turnover (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). Perhaps due to this simple structure, club officers expressed difficulty navigating the extraordinary number of institutional rules, policies, and procedures. Despite the compliance burden university bureaucracy can place on sport clubs, recreational sport administrators argued the rules, policies, and

procedures are necessary to properly manage clubs and mitigate university liability. This begs the question, are these institutional rules, policies, and procedures helpful or hurtful?

Scholars have coined ineffective organizational rules – such as those with no legitimate purpose that create a compliance burden (Blom et al., 2021) - as ‘red tape’ and effective organizational rules – including “written requirements, with valid means-ends relationships, which employ optimal control, are consistently applied, and have purposes understood by stakeholders” (DeHart-Davis, 2008, p. 362) - as ‘green tape’. Previous research has noted that while some institutional rules may help provide infrastructure, many are restrictive such as allowable purchases and regulation of the university trademark (Czekanski et al., 2023; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021), highlighting the tension between how institutional rules, policies, and procedures act as facilitators and barriers to club operations. It is common for stringent policies to lead to organizational disaster through overcontrol, over-compliance, misplaced precision, and red tape (Bozeman & Anderson, 2016), which can impede sport clubs from reaching their goals (Rundio & Buning, 2022). Further, Hatke et al. (2020) contend perceived bureaucratic red tape often leads to negative emotions among organizational members like confusion, frustration, and anger, which can adversely affect members’ perceived organizational culture, engagement, motivation, satisfaction, performance, and persistence (Blom et al., 2021). Blom et al. (2021) noted having different opinions about red and green tape within an organization is normal. However, clashing opinions may cause friction between the parties involved if they do not proceed with caution. Friction between recreational sport administrators and club officers may result in ineffective communication and cooperation, negatively affecting sport club operations and effectiveness. On the flip side, Skyberg (2022) argues friction between parties has the potential to lead to creativity and innovation if intentionally addressed.

## University Constraints

University constraints revolved around limited resources, organizational problems, and interorganizational conflict. Resource scarcity is an increasing concern due to the recent global pandemic, which has especially impacted the financial situation of higher education institutions (Kara, 2021). This further affects campus programs, facilities, and services – showing the influence of the macro-environment on the meso- and micro-systems within. When considering college sport programs, the university resources dedicated to varsity sports like funding, facilities/equipment, administrative support, and student services far exceed the resources available for sport clubs (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). This may be due to the unique characteristics of sport clubs, which are classified as student organizations and thus expected to secure their own resources to support club operations through fundraising, facility reservations, use of member equipment, etc. (Lower & Czekanski, 2019; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). Because resources are scarce at the program level, competition is created between clubs to obtain such resources. This interorganizational competition for resources can negatively impact club re-



lationships and create a cutthroat mentality contributing to a toxic culture. To et al. (2020) indicated competition has more negative effects when there is a presence of uncertainty surrounding rules. As such, the complexity of navigating the university bureaucracy, such as financial allocation rules and procedures, may exacerbate the issue of competition due to scarce resources.

The organizational problems and interorganizational conflict noted by club officers have been reported in previous research examining the social exchange relationship between universities and sport clubs. Moreover, Lower-Hoppe et al. (2021) and Czekanski et al. (2023) reported clubs criticizing program staff's poor communication, disorganization, and inconsistent enforcement of institutional rules, policies, and procedures, which adversely affected clubs' ability to operate and achieve their goals. Perhaps the lack of human resources has spread the recreation department too thin, with sport club programs of one to three full-time professional staff responsible for overseeing upwards of 50+ sport clubs (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2023).

### **Sport Club Constraints**

The recreational sport administrators identified poor communication, poor strategic planning and documentation, and centralized leadership as the major sport club constraints. Clubs' low degree of formality likely contributes to their poor communication, planning, and documentation. Research has shown that club officers typically only meet on an 'as-needed' basis (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021), primarily communicate through informal group messages (Czekanski & Lower, 2019), and share documentation through flash drives or shared drives that can be lost in leader transition (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Meeting sporadically and communicating through informal mediums restricts club documentation, planning, and information sharing between club officers, members, and university administrators. More broadly, without a formal organizational structure and consistent communication processes, clubs may struggle to master and comply with the complex institutional rules, policies, and procedures and pass their institutional knowledge on to incoming club officers.

The centralized sport club leadership confirms prior research, which suggests clubs control decision-making at the club apex (executive board) to efficiently navigate the constantly changing university system (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). However, this places significant responsibility on the few club members serving in leadership roles, which can be exhausting and lead to burnout (Bryant & Clement, 2015; Hattke et al., 2020). Further, sport club officers have reported greater interest in sport and social activities than their administrative club responsibilities which may contribute to the organizational problems noted by the recreational sport administrators (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). While students volunteer to serve on the club executive board, they are still club members and (perhaps more importantly) college students and, therefore, have divided attention and limited time. This collectively supports the idea that responsibilities should be further divided to limit exhaustion and increase the effectiveness of club members in leadership roles. In all, institutional rules, policies, and procedures were the most prominent barriers to sport clubs operating effectively. Therefore, it is critical to mitigate the central barrier to hopefully ease the other related barriers.

## Implications

The study findings have program- and club-level implications for mitigating institutional barriers that impede CSCs from operating effectively.

### *Program-level*

To increase green tape and decrease red tape at the program level, recreational sport administrators should evaluate institutional rules, policies, and procedures—particularly those at the department- or program-level where they have a degree of control—to assess the purpose of the rule/policy/procedure and the burden it places on clubs (Blom et al., 2021; DeHart-Davis, 2008). For example, recreational sport departments manage their budget allocation and facility reservation systems which could be modified to accommodate diverse club needs. This insight will help programs discern what rules, policies, and/or procedures can be eliminated or revised to decrease the compliance burden on clubs and which must be maintained to mitigate university liability and operate effectively as a program. Programs are encouraged to provide sport club officers training and resources, such as a sport club manual, to increase their knowledge and understanding of institutional rules, policies, and procedures so they can navigate the university bureaucracy effectively and share this institutional knowledge with future club leaders (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021).

To mitigate the possible friction between recreational sport administrators and sport club officers, these stakeholder groups should engage in value co-creation. Moreover, recreational sport administrators can work with club officers in the “product/service design process,” whereby the stakeholder groups interact and share knowledge of current/future needs and control to enable joint action that advances mutually beneficial goals (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 292). This can be accomplished through the use of a sport club council. The council can be comprised of club officers elected by administrators or their club peers to serve as a liaison between the department and clubs, advocate for club needs, enhance information, participate in program-level decision making, and translate the purpose of institutional rules, policies, and procedures to their club members (Czekanski & Lower, 2019; Springer et al., 2024). Intentionally seeking out sport club engagement in program administration may contribute to a more positive and effective interorganizational relationship and collaboration between the parties.

To navigate scarce resources, programs should educate clubs on identifying and securing the resources necessary to operate, such as funding, facility space, and equipment. This training may include instruction on university rules and processes for acquiring university funding, making purchases, reserving university facility space, and leasing university equipment, which may alleviate the competition for resources and promote a positive organizational culture (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020). Programs can also connect clubs with potential fundraising opportunities and donors (Lower & Czekanski, 2019) – much like we are seeing in collegiate athletics with departments connecting student-athletes with name, image, and likeness (NIL) endorsement opportunities (NCAA, 2022). Further, programs can allow individuals to

donate directly to individual sport clubs, and market this opportunity to club parents, fans, and alumni.

### ***Club-level***

To manage the expansive operations of a sport club, the leadership responsibilities should be divided across a sizeable executive board of 5-10 officers (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Dividing responsibilities will help club officers share the workload, manage their time, hone their skills, and avoid burnout (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2023). Weese (1994) noted individuals should focus on one duty at a time to complete tasks efficiently and effectively. Scholars and practitioners recommend club executive boards include, at minimum, a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary and consider additional roles such as social media/marketing chair, fundraising chair, safety officer, and team captain (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Club members can learn valuable skills from these leadership roles, including social, vocational, and practical competence (Flosdorf et al., 2016). Therefore, increasing opportunities for club members to serve in leadership roles can benefit club operations and individual development.

While expanding the club executive board may increase the capacity of club officers to manage club operations, it can also make communication more challenging. To enhance communication across the board, club officers should engage in regular formal meetings to share information, discuss club operations, ensure compliance with institutional rules, policies, and procedures, and advance strategic planning and initiatives (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). It is also critical to maintain good communication with club members; therefore, facilitating periodic club meetings to keep members informed, gather their input, and vote on club decisions will enhance the social exchange relationship between the board and club members and the effectiveness of the club as a whole (Czekanski et al., 2023). Within these meetings, the club secretary should be responsible for recording minutes to document club decisions (Lower & Czekanski, 2019), which can help officers share critical information with the recreational sport administrators overseeing the program and pass club knowledge on to future leaders in the club. Additionally, these meeting also provide an opportunity for the club to review their club constitution for any necessary revisions. Lastly, it is the club's responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the program to enhance their operations, such as participating in leadership trainings, serving on the sport club council, and reviewing program materials.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

While this study increases our understanding of the institutional barriers impeding CSCs' operational effectiveness, it is not without limitations. First and foremost, qualitative research brings limitations related to data trustworthiness (Guba, 1981). Using focus groups and interview methodology raises the issue that participants might offer socially acceptable responses rather than accurately answering the posed questions. We sought to mitigate this threat to internal validity by explaining confidentiality to encourage honest responses during the recruitment and data collection

process. Additionally, despite including multiple universities in the study, the qualitative nature of the research means “it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations” (Shenton, 2004, p. 69). Therefore, the findings cannot be transferred to other sport club programs in America or worldwide. Future scholars thus need to apply and test our study’s findings within their own population to determine what institutional barriers exist.

We encourage future research to explore institutional barriers in a wider range of university (e.g., Canadian institutions, small liberal arts colleges) and program (e.g., competitive sport programs that oversee both intramural and club sports) environments to distinguish dominant barriers from those institution-specific. Furthermore, researchers may consider including additional key actors who influence and are impacted by institutional rules, policies, and procedures, such as administrators in the division of student affairs, sport club graduate assistants, and club members. A greater understanding of the interplay between CSCs and their university can inform policy development, club management, and program-club cooperation to support clubs’ operational effectiveness.

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