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Understanding the Experiences of Student-Athletes with Disabilities: A Mixed Methods Study

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Experiences are the impressions developed through gaining, using, fostering, and sometimes disposing of a service or product. Recent years have shown an ongoing emphasis placed on experiences and their impacts; one of particular interest for this study are the experiences of para-collegiate student-athletes. Using the Experience Type Framework (ETF) and the Experience Impact Scale (EIS), the purpose of this study was to understand the experience of involvement in intercollegiate sports among student-athletes with disabilities. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, using quantitative and qualitative data to understand the student-athlete with disabilities experience. Phase I (n = 30) used the EIS to measure the impact of para-collegiate sports experiences, while Phase II used semi-structured interviews (n = 11) to identify characteristics of para-collegiate sports experiences. Findings from Phase I indicated para-collegiate sports presented as highly impactful (23% meaningful and 77% transformative), and in Phase II, three overall themes emerged, one for each experience type: (1) importance of the disability community and development of lifelong friendships (memorable), (2) holistic growth on and off the court (meaningful), and (3) sense of purpose and self (transformative).

Keywords: adaptive sports, designed experiences, extraordinary experiences, para-collegiate sports, student-athletes

The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) provides 24 men's and women's sports to about 500,000 student-athletes across approximately 1,100 member institutions (NCAA, n.d.; Siegfried et al., 2021). There is a well-developed body of literature that has explored the impact of intercollegiate sports on traditional student-athletes (Briggs et al., 2021; Gayles, 2009; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Martin et al., 2017; Paule & Gilson, 2010; Saxe et al., 2017; Warner & Dixon, 2013, 2015). In general, findings indicate intercollegiate sport involvement to be highly impactful, both positively and negatively. For student-athletes with a disability, there are noticeably fewer intercollegiate sport opportunities. McCarty et al. (2023) notes that as of 2020 there were 42 universities providing some type of adaptive sports opportunity at any level (i.e., campus recreation, club sports, or varsity athletics) to students and community members. To be clear, the NCAA does not sanction any adaptive athletics programs, even though there are a few institutions that have programs embedded within their traditional athletic departments. Recent research has provided a rich description of the variety of structures of para-collegiate athletics programs (Townsend et al., 2025).

Despite this recent work providing such detail on program structures, little to no literature directly explores the impact of para-collegiate sports experiences on student-athletes with disabilities. A small series of studies have indicated student-athletes with disabilities are under-supported and underrepresented in the intercollegiate athletics scene (McCarty et al., 2023; McGinniss, 2020; Siegfried et al., 2021; Watson, 2020). Given the knowledge previously reported about the impact of intercollegiate sports on traditional student-athletes, it is rather likely these experiences are at least as impactful for student-athletes with disabilities as well.

Experiences are the impressions developed through gaining, using, fostering, and sometimes disposing of a service or product (Chang & Horng, 2010). They can be described as intentionally designed activities that foster emotional responses that impact a participant's behaviors, morals, and beliefs (Duerden et al., 2018). Everything a person does can be considered an experience. Some occur subconsciously (e.g., routines) while others occur consciously (Duerden et al., 2018). During the past decade an increasing emphasis has been placed on the study and design of experiences and their impacts (Duerden et al., 2015). Historically, experience research has been conducted using qualitative approaches and has lacked continuity regarding the language used to describe differing experiences across multiple fields of study, including tourism, marketing, and consumer behavior (Duerden et al., 2015). These inconsistencies have hindered researchers' ability to distinguish between experience types and virtually made it impossible to confidently classify their impacts (Chang & Horng, 2010; Duerden et al., 2015). The nature of the previous studies and lack of consistent language have resulted in a gap in literature.

Duerden et al. (2018) developed the Experience Type Framework (ETF), which addressed the inability to distinguish between experience types and subsequently led to the development of the Experience Impact Scale (EIS; Lundberg et al., 2021), the first instrument intended to classify experience type impacts as conceptualized by the ETF. The emergence of the framework and an associated measure has opened

the door for experience researchers to produce a deeper understanding of experience types and their impacts. One such activity worth exploring is involvement in para-collegiate sports. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the experience of involvement in para-collegiate sports among student-athletes with disabilities using the Experience Type Framework.

Literature Review

Organized sport experiences are defined as structured activities in settings that foster training and facilitate competitions hosted by various service providers and organizations (i.e., clubs, medical clinics, and educational institutions) that are either privately or state-funded as an association or club (Albrecht & Strand, 2010; Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2021). Organized sports in the United States are prevalent and have been an important cultural event in modern times. Some describe organized sports participation as a childhood rite, traceable back to the late 1800s (Brady, 2004). The widespread nature and growth of organized sports in the United States is attributed to a number of historical and societal events, such as the establishment of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in 1851, and the passing of Title IX in 1972, which prohibited sex-based discrimination in educational programs receiving federal funding, including participation for women in organized sports (Albrecht & Strand, 2010). Approximately 56.1% of youth and young adults participated in organized sports nationwide in 2024 (Project Play, n.d.).

Sports are frequently recognized as a channel to provide health benefits across the lifespan, such as: improved psychological and physical health, increased social and emotional functioning, ongoing opportunities for personal and social entertainment and relationships, positive self-esteem, and overall greater quality of life (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2018; Eime et al., 2013; Lower et al., 2013; Tamminen & Holt, 2012; Wagnsson et al., 2014). Additionally, Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al. (2021) suggest organized sport and recreation experiences positively impact those who are socially vulnerable.

Individuals considered to be socially vulnerable have an altered or unfair relationship with various societal institutions, such as schools, healthcare, the labor market, and the justice system. This can be due to a series of negative experiences or lack of success in these institutions (Haudenhuyse et al., 2013). Over time, those negative experiences can accumulate and lead to social disconnection and feelings of stigmatization, discrimination, and beliefs of incompetence. Organized sports serve as an institution that provides opportunities for individuals to engage in supportive, meaningful, and positive institutional experiences, while challenging and addressing negative issues from other societal domains (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2021; Haudenhuyse et al., 2013).

The nature of organized sports to combat factors of social vulnerability is particularly important for people with disabilities (PWDs). PWDs are at a high risk of social vulnerability as they often report they do not receive equal access to essential

resources (economic and social), experience far less autonomy and power than their able-bodied peers and are viewed to have almost no social capital (Peek & Stough, 2010). Despite PWDs frequently having negative experiences with institutions across society, many indicate organized sports participation assists in mitigating feelings of stigmatization and discrimination while facilitating positive self-image, identity, and self-perceptions of competence (Lundberg et al., 2011b; Mayer et al., 2014). The terms adaptive sports, adapted sports, disabled sports, and para-sports are often used interchangeably in the literature to describe sports opportunities for PWDs (Hardin & Pate, 2024). For the purpose of this manuscript, we use the term *adaptive sports* to refer specifically to organized sports experiences that have been modified to meet the needs of PWDs and serve as the core context of this study.

Adaptive Sports

The core philosophy of the adaptive sports movement is to maximize independent participation in sport and recreation by implementing the least restrictive modifications necessary (Lundberg et al., 2011a). These modifications may involve adjustments to rules, equipment, or instructional methods, all of which enhance the accessibility of sport and recreation activities to accommodate the needs and abilities of participants. Adaptive sports serve individuals with various disabilities and provide opportunities at multiple levels of competition, including recreational, competitive, and elite, each with distinct objectives and outcomes. These programs are offered in diverse settings, such as hospitals, municipal park and recreation centers, K-12 school systems, and universities (Lundberg et al., 2011b; Mayer et al., 2014).

For more than a hundred years, sports opportunities for individuals with disabilities have existed. In 1888, the first sports club for the deaf was established in Berlin, Germany. By 1911, the United States hosted its first physical disability event, the Cripples Olympiad, in New York (Weiler et al., 2021). In 1924, the inaugural International Silent Games, the first global competition for athletes with disabilities, occurred (Miller & Katz, 2015). In 1932, adaptive sports further expanded with the formation of the British Society of One-Armed Golfers. However, it was not until more than a decade later the global adaptive sports movement, particularly wheelchair sports, gained widespread momentum.

In 1948, Dr. Ludwig Guttman established wheelchair adaptive sports as part of the rehabilitative process for injured veterans. During this time, Dr. Guttman worked in Germany with patients who had acquired spinal cord injuries during World War II and found sports and recreation to be viable interventions for improving the lives of his patients (Slater & Meade, 2004). Dr. Guttman believed sport provided those with spinal cord injuries a sense of hope and worth (Brittain et al., 2013). Additionally, he believed sport had the power to change society's attitudes towards people with spinal cord injuries. In July of 1948, Dr. Guttman held the first organized wheelchair games at Stoke Mandeville Hospital. The games consisted of two teams competing in an archery demonstration. His work led to the first wheelchair Olympic Games, known as the International Stoke Mandeville Games (ISMG) for individuals

with spinal cord injuries in 1960, which later expanded to individuals with physical, cognitive, and intellectual disabilities in 1976 (Brittain et al., 2013). The ISMGs were later named the Paralympic Games in 1985. Now organized and sanctioned by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the Paralympic Games are held in the summer and winter directly following the Olympic Games in the same host city and venues, and provide many of the same elite sports competitions as are found at in Olympic competition in addition to a few that are unique to athletes with certain disabilities, such as goalball for visually impaired athletes and wheelchair rugby for athletes with quadriplegia (*International Paralympic Committee, n.d.*).

PWDs have not always had equal opportunities to participate in sports and recreation programs. The United States has attempted to address these issues through legislative action. Stemming from the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, United States legislation has steadily increased access and opportunity for PWDs. Throughout history, several acts have been enacted and remain active to this day: the Civil Rights Act (Title VI, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d et seq.), the Architectural Barriers Act (PL 93-112; 42 U.S.C. §§ 4151—57), the Rehabilitation Act (29 U.S.C. § 701), Recreation for all Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (PL 94-142; 20 U.S.C. § 1400), the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) (PL 101-336; § 121, et seq.), and the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act (§ 3023), all mandate access and opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Despite this legislation, opportunities for involvement in sports and recreation for PWDs continue to be limited and inequitable. As such, a 2010 study by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) revealed students with disabilities did not have equal opportunities to engage in extracurricular athletics programs associated with their schools (Comerford, 2018). In response, a Dear Colleague Letter written by the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2013) to educational institutions of all levels reminded administrators of the legal requirement to provide access and opportunity in school settings. It also outlined policies and practices that would promote equal opportunities for student-athletes with disabilities, such as (1) educating about Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, (2) not making athletic involvement decisions based on presumptions and stereotypes about disability, and (3) considering, at the least, separate or different athletic opportunities for student-athletes with disabilities if unable to integrate directly into existing athletics programs. Involvement of student-athletes with disabilities has steadily increased in high-school athletics since the 2013 Dear Colleague Letter (Comerford, 2018), yet is still far below what would be considered truly equal participation. As equity and access issues have become more visible across society, there is still a noticeable absence of para-collegiate sport programs for student-athletes with disabilities at the intercollegiate level (McGinniss, 2020; Townsend et al., 2025).

Para-Collegiate Sports

Para-sports are distinct disciplines within the broader category of adaptive sports and specifically refer to sports included in the Paralympic Games for indi-

viduals with physical disabilities (United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee [USOPC], n.d.). According to the USOPC, collegiate competition plays a critical role in the success of Team USA by fostering the development of athletes with disabilities. Para student-athletes compete at NCAA Division I, II, and III levels, as well as in club sports (United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee [USOPC], n.d.). According to the USOPC (n.d.), about 20 universities across 17 states offer para-collegiate sports opportunities for student-athletes with disabilities. These para-collegiate sports programs enable student-athletes to represent their institutions through competition, fostering inclusion and athletic excellence.

While the NCAA has recently taken steps to support student-athletes with physical disabilities—such as its 2022 collaboration with the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) to engage institutions in adaptive sports and promote greater awareness, connection, and understanding across the collegiate landscape (NCAA, 2023)—its role in these efforts remains limited. As such, any adaptive athletics efforts are currently initiated by individual member institutions, and those inquiries are usually in response to requests from individual athletes or specific sport programs. NCAA member institutions can request reasonable modifications to sports rules to accommodate student-athletes with any type of disability, but broader systemic support remains absent, especially for student-athletes with physical disabilities. As such, the national governing bodies for some adaptive sports have taken on the responsibility to sanction the para-collegiate space. The first para-collegiate sport to take place was wheelchair basketball at the University of Illinois in 1970 and was sanctioned under the direction of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (Siegfried et al., 2021). The United States Tennis Association (USTA) has sanctioned intercollegiate wheelchair tennis programs and tournaments since 1999 (Chiesa, 2020), although the Intercollegiate Tennis Association (ITA) has recently taken over those responsibilities (Intercollegiate Tennis Association, n.d.). Lastly, collegiate adaptive track and field is governed by the USOPC.

Despite the clear and direct language used in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 regarding equal opportunities for students with disabilities as well as the GAO report and Dear Colleague Letter, institutions continue to receive criticism surrounding athletic opportunities for students with disabilities (McGinniss et al., 2020). This criticism focuses on the overall lack of awareness of adaptive sports and how it hinders social inclusion and full integration of student-athletes with disabilities on American college campuses. In 2015, the Eastern Collegiate Athletics Conference (ECAC) was the first NCAA member conference support intercollegiate adaptive sport programs for student-athletes with disabilities by providing championships for swimming, rowing, and track and field. Despite the early excitement regarding the ECAC's attempts at inclusion of adaptive sports, efforts failed to continue past their inaugural year, and no additional support has been provided regarding the ECAC adaptive sports championships (McGinniss et al., 2020).

Of the 1,100 institutions represented by the NCAA, 19% of their student bodies reported having a disability (9.3% report physical or mobility related disabilities), yet fewer than 0.5% (23 institutions) offer at least one adaptive sport program adja-

cent to NCAA sanctioned programs (i.e., wheelchair basketball, tennis, and track & field; Siegfried et al., 2021). McCarty et al. (2023) noted 16 public NCAA universities at different levels (i.e., DI, DII, and DIII) across 14 states offered para-collegiate sports; 68% of them offered only one sport, which was most often wheelchair basketball. Additionally, McCarty et al. (2023) identified the adaptive sport programs were housed under a variety of higher education departments (e.g., disability services, student affairs/student life, academic departments, campus recreation, and athletic departments). These findings were supported by more recent work that provided rich details of the structures and organization of seven different para-collegiate athletics programs (Townsend, et al., 2025). Although minimal, current para-collegiate sports literature indicates programs are devalued by the media, receive little support from their institutions, and are underrepresented by the NCAA (McGinniss et al., 2020; Siegfried et al., 2021; Townsend, et al., 2025; Watson, 2020), despite the NCAA's own inclusion statement that states they will provide programming across the diversity dimensions, including disability.

Today, many people in the United States view intercollegiate athletics as extraordinary and exclusive; some consider athletics programs to be the most respected characteristic of an institution (Madrigal & Robbins, 2020). It is not uncommon for students to base their decision to attend an institution solely on the strength of the athletic team(s). Existing knowledge about the impact of these experiences, however, is limited in its scope and primarily focuses on traditional athletes.

Experience Type Framework

The Experience Type Framework (ETF) constructs originated from literature in the field of tourism and other areas such as consumer behavior, leisure sciences, and neuroscience (Duerden et al., 2018). The ETF is grounded in the concept of *designed experiences*. Designed experiences are intentional, structured experiences that incorporate objective elements (settings, people, relationships, structure, and physical or symbolic objects). Regarding objective elements for this study, researchers are interested in para-collegiate program resources, as well as athlete and team dynamics. The ETF framework indicates that depending on a participant's interactions with the objective elements, the participants' subjective reaction and experience type will vary. When the objective elements of an experience do not grab and hold a participant's attention, the experiences are defined as subconscious (Duerden et al., 2018). Subconscious incidents occur when participants are distracted or the experience is no longer novel, causing the brain to respond automatically. Conscious experiences, on the other hand, attract and hold the individual's attention. There are two types of conscious experiences: ordinary and extraordinary (Duerden et al., 2018).

Ordinary experiences are described as common experiences that happen frequently in everyday life, and do not produce a strong emotional response, whereas extraordinary experiences do (Duerden et al., 2018). Extraordinary experiences are defined as a hierarchical order of three subtypes: memorable, meaningful, and transformative (Duerden et al., 2018). This definition provides a structured, inclusive,

consistent, and simple way of distinguishing between the extraordinary experience types.

Memorable experiences are experiences where the objective elements captivate the participant's attention and produce a strong emotional reaction. Similarly, meaningful experiences produce strong emotions and include an aspect of self-discovery. Finally, transformative experiences incorporate feelings of intense emotion, self-discovery, and foster personal changes within participants' values, beliefs, and behaviors (Duerden et al., 2018). The ETF is a cumulative process, with characteristics building across each subtype such that transformative experiences contain the significant characteristics of each of the previous subtypes in addition to its own unique characteristic(s). Intercollegiate sports are one example of highly designed experiences that have the potential to be quite impactful in the lives of participants. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand and describe the experience of involvement in para-collegiate sports among student-athletes with disabilities using the Experience Type Framework.

Method

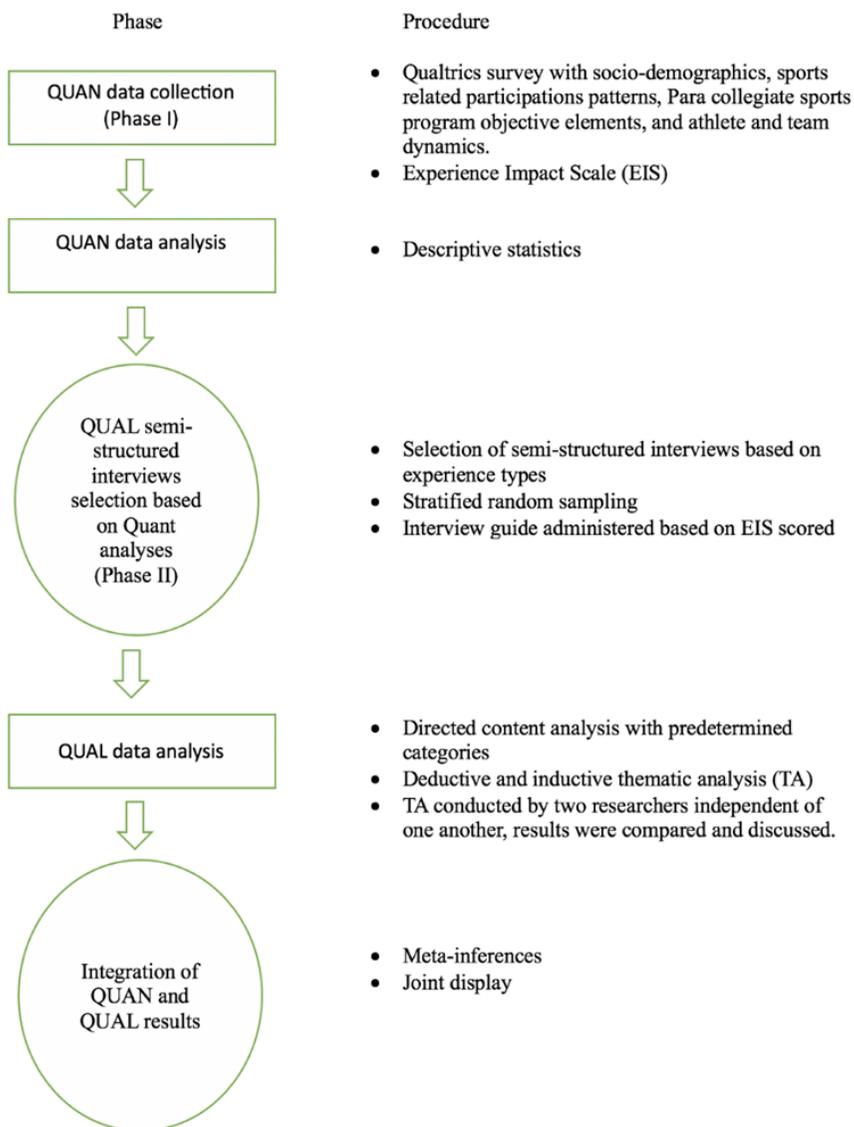
Design

This study was limited to universities that engaged in intercollegiate para-sport programs at the competitive level, which only included wheelchair basketball, wheelchair tennis, and adaptive track and field. This multi-phase explanatory sequential mixed methods study used quantitative and qualitative data to understand the student-athlete experience (see Figure 1). Phase I (QUAN) used the Experience Impact Scale (EIS) to measure the impact of para-collegiate adaptive sports experiences on student-athletes. Phase II (QUAL) consisted of 11 semi-structured interviews with student-athletes. These interviews were used to identify characteristics of the intercollegiate sports experiences in relationship to the experience types conceptualized by the ETF. The EIS precisely measured the impact of the para-collegiate sports experience, but by itself, it could not adequately describe the para-collegiate sports experience. While semi-structured interviews described the student-athletes experiences, they could not precisely measure the impact of the intercollegiate sports experience. Therefore, this mixed method approach allowed researchers to integrate findings from the EIS and the semi-structured interviews and provided a specific and comprehensive understanding of the intercollegiate student-athlete experiences.

Participants

This study focused on the experiences of para-collegiate student-athletes. As such, inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (1) participants were required to be current para-collegiate student-athletes from at least one of three adaptive sport disciplines; (2) participants were required to currently be attending one of 18 univer-

Figure 1
Mixed-Methods Study Design



sities in the United States that had intercollegiate adaptive athletics programs (See Table 1). Table 1 was developed through extensive online searches of para-collegiate sports programs that offered at least one of the previously mentioned sports disciplines. The table did not include institutions that offered adaptive sports disciplines at the campus recreation or intramural level (i.e., with no intercollegiate competition). By reviewing publicly available adaptive sports program websites and rosters and inferring to fill in gaps from missing or out-of-date rosters and programs, best estimates indicate approximately 250 intercollegiate adaptive student-athletes were competing across the 18 institutions identified in Table 1. Participants were recruited by non-probability sampling (purposive) from these institutions.

Data Collection Procedures

Upon IRB approval, the researchers directly contacted team officials associated with the identified sports disciplines at each of the 18 universities to gain permission to share the study information with their student-athletes. A team staff member dis-

Table 1

Para-collegiate Sports Program and Estimated Number of Athletes Per Team

	Men's Wheelchair Basketball	Women's Wheelchair Basketball	Wheelchair Tennis	Adaptive Track & Field	Total Estimated # of Athletes
Auburn University	14		6		20
Clemson University			3		3
City University of New York	8	7			15
Eastern Washington University	6				6
Edinboro University	15				15
Michigan State University			Unknown		Unknown
San Diego State University			Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Southwest Minnesota State University	9				9
University of Alabama	13	12	5		30

University of Arizona	14	7		14	35
University of Illinois	11	10		20	41
University of Michigan			3	8	11
University of Missouri	8				8
University of Nebraska- Omaha	6				6
University of Texas-Arlington	14	12			26
University of Virginia			4		
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater	7	9			16
Virginia Tech			2		
Total Estimate	125	57	23	42	247

seminated the study information through a method of their choosing (i.e., general team meeting, internal team email, or additional forms of communication). Participation in this study was voluntary, and student-athletes who completed Phase I (initial and follow-up survey) received a \$10 e-gift card. Those who completed Phase II (semi-structured interview) received an additional \$25 e-gift card.

Phase I: Quantitative Phase

Quantitative Data Collection

In Phase I, participants completed a research questionnaire comprising the Experience Impact Scale, socio-demographics, sports-related participation patterns, para-collegiate program resource objective elements, and athlete and team dynamics objective elements.

Experience Impact Scale. The Experience Impact Scale (Lundberg et al., 2021) was the first instrument to classify extraordinary experience types as conceptualized by the ETF. The scale was developed through an indicative qualitative method (observed patterns from research data used to generalize a theory) utilizing data from 62 study abroad students, and an expert panel established initial content-related evidence of validity. Participants were asked to respond to the 10 items based on a yes/no rating scale (i.e., Guttman's scaling; Guttman, 1944). Each statement on the

EIS represented a general type of experience they may have had and offered several characteristics that represented that experience (see Table 2). The EIS was scored by adding the number of yes responses to the 10 items. Participants who scored a 1 were considered to have had an ordinary experience; 2-4 memorable, 5-7 meaningful, and 8-10 were considered transformative. For this study, the questionnaire directed participants to reflect on their intercollegiate sports experiences and indicate if the characteristics of each type of impact were part of their experience (responding yes or no).

Demographics and Objective Elements. Phase I collected four types of student-athlete demographics: socio-demographics, sports-related participation patterns, adaptive sports program resource objective elements, and athlete and team

Table 2
Experience Impact Scale

1	It was regular, common, not memorable.
2	It was memorable. It created emotion and an impression due to being new, complex, or unusual .
3	It was memorable because it created emotion and an impression or an appreciation for the value of the experience or place.
4	It was memorable because it created emotion and strong impressions or a connection that became more personal or real for me.
5	It was meaningful because it led to insights about new accomplishments, new skills or attributes that may influence my self-awareness or promote personal growth.
6	It was meaningful because it led to insights about people, relationships , or the understanding of others that may influence my self-awareness or promote personal growth.
7	It was meaningful because it led to insights about myself and my character that have begun to influence my self-awareness or promote personal growth.
8	It was transformative because it led to a change in perspective or attitude about who I am and to a desire to change my behavior .
9	It was transformative because it led to a change in perspective related to who I am or my identity and I have made or am making significant changes in my behavior .
10	It was transformative because it led to a change in some aspect of who I am , my identity , or my core values and has resulted in lasting behavior changes .

Note. Words are bolded as they have been intentionally designed to be by the EIS developers.

dynamics objective elements. When gathering socio-demographics researchers collected information regarding the participants age, sex, race, health condition, length of disability, type of disability, what university they attended, and year in school. Regarding sport-related demographics, researchers gathered information regarding the sport they played, how long they have played, how many seasons at the varsity level, how many days a week they practiced and for how many hours per week. When examining adaptive sport program resource objective elements, students were prompted to respond yes/no (dichotomous response option) regarding whether or not they had access to the following resources: academic support services, athlete scholarship or compensation, access to sports medicine team, elite training opportunities, involvement in media days, leadership development opportunities, nutrition service, professional development opportunities, strength and conditioning, support for name/image/likeness activities, use of varsity athletic facilities, and use of institutional athletics apparel. These characteristics have been discussed in depth in the literature surrounding traditional student-athlete experiences, and thus provided a base of information to explore para-collegiate student-athlete experiences (Bandre, 2011; Eisner, 2014; Gayles, 2009; Karpinski, 2012). Lastly demographic information regarding athlete and team dynamics objective elements was also gathered. Athletes identified (again through a yes or no response option) if the following characteristics were present during their para-collegiate sports experience: athlete burnout/exhaustion, coach provided training/instruction/positive feedback, individual athletes define success based on their comparison to peers, individual athletes define success based on their own effort and improvement, high levels of performance anxiety and tension, low levels of performance anxiety and tension, positive relationship with coaching staff, sense of boredom among athletes, sense of athletic identity, sense of school pride, sense of social support from teammates, and team satisfaction/pride. Similarly, these characteristics have been explored extensively in traditional collegiate sports literature and were thus relevant to this exploration of para-collegiate student-athlete experiences (DeFreese & Smith, 2013; Gayles, 2009; Griffith & Johnson, 2002; Ho, 2018; Madrigal & Robbins, 2020; Smith et al., 2005).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Analysis was completed using SPSS version 29. Researchers cleaned the dataset and removed 17 participants due to non-responses to the EIS. Histograms were used to scan for outliers across all variables, confirming normality and establishing the dataset was outliers-free. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were performed to describe the sample and explore the inherent elements of the research variables.

Phase II: Qualitative Phase

Qualitative Data Collection

For Phase II, researchers used stratified sampling to select 20 respondents from Phase I who indicated they were interested in participating in semi-structured in-

interviews. Participants were picked randomly from each subset of experience types (meaningful and transformative) and were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Researchers had planned to select student-athletes from each experience type identified in the ETF (i.e., ordinary, memorable, meaningful, and transformative), but no participants indicated they had an ordinary or memorable experience. Researchers conducted 11 semi-structured interviews (five meaningful and six transformative) to meet saturation. Data saturation was determined by the use of multiple methodological approaches such as data triangulation, member checking, and analytic reflection, all of which are strategies that are well-established in qualitative research (Hennink et al., 2007). Thematic saturation was confirmed when no new themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews, again, consistent with established qualitative research practices (Hennink et al., 2007).

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were used to understand further and identify characteristics of the para-collegiate sports experiences (see Table 3 for the interview guide). Lundberg et al. (2021) established 10 descriptive statements in line with the ETF: three statements for each extraordinary experience type (memorable, meaningful, and transformative) and one representing an ordinary experience type. The interview guide for this study was designed to mirror the descriptive statements established by Lundberg et al. (2021). One broad question was asked for each experience type (i.e., describe the memorable impact(s) that your para-collegiate sports experiences have had on your life) and followed up with three additional probing questions that reflected the three descriptive statements corresponding with that experience type.

Before conducting the interviews, researchers piloted the interview guide via Zoom with a former traditional intercollegiate student-athlete. Minor adjustments were made based on participant feedback. The researcher conducted the interviews via Zoom, allowing audio and video recording using Zoom and a digital audio recorder as backup. Audio files were primarily transcribed through Zoom, except one that needed to be sent to a transcription company (Ubiquitous On Demand) due to poor sound quality.

When starting the interviews, the PI introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the study. Afterward, the researcher asked open-ended questions following the interview guide. The researcher used probes to gain further detail and clarification about each experience type throughout the interview process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher closed the interviews by asking participants if they had any final thoughts to share about their para-collegiate sports experiences, thanked them for their time, assured confidentiality, and asked if they could follow up with them to ensure transcripts matched what they said or heard in the interview.

Table 3

Interview Guide

Aim: To further understand and identify characteristics of the para-collegiate sports experiences related to their extraordinary experience types.

You all identified that your para-collegiate sports experience as:

Memorable

Describe the memorable impact(s) that your para-collegiate sports experiences have had on your life.

Probes:

- What about the para-collegiate sports experience created emotion and impression due to being new, complex, or unusual?
- What about the para-collegiate sports experience created emotion and an impression or an appreciation for the value of the experience?
- What about the para-collegiate sports experience created emotion and strong impressions or a connection that became more personal or real?

Meaningful

Describe the Meaningful impact(s) that your para-collegiate sports experiences have had on your life.

Probes:

- What about the para-collegiate sports experience led you to have new insights into new accomplishments, skills, or attributes that have influenced your self-awareness or personal growth?
- What about the para-collegiate sports experience led you to have insights about people, relationships, or understanding of others that influence your self-awareness or personal growth?
- What about the para-collegiate sports experience led to insight about yourself and your character that has influenced your self-awareness and personal growth?

Transformative

Describe the transformative impact(s) that your para-collegiate sports experiences have on your life.

Probes:

- What about the para-collegiate sports experience led to changes in your perspective or attitudes of who you are and fostered a desire to change your behaviors?
- What about the para-collegiate sports experience led you to changes in your perspectives about your identity and have made or are currently making significant changes in your behaviors?
- What about the para-collegiate sports experience led to you having changes in your core values and has resulted in lasting behavioral changes?

Wrap-Up

- Thank you for your time.
- I assure you that you and what you shared here today will be kept confidential.
- Can I follow up with you all regarding the transcriptions from this interview to ensure the transcription matches what you said or heard today?

Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze Phase II data from the semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis allowed the researchers to identify, analyze, and report factors influencing the para-collegiate student-athletes' experiences (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Trustworthiness and validity of the data were determined by researcher triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (i.e., methodological practice, analysis techniques, and clarity of the research process).

Thematic analysis was conducted by two researchers, independent of one another. Upon completion of the thematic analysis, the results were compared and discussed (i.e., triangulation). First, the researchers independently reviewed the transcripts, identifying themes, patterns, and key findings. They then met to compare findings, discuss areas of agreement and disagreement, and explore reasons for differences in interpretations. The researchers agreed on all findings from the thematic analysis except for one item. After a discussion that included re-examining findings in the context of the data, they mutually agreed the item did not belong, and it was disregarded from the thematic analysis. The final step involved integrating findings from each researcher into a cohesive analysis.

Regarding member checking, researchers first cleaned the transcripts from the individual interviews and sent each participant a copy, asking them to review and edit as needed. Five of the 11 participants responded to this first round of member checking and did not have any feedback or find any discrepancies in the transcripts. Secondly, researchers summarized each interview and emailed the individual summaries to the participants to ensure that the researchers had interpreted the student-athlete experience accurately. Six of the 11 participants responded to the secondary member checking, none of which had any concerns regarding the interpretation of their experiences.

Peer debriefing occurred repeatedly as researchers had ongoing and consistent meetings and check-ins throughout the entire process to ensure methodological practices were current and being followed.

Mixing of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Creswell (2022) states explanatory sequential mixed methods designs are most appropriate for studies that use established instruments, as was the case in this study, which employed the Experience Impact Scale (EIS). Consistent with the structure of explanatory sequential mixed methods research, this study first collected quantitative data, followed by qualitative data, to further interpret and expand upon the initial findings (Creswell, 2022).

The quantitative phase identified para-collegiate student-athletes' experience types and informed the development of targeted questions for the qualitative follow-up, which consisted of semi-structured interviews. Because the qualitative phase was designed based on the results of the quantitative data, and the qualitative findings were used to provide deeper insight into the quantitative results, this study followed an explanatory sequential mixed methods structure (Creswell, 2022).

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative phases were combined to draw meta-inferences on how the findings from the qualitative phase explained the quantitative results. A joint display (see Table 5) was developed to present mixed methods findings, focusing on how the qualitative results enhanced or clarified the quantitative results (Creswell, 2022).

Results

Quantitative Results

Sample

A total of 30 surveys were collected. Additionally, 61% of United States para-collegiate sports programs were represented in the sample. A slight majority of the sample was female (60%). Racial diversity was primarily represented by White participants (23 participants) followed by 7 participants who identify as Asian or Asian Indian, Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origins. Disabilities were either acquired (43.33%), congenital (53.33%), or both (3.33%). Participants varied across academic years, with a relatively uniform distribution among freshmen, juniors, seniors, and graduate students, but fewer sophomores.

Sports Related Participation Patterns

Participants were recruited from 18 universities, 11 of which were represented in this sample. The majority of the sample participated in wheelchair basketball (60.0%), followed by adaptive track and field (26.7%), lastly wheelchair tennis (13.3%), which is representative of the para-collegiate student-athlete population, as wheelchair basketball athletes account for 72.0% of the population. Length of participation and seasons played at the intercollegiate level varied, with a notable duration of three to four years and seasons being most common (40.0%). The majority of the sample practiced five days a week (46.7%). Additionally, the majority of the sample indicated they practiced between 11 to 15 hours per week (36.7%).

Objective Elements

In addition to collecting socio-demographics and sports-related participation pattern data, researchers were interested in a number of para-collegiate program resource objective elements as well as athlete and team dynamic objective elements. As mentioned previously, designed experiences incorporate a number of objective elements (settings, people, relationships, structure, and physical or symbolic objects) and how the participant interacts with them may determine what type of experience they have.

Para-Collegiate Program Resources. The survey conducted among para-collegiate student-athletes highlighted varied access to program resources (see Table 4).

Table 4
Para-Collegiate Program Resources

Objective Element	NO n (%)	YES n (%)
Academic support services (i.e., tutoring, etc.)	9 (30%)	21 (70%)
Athletic scholarships or compensation	11 (36.67%)	19 (63.33%)
Access to a sports medicine team (i.e., physicians, athletic trainers, sports psychologists, etc.)	10 (33.33%)	20 (66.67%)
Elite training opportunities (i.e., high quality coaches, facilities, equipment, etc.)	11 (36.67%)	19 (63.33%)
Involvement in media days (i.e., photo shoots, etc.)	16 (53.33%)	14 (46.67%)
Leadership development opportunities	25 (83.33%)	5 (16.67%)
Nutrition services	15 (50.0%)	15 (50.0%)
Professional development opportunities (i.e., micro-internships, resume building activities, etc.)	23 (76.67%)	7 (23.33%)
Strength and conditioning	7 (23.33%)	23 (76.67%)
Support for Name, Image, Likeness activities	24 (80.0%)	6 (20.0%)
Use of varsity athletic facilities	21 (70.0%)	9 (30.0%)
Use of institutional athletics apparel (i.e., Nike, Adidas, etc.)	15 (50.0%)	15 (50.0%)

Athlete and Team Dynamics. The study identified a diverse range of objective elements related to athlete and team dynamics among the student-athletes (see Table 5). Overall, student-athletes reported predominantly positive extraordinary experiences in para-sport participation. However, nearly half (46.67%) reported they experienced athlete burnout or exhaustion.

Para-Collegiate Student-Athlete Experience Types

Findings from the EIS indicated para-collegiate sports presented as highly impactful (meaningful = 23%; transformative = 77%) to these student-athletes. No participants indicated their experience was ordinary or memorable. In other words, the para-collegiate sports experience invoked strong emotional responses and impressions on the student-athletes, they gained personal insights about themselves and others, and for most, the experience changed their values, beliefs, behaviors, and identities.

Table 5
Athlete and Team Dynamics Objective Elements

Objective Element	NO n (%)	YES n(%)
Athlete burnout/exhaustion	16 (53.33%)	14 (46.67%)
Coaches provided training, instruction, and positive feedback/reinforcement	4 (13.33%)	26 (86.67%)
Individual athletes define success based on their comparison to peers	18 (60.0%)	12 (40.0%)
Individual athletes define success based on their own effort and improvement	7 (23.33%)	23 (76.67%)
High levels of performance anxiety and tension	17 (56.67%)	3 (43.33%)
Low levels of performance anxiety and tension	22 (73.33%)	8 (26.67%)
Positive relationship with coaching staff	5 (16.67%)	25 (83.33%)
Sense of boredom among athletes (i.e., skipping practice)	26 (86.67%)	4 (13.33%)
Sense of athletic identity	8 (26.67%)	22 (73.33%)
Sense of school pride	13 (43.33%)	17 (56.67%)
Sense of social support from teammates	2 (40.0%)	18 (60.0%)
Team satisfaction/pride	12 (40.0%)	18 (60.0%)

Qualitative Results

Sample and Qualitative Data Collection

Twenty participants were contacted for an interview, 11 student-athletes (see Table 6) responded and participated in the semi-structured interview process. Nine of the 18 universities that offer para-collegiate sport programs were represented in the interview sample and the majority of the student-athletes played wheelchair basketball (45.4%), followed by wheelchair tennis (27.3%), and adaptive track and field (27.3%). Thematic analysis produced results organized into three categories that aligned with the ETF: memorable, meaningful, and transformative experience types. One overarching theme emerged for each category (three total themes).

Category 1: Memorable

Regarding memorable experiences, Lundberg et al. (2021) suggested memorable experiences are those that produce an impression (sometimes strong impressions). When inquiring about memorable experiences, researchers were focused on three attributes: (1) new, complex, or unusual, (2) value, and (3) connection that became more personal or real. One theme emerged from the student-athletes' semi-structured

Table 6
Student-Athlete Demographics

Student-athlete	Sex	Age	Disability Type	Sport	Year in School	EIS Score
1	Female	20	Acquired	Adaptive Track & Field	Junior	Transformative
2	Female	19	Acquired	Wheelchair Tennis	Junior	Transformative
3	Male	18	Congenital	Wheelchair Basketball	Freshman	Meaningful
4	Male	20	Congenital	Wheelchair Basketball	Freshman	Transformative
5	Female	18	Congenital	Wheelchair Basketball	Freshman	Meaningful
6	Female	22	Acquired	Wheelchair Basketball	Senior	Transformative
7	Female	27	Congenital	Wheelchair Basketball	Senior	Meaningful
8	Male	24	Congenital	Adaptive Track & Field	Senior	Meaningful
9	Male	24	Acquired	Wheelchair Tennis	Graduate Student	Transformative
10	Female	23	Congenital	Adaptive Track & Field	Graduate Student	Transformative
11	Male	20	Acquired	Wheelchair Tennis	Junior	Meaningful

interviews: the importance of the disability community and development of lifelong friendships.

Theme 1: Importance of the Disability Community and Development of Lifelong Friendships. The para-collegiate sports programs for many provided them with the opportunity to interact and be with people who were similar to them. These opportunities created strong impressions and laid the foundation for memorable experiences to occur. Student-athletes attributed the impact of being part of the community to simply having the opportunity to connect with peers differently.

Student-athlete 1 stated: “Yeah, just being able to connect with athletes with different abilities and backgrounds.” For some, those connections with peers of differing abilities fostered interpersonal connections that were vital to their memorable experience. Student-athlete 9 stated: “I think the most important part is the interpersonal relationships that you form and that you’re able to grow because of it.”

Additionally, being part of the disability community allowed student-athletes to relate to peers in a different way than with able-bodied peers, as they all had something in common: a disability. The disability community fostered deep connections to peers and led to lifelong friendships. Regarding the connections made from being in the disability community, one student-athlete stated:

The fact that [we] all have something in common. That’s the fact that [we’re] all disabled. So, you know that definitely kind of breaks a barrier that I feel like is there for a lot of other relationships that you have in life. So, when that barrier is already broken, because you already all have that in common, I think that helps create a more, a deeper like relationship with those people. It goes deeper than you would with, you know, your average friends, because you can have that in common. (Student-athlete 5)

Another stated:

I’ve made definitely lifelong friends now that play tennis and different colleges like at nationals, and being with them, seeing them like every month at each tournament has been really cool and seeing them grow as well. (Student-athlete 2)

Furthermore, the para-collegiate sports experience seemed to allow them to develop friendships that later formed into bonds similar to a family. Student-athlete 6 stated “some of my teammates are like family to me now, you know. I do live...with a couple of my teammates as well. So, like, you know, we have that connection as well.” Another student-athlete described their experience in this way:

I mean, basically just basically becoming friends, and then becoming families with other teams basically having that bond between each other and being able to share memorable moments. Being a family and making sure that you know everybody has fun with it, and also being there for people that need it. (Student-athlete 4)

Category 2: Meaningful

Lundeberg et al. (2021) suggest meaningful responses are similar to memorable experiences in regard to participants reporting impressions and emotional responses. In addition to gaining new insights into accomplishments, the individuals had opportunities for skill development that impacted both themselves and others, and personal character that influenced their self-awareness and promoted personal growth. One overarching theme emerged from the semi-structured interviews: holistic growth on and off the court.

Theme 2: Holistic Growth on and off the Court. Student-athletes overwhelmingly attributed their meaningful para-collegiate sports experience to the growth

(physically, mentally, and emotionally) they identified in themselves on the court and in their everyday lives. One student-athlete described this impact of their para-collegiate experience in the following way:

I believe that outside of just straight up, getting better at basketball, right...I have become...I think I've learned a lot more about my body and taking care of it in terms of my disability... because one of the programs that we do participate is it's kind of a blend between weight room time and physical therapy kind of. We do a lot of stretching and physical therapy type exercises, and I think that has helped me learn a lot about...how to better take care of my body in terms of doing things that an average person wouldn't recommend to do that I would need to do because of my disability to stay healthy. That also goes with my mental health as well. (Student-athlete 5)

Similarly, another student-athlete indicated their para-collegiate sports experience was motivating across their life:

It has motivated me, and, like maybe become more attached not just in track and field, but just in every part of life, I mean, you're gonna...have to have a great work ethic. You're gonna have to be on time to everything. You're gonna have to work as hard as you can to get that job, you know... It translates into life of what I'm doing with my sport. (Student-athlete 10)

Additionally, others indicated the para-collegiate sports experience helped them develop their interpersonal skills:

Like my personal character wise. I would say that becoming, I've been captain of the team for the last five years of my career. So that has allowed me to become a leader, and grow as a leader.... It has allowed me to work on my character of leadership, but also my character of communication, you know, talking well with others, helping others as well. (Student-athlete 6)

Furthermore, student-athletes attribute their meaningful experiences and impacts to opportunities that foster and increase their independence:

Just like being independent and like going to tournaments and stuff. That was definitely a new experience for me, because I usually don't do that. And now I can like go on flights by myself with the team. And so that's given me the opportunity to be independent. (Student-athlete 2)

Another student-athlete made similar statements:

It creates a sense of like independence. Being able to do things by yourself without having, like your parents, or ... a personal assistant type always come around and like, try to do things for you. I think sports just gives us another way of like us figure it out, and your teammates want you to be independent. (Student-athlete 8)

Category 3: Transformative

Similar to the meaningful category, transformative experiences have characteristics of the previous two experience types, but at the core of transformative experience types is change. This change is on a continuum from aspiring to change to fully adapting life changes regarding perspectives or attitudes about who they are,

their identity, and core values (Lundberg et al., 2021). One theme emerged: sense of purpose and self.

Theme 3: Sense of Purpose and Identity. Student-athletes described the para-collegiate sports experience as facilitating a transformation in their personal belief, sense of self, and mindset. The para-collegiate sports experiences altered the student-athletes' future as they changed career paths or developed a strong desire to continue to be involved in and advocate for adaptive sports. Student-athlete 6 suggested "playing...college basketball made me realize I also wanna continue coaching and being involved in the sport. Even when I'm done playing as well." Additionally, student-athlete 2 stated, "I would like to get a job in adapted sports when I graduate and help things like this grow, because I know how hard it is and how much work goes into it." Another student-athlete described their shift in beliefs, self, and perspectives as:

I went from someone that's very, that was very shy and introvert, you know. that completely did a [360] it's given me perspective of what, in my opinion matters in life. Cause I feel like I was wasting my time a lot on frivolous stuff, caring a lot about what people think. And lots of times is like over analyzing what's expected, what's expected of me, and because I've gained more confidence to myself, it's more about what I'm able to offer. (Student-athlete 9)

Lastly, a change in one's identity is a characteristic of the highest level of a transformative experience, student-athletes described their change in identity in the following way:

I want to, you know be a person that's bigger than myself, and that drove me to change... my perspective on my athletic career.... I'm very self-aware of my identity, but I think like I kinda said before that I think it changed me. I'm not just a student. I am an athlete... And I am a student-athlete. (Student-athlete 10)

Additionally:

Honestly, it was a big mindset change for me, you know, growing up, you know, as a person with a disability, you know you are constantly being told you know you can't do something, or you'll never do this, or you never do this. So adaptive sports really transformed my mind set. Oh, I can be a college athlete. Oh, I can get a scholarship. Oh, I can graduate with a 4.0. Like, you know all that stuff, but really transform my mind set when it comes to confidence on the court as well as off the court, and you know, being able to in daily life.... So, I would add more into that in a way that now that I've changed my personal mindset, and how I can succeed in life, and I don't have to listen to this people that told me I can't. (Student-athlete 6)

Mixed Results

Table 7 shows a joint display which summarizes the two datasets and the meta-inferences from the data integration process. The joint display provides explanation and further details to each of the three experience types.

Table 7
Joint-Display

Quantitative Results	Qualitative Results	Meta-Inferences
7 out of 30 reported a meaningful para-collegiate sports experience (23%)	<p>Theme: Holistic growth on and off the court.</p> <p><i>“I believe that outside of just straight up, getting better at basketball, right...I have become...I think I’ve learned a lot more about my body and taking care of it in terms of my disability.... That also goes with my mental health as well.” (Student-athlete 5)</i></p> <p><i>“It creates a sense of like independence. Being able to do things by yourself without having, like your parents, or ... a personal assistant type always come around and like, try to do things for you. I think sports just gives us another way of like us figure it out, and your teammates want you to be independent.” (Student-athlete 8)</i></p> <p><i>Just like being independent and like going to tournaments and stuff. That was definitely a new experience for me, because I usually don’t do that. And now I can like go on flights by myself with the team. And so that’s given me the opportunity to be independent. (Student-athlete 2)</i></p>	<p>Quantitative and qualitative findings concurred on para-collegiate sports being a meaningful experience among student-athletes with disabilities.</p> <p>Student-athletes attribute their meaningful para-collegiate sports to seeing success on the court or track and field and in their everyday lives. The para-collegiate sports experience not only developed physical skills but also provided opportunities for personal growth, both mentally and emotionally. Additionally, the para-collegiate sports experience fostered independence amongst the student-athletes.</p>

Theme: Sense of purpose and self.

23 out of 30 reported a transformative para-collegiate sports experience (77%)

“it’s given me perspective of what, in my opinion matters in life” (Student-athlete 9)

“I want to, you know be a person that’s bigger than myself, and that drove me to change of my perspective on my athletic career.... I’m very self-aware of my identity, but I think like I kinda said before that I think it changed me. I’m not just a student. I am an athlete... And I am a student-athlete.” (Student-athlete 10)

“Honestly, it was a big mindset change for me, you know, growing up, you know, as a person with a disability, you know you are constantly being told you know you can’t do something, or you’ll never do this, or you never do this. So adaptive sports really transformed my mind set. Oh, I can be a college athlete.” (Student-athlete 6)

Quantitative and qualitative findings concurred on para-collegiate sports being a transformative experience among student-athletes with disabilities.

Student-athletes attribute their transformative para-collegiate sports to transforming their mindset and identity. The para-collegiate sports experience allowed student-athletes to see what they and their peers are capable of, changed their personalities, altered career paths, and fostered a sense of confidence and identity development.

Discussion

Study Overview

This study aimed to understand the experiences of student-athletes with disabilities in para-collegiate sports using the Experience Type Framework. The study focused on university resources, athlete and team dynamics, and overall experiences using the EIS. Interviews provided further insight into individual experiences. Several areas were identified for discussion, including access to resources, relationships and dynamics, the disability community, athlete development, overcoming stigma, identity formation, and the need for expanding para-collegiate sports programs.

Access to University Resources

When examining para-collegiate program resources, results were mixed regarding access to athletic departments and university program resources, aligning with previous para-collegiate sports literature (Siegfried et al., 2021). Siegfried et al. (2021) indicated that despite the slight growth in para-collegiate sports, disparities in the number of programs still exist, and the resources they receive are inequitable. Findings indicated that para-collegiate student-athletes had access to some university athletics resources such as academic support services, athletic scholarships or

compensation, sports medicine team and elite training opportunities, strength and conditioning, and nutrition.

Despite these findings, not every student-athlete had the same access to these resources across their different programs, and those with access did not have access at the same levels as able-bodied student-athletes. Less than 50% of the para-collegiate student-athletes had access to media days, leadership development opportunities, NIL activities, and varsity athletic facilities. If the expectation is for equity in collegiate sports experiences for students with disabilities, as has been called for (Lakowski, 2011; McCarty, et al, 2023; McGinnis, et al., 2020), then these disparities are cause for concern. Previous literature has identified these as essential resources provided to able-bodied student-athletes participating in NCAA-sponsored programs (Bandre, 2011; Eisner et al., 2014; Gayles, 2009; Karpinski, 2012), yet they are largely unavailable to para-collegiate student-athletes. Lack of access to these resources impacts student-athletes' visibility, individual development, and professional sports opportunities. Universities currently providing para-collegiate sports programs should address these disparities to ensure student-athletes with disabilities have equitable athletic opportunities. "Standardization and inclusion within the existing infrastructures of interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics for persons with disabilities must become a goal that we all support and encourage in unison" (Lakowski, 2011, p. 99).

We acknowledge a few important points that may make the feasibility of full inclusion of para-collegiate student-athletes with disabilities into the existing infrastructures challenging. First, the changing landscape of the traditional college sports system, especially with regards to the recent *House v. NCAA* class-action settlement that will result in revenue sharing with student athletes (NCAA, 2025). This will fundamentally change the financial landscape of NCAA Division I college athletic departments. Recent research has revealed that para-collegiate programs have a diverse funding portfolio to include donors, grants, fundraising, and extremely limited institutional financial support (Townsend et al., 2025), with donors and alumni being the primary financial supports of programs. This diverse funding strategy mirrors traditional collegiate athletics departments (Brown, 2021), with the major difference being the primary revenue stream for these programs is broadcast rights (Fried, et al., 2025). It is unclear how the House settlement will change the funding portfolios of traditional collegiate athletics departments, and whether or not resources will be able to spread to para-collegiate programs as those portfolios change.

Second, Townsend et al. (2025) also described the location of many para-collegiate programs as not being housed in traditional athletic departments, and instead are found in academic units, disability services offices, or campus recreation units. They point out that "because the NCAA does not sanction adaptive intercollegiate athletics, which has been discussed at length elsewhere (Fay, 2011; Larkin et al., 2014; McCarty et al., 2023), program leaders have had no choice but to align their programs with institutional partners who are supportive of their efforts but who do not necessarily prioritize adaptive athletics. The lack of focus on athletics in these

locations often resulted in inadequate allocation of resources for the adaptive athletics programs” (p. 19).

Some may argue then, that these programs should not have access to traditional athletic department resources. Nevertheless, this should not dissuade universities from allocating resources to support para-collegiate athletics programs, and university and program leaders should work to mobilize resources across campus to support these programs and their student-athletes.

Relationships and Team Dynamics

In regards to athlete and team dynamics, para-collegiate athletes described mixed attributes of their experiences; this is similar to able-bodied student-athletes as the literature reports various dynamics from program to program (Defreese & Smith, 2012; Gayles, 2009; Griffith & Johnson, 2002; Ho, 2018; Madrigal & Robins, 2020; Smith et al., 2005). One item of interest should be considered for further examination as para-collegiate student-athletes suggested that they experience high levels of burnout. These findings are not unique to para-collegiate athletes, as athlete burnout can be found in the traditional collegiate sports literature. The literature attributes athlete burnout to increased demands on athletes’ success, paired with social and academic pressures (Dubuc-Charbonneau & Durand-Bush, 2018). Dubuc-Charbonneau & Durand-Bush (2018) posit, the previously mentioned heightened demands and pressures led to chronic stress, which is a cause of athletic burnout. Other factors contributing to athlete burnout include external pressure, power dynamics, excessive training, boredom, and lack of social support (Dubuc-Charbonneau & Durand-Bush, 2018). As mentioned previously, para-collegiate student-athletes reported a lack of support from athletic departments and universities, which may be a contributing factor to the para-collegiate student-athlete experience and should be further examined.

The Disability Community

Research has indicated adaptive sports provide an outlet for people with disabilities to connect with other people with disabilities, increase social interactions, and allow for emotional expression (Zabriskie et al., 2005). For some student-athletes in this study, the para-collegiate sports experience was the first time they were able to interact with peers with a disability. Many identified they no longer felt alone, aligning with findings from other studies stating that adaptive sports involvement promotes a sense of belonging and community (Lundberget al., 2011; Stanojevic et al., 2023). Student-athletes reported being part of this disability community allowed them to connect with peers in a way they could not with their able-bodied peers.

Physical and Emotional Development

In addition to being part of the disability community, student-athletes identified personally holistic growth (physically, mentally, and emotionally) as a key characteristic of their extraordinary experiences. Student-athletes reported they increased their physical sports-related skills, as expected. However, this improved functioning off the court (i.e., endurance in pushing their wheelchairs around their communities

and putting groceries in their cars). In addition to physical skills, student-athletes reported the para-collegiate sports experiences fostered a sense of independence they would not have gained if they had not been in the program. These findings highlight the importance of adaptive sports in promoting and increasing the overall well-being, daily functioning, and quality of life of individuals with disabilities. These findings align with previous literature identifying that participation in adaptive sports influenced positive physical well-being and health, interpersonal and social relationships, and intrapersonal beliefs and attitudes (Lape et al., 2018).

Overcoming Stigma and Identity Formation

Para-collegiate sports pushed student-athletes to their limits, revealing what they and others with disabilities are capable of, leading to changes in mindset and identity. Often stigmatized and seen as inferior, sports offered an outlet for authenticity and high-level competition with peers (Lundberg et al., 2011b). These opportunities fostered confidence, challenged their perceptions, and align with previous studies that state adaptive sports reduce stigma and social barriers (Vermillion, 2013; Watson, 2020). These changes in perceptions facilitated changes in their identities. Lundberg et al. (2011b) indicated that organized activities are ideal for developing one's identity through new experiences, societal feedback, and skill and social development. Thus, para-collegiate sports provide the ingredients for student-athletes to discover or rediscover themselves.

The Need for Expansion of Para-Collegiate Sports Programs

Although para-collegiate student-athletes identify their experiences as extraordinary, there remain only 18 universities at the time of this study that provide inter-collegiate sports programs for students with disabilities, compared to the over 1,100 programs provided by the NCAA for able-bodied students. Despite their benefits, adaptive sports receive little recognition from the media and the NCAA (Watson, 2020). Adaptive sports play a vital role in the visibility and voices of the ever-growing student body with disabilities. Universities must grow para-collegiate sports programs in order to be responsive to federal legislation requiring equal opportunities for student-athletes with disabilities.

Para-Collegiate Sports as Extraordinary Experiences

Despite varied access to university resources and potential athlete burnout, results showed para-collegiate sports opportunities led to primarily transformative, extraordinary experiences. Student-athletes credited this to being part of the disability community, forming lifelong friendships, and holistic personal growth, which shifted their mindset and identity. These findings align with a previous study (Whaley et al., 2023) showing that 142 adaptive sports participants described their experience as extraordinary and transformative, supporting that para-collegiate sports promote personal improvements for student-athletes with disabilities.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study contributes valuable insights to adaptive sports literature and suggests directions for future research, limitations exist. The complexity of the Guttman scale may have caused errors, as participants needed more instructions on responding correctly. Additionally, the self-selection of participants could have introduced reporter bias into the findings.

This study calls for continued research on para-collegiate sports experiences. Future studies should examine program resources and athlete and team dynamics, exploring potential relationships with EIS scores. Identifying predictors (e.g., program characteristics) impacting EIS scores could help develop para-collegiate programs that foster extraordinary experiences. Further research should clarify burnout and lack of social support among para-collegiate athletes to determine if these are broader trends or unique to this sample.

Conclusion

This study, the first to use the Experience Type Framework to examine the impact of para-collegiate sports, revealed both challenges and extraordinary impacts of para-collegiate student-athlete experiences. Key findings show disparities between para-collegiate and able-bodied intercollegiate programs in access to athletic departments and university resources, leading to negative repercussions like lack of visibility and program development. Addressing these disparities can create more equitable opportunities for student-athletes with disabilities. Despite these challenges, para-collegiate sports facilitated primarily transformative, extraordinary experiences, as indicated by EIS quantitative data.

Participants' narratives highlighted the transformative power of their para-collegiate sports experience, emphasizing a strong sense of community, personal growth, and identity formation. This study underscores both the successes and areas for improvement in para-collegiate sports, advocating for more inclusive and supportive athletic departments and universities. It calls on athletic departments, universities, and the NCAA to take action toward creating equitable intercollegiate sports programs for all student-athletes.

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“No One’s Thriving During Football Season”: A Narrative Inquiry on the Biopsychosocial Well-Being of Collegiate Athletic Administrators and Their Partners

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Research has hinted at the effects organizational culture may have on sport employees and their families, but this relationship has primarily been explored through the experiences of the employees and has not considered the experiences of their families. Additionally, this relationship has not been directly examined from a biopsychosocial (i.e., biological, psychological, and social well-being) perspective. Thus, the purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the stories of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to construct their narratives of well-being within the context of sport. Nine dyads—a college athletic administrator and their partner—participated in narrative interviews. Following a two-step narrative analysis, two distinct narrative archetypes were constructed: *organized life around sport* and *organized life around family*. This suggests that, in contrast to much previous literature, there are some sport employees who are prioritizing nonwork life over career. The findings also suggest sport influences domains of health through non-direct changeways, which has implications for the biopsychosocial model of health. Specifically, for both archetypes, work in sport both enhanced and diminished employees’ and their partners’ biopsychosocial health, but participants focused mostly on the everyday impacts on social health. Practical implications for sport organizations include systemic changes to allow for better work-life negotiations.

Keywords: employee wellness, organizational culture, health, changeways, qualitative



Working in sport is known as being a demanding profession (Weight et al., 2021). Employees who work in sport routinely describe an organizational culture that requires atypical work hours and emphasizes presenteeism, which can lead to prioritizing work over personal obligations (Saxe et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2021). Further, research on sport employees suggests their (over)engagement can lead to work addiction (Huml et al., 2021) and work addiction has been linked to burnout (Taylor et al., 2019), which can contribute to negative physical health outcomes such as coronary heart disease, chronic pain, and chronic fatigue (Salvagioni et al., 2017). Both relationships are also impacted by work-family conflict, which suggests factors outside the organization have an important influence on these work-related experiences and may lead to employees leaving an organization. Within the college sport sector, organizations are experiencing what Weaver (2022) calls “the great resignation” (para. 1), whereby employees are leaving the industry at rates twice as high as similar industries.

For many of those employees who do stay in the industry, this conflict and balance stems from a combination of long, nontraditional hours, travel, and the stress of high-performance expectations, among other things (e.g., Graham & Dixon, 2017), and have been found to force employees to relegate personal life responsibilities to a secondary role (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Interestingly, research has illustrated college sport employees may be making purposeful decisions to limit romantic engagements, delay starting a family, or miss family events so they can adequately devote time to their job (e.g., Saxe et al., 2023), which suggests the organizational culture within the college sport industry has an impact on employees that extends beyond themselves and their workplaces.

Kim et al. (2017) suggested scholars examine factors that influence employees’ work experience and well-being, which we understand as including factors beyond simply psychological. Importantly, previous work has largely used proxies to measure employee well-being (e.g., burnout, exploitation; Huml et al., 2021; Weight et al., 2021) and it is therefore critical to begin explicitly measuring well-being from a holistic perspective. As such, we incorporate the biopsychosocial (BPS) model, which conceptualizes holistic health as interactions between an individual’s biological, psychological, and social well-being. Further, because an employee’s health includes an analysis of their biological, psychological, and social well-being, it is necessary to understand the perceptions of the individuals who contribute to their social well-being (e.g., partners). Indeed, the work-family experiences of one partner can impact their partner’s attitudes and well-being (Radcliffe et al., 2023). Even though research has hinted at the effects an organizational culture characterized by imbalance may have on employees and their families (e.g., Saxe et al., 2023), making these dyadic considerations compelling, the examination of this relationship is notably absent from the literature. Thus, the purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the relationship stories of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to construct their narratives of well-being within the context of sport.

Literature Review

Understanding Sport Employees: Sport Identity

One factor that may reduce turnover intention and improve employee performance is a sport employee's identification with the sport organization (e.g., Oja et al., 2019; Swanson & Kent, 2015). Significantly, identification with sport can contribute to college sport employees' identification with their organization, as Oja and colleagues (2015) argue sport employees gain belonging as "quasi-fans" (p. 585). Indeed, Swanson and Kent (2015) found team *and* organizational identification predicted job commitment as well as other factors important for employee retention (i.e., satisfaction, motivation). Such social identification may enhance both sport employee and organizational performance (Oja et al., 2023). This body of work overall suggests sport employees who are highly identified with their sport identity and organizational identity may be more satisfied at work and less likely to leave the organization.

However, Oja and Zeimers (2025) caution that, while sport passion for many sport employees is a protective factor against burnout, when passion for sport becomes obsessive it may have negative outcomes impacting their nonwork life. Consequently, while there may be positive outcomes from sport and organizational identification, it may also have detrimental impacts on sport employees' social relationships. This may explain the fact that burnout occurs even in sport employees who find meaning in their work due to an overwork climate (Huml et al., 2025). The next section thus further explores the social relationships of sport employees.

Understanding Sport Employees: Social Relationships

Though much of what we understand about sport employees' well-being is understood from the examination of associated variables (e.g., turnover intent, job satisfaction; Taylor et al., 2024) there is an important line of work focusing on the social relationships of employees (e.g., work-life conflict, balance; Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Graham & Dixon, 2017). These social relationships, typically studied through the concept of work-family interface, hinge on the premise that there is a finite amount of time in a single day, thereby creating competing demands between work and personal life responsibilities of employees (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). For example, employees may face pressure at work with respect to time stemming from a rigid, inflexible schedule and pressure in their personal life with respect to time needed for family responsibilities. As such, time devoted to one role (e.g., work) can make it challenging to fulfill the time requirements of another role (e.g., personal life).

Though predominant theory (e.g., role theory, scarcity theory) suggests balance between an employee's work and life outside of work is achievable, sport scholars have shown otherwise, identifying a "culture characterized by *imbalance*" (Taylor et al., 2021, p. 305). This imbalance is also likely to impact employee satisfaction and turnover intent (Graham & Smith, 2022), as imbalance can lead to decreased employee satisfaction with their work-life interface (Saxe et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2021). Relatedly, work also notes the heightened challenges and unique experiences

for dual-career couples, which ties in directly with this study as it is critical to include the perspectives of partners in understanding the holistic employee experience (Hong et al., 2022). Importantly, including the perspectives of collegiate sport employees' partners can provide insight into exactly how these negotiations take place, and allows for a more nuanced examination of how work experiences impact familial relationships, which is missing in the literature. To fill this gap, this study includes the voices of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to holistically conceptualize well-being.

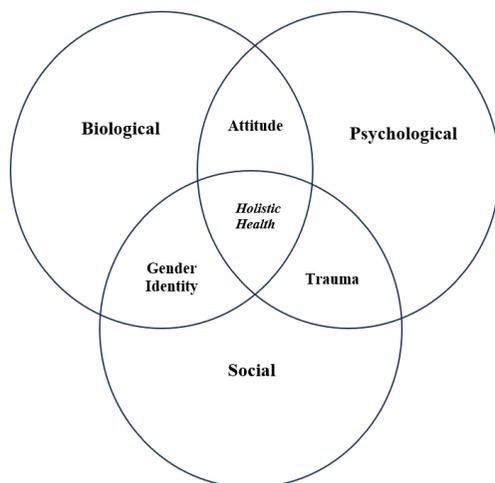
Conceptual Framework: Biopsychosocial Model of Health

The biopsychosocial (BPS) model of health underscores the biological (e.g., genetics, sex), psychological (e.g., cognition, emotion), and social (e.g., interpersonal relationships, cultural background) influences that co-create an individual's well-being (Engel & Bloch, 1992). In a departure from the medical model of care that relies on somatic data, work using the BPS seeks to understand ways in which health is influenced by both biology, and psychological and social factors, and how biology itself is also constructed by psychological and social factors (Haslam et al., 2021).

However, the BPS may be too vague, and thus unmeasurable, and traditionally does not explore how the three factors of health intersect (e.g., Karunamuni et al., 2021). Therefore, Karunamuni and colleagues (2021) argued the model is better conceptualized as individual pathways (i.e., S-->P, B-->P, etc.). However, viewing the BPS as pathways necessitates viewing the biological, psychological, and social components as distinct, measurable constructs, which makes viewing the human as a "*whole person*" not possible (Haslam, et al., 2021, p., 2; emphasis original). Therefore, Haslam et al. (2021) further conceptualized the BPS as integrated changeways between each of these elements, suggesting the elements of health are "themselves being transformed through interconnection" (p. 2). In this way, a trigger in one domain—positive change in the social domain—can lead to positive changes in the biological and psychological domain, reconstructing an individual's social identity as well as overall well-being. For example, when an employee begins working in a new athletic department, this employee may begin as simply the same person in a different environment. However, over time the employee may internalize their experiences to where they transform as a person because of the environmental and social factors influencing them (Haslam et al., 2021).

Therefore, the BPS model allows a framework for understanding the overarching factors that construct well-being, with well-being conceptualized as an individual's overall perception, satisfaction, and fulfillment within their life experience (Center for Disease Control, 2018). The BPS model is commonly viewed as a Venn diagram (see Figure 1; National Institutes of Health, 2022), wherein overlap of domains construct different aspects of well-being. For example, when the psychological domain interacts with the biological domain it can construct an individual's attitude, when the psychological domain interacts with the social domain it can construct an individual's experience of trauma, and when the social domain interacts with the biolog-

Figure 1
Example of Biopsychosocial Model domain interactions



ical domain it can construct an individual's gender identity. When all domains come together, they construct an individual's holistic well-being, which can also impact overall job satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Whelpley et al., 2023). As Whelpley et al. (2023) posit, "how these three domains overlap is what makes the BPS unique and potentially fruitful in the work environment" (p. 28).

Biopsychosocial Model of Health in Sport

The BPS model has been used to explore several phenomena within sport. For example, van Voorthuizen et al. (2022) used the BPS model to explore BPS profiles of survivors of sexual harassment and abuse (SHA) within youth sport. The results indicated biological factors (e.g., age of sport participant, sex), psychological factors (e.g., self-esteem, emotional vulnerability), and social factors (e.g., familial structure/relationships, power dynamic within the sport setting) converged to inform the BPS risk factors for experiencing SHA within sport settings (van Voorthuizen et al., 2022). The BPS model has also been used to explore the occurrence of concussions in sport (Clacy et al., 2020), return to sport following an ACL injury (Slater et al., 2022), and eSports players' well-being (Shulze et al., 2021). Specifically, Shulze and colleagues examined how a lack of sleep of esports athletes (biological factors) led to more disagreements with family (social factor) which increases individual stress of the athlete (psychological factor), showing how BPS factors do operate as direct changeways. In totality, research using the BPS model in sport settings provides support for the BPS definition of well-being, and for how the different domains of health can act as direct changeways to construct an individual's well-being. However, the BPS model has yet to be used to explore the well-being of sport employees, despite the clear social aspects of an employee's health (i.e., work-family conflict; Taylor et al., 2021).

Method

This study was grounded in a constructivist epistemological approach to narrative inquiry, wherein “narratives are socially constructed” by the researcher and participant(s) (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007, p. 151). Research that employs narrative inquiry either collects stories as data, analyzes all data using narrative methods, or both (Clandinin, 2006). As detailed later, this study specifically used narrative interviewing methods and narrative thematic analysis.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological approach for this study for three primary reasons: (a) match of research purpose (O’Riley & Kiyimba, 2015); (b) match with conceptual framework (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017); and (c) researchers’ positionality (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). First, the focus of the research is on the narrative arc of a relationship, not just a specific moment or experience, and how major decisions (i.e., narrative turning points; Wieslander & Löfgren, 2025) in the relationship intertwined with one partner’s career in sport, which matches with a narrative methodology (O’Riley & Kiyimba, 2015). Secondly, the conceptual model of the manuscript also has a narrative foundation, so that the methodology is aligned with the conceptual frame (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017). As Engel (1997) argues in their descriptions of BPS model in practice, “narrative style facilitates vicarious participation of the listener in whatever the patient was or is experiencing” (p. 526). Finally, in a constructivist approach to narrative inquiry, the identity of the researcher influences research design (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). All authors have been professionally trained in qualitative methods with the lead author being trained in narrative therapy and therapeutic narrative interviewing, an expertise that added to the methodological approach of this work. Three members of the research team identify as White women, with two being in heterosexual long-term relationships and one being single. The lead researcher is a licensed behavioral health professional, the second author is in a long-term relationship with a college sport employee, and the third author is a former college sport employee. The fourth author identifies as a White man who is single. These identities were consistently reflected on during data analysis discussion, which further contextualized the participants’ narratives.

Participants

Participants were recruited based on purposeful criterion sampling, as specific criteria needed to be met for participation in the study (Patton, 2015). To participate in this study, participants were mid-career (minimum five years in the industry) collegiate sport administrators working at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) DI institution and in a long-term relationship with someone who does not currently work in collegiate sport administration. Prospective participants were identified through professional networks and contacted via publicly available email addresses. If they agreed to participate, they provided their partner’s email address, and all study information was also sent to their partner. Once the sport employee and their partner both agreed to participate in the study, individual consent forms were sent to each member of the dyad. Nine dyads (18 total participants) participated. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Table 1
Summary of participant demographics

Pseudonyms	Sport Employee Job Title	Length of Time in Current Position	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Family Structure	Length of Relationship at time of interview	Number of Job Moves (During Relationship)
Jennifer Mike	Jennifer—Senior Associate Athletics Director	Two years	Female Male	Caucasian Caucasian	Married, no children	>Six years	One
Ben Natasha	Ben—Associate Athletic Director	Three years	Male Female	White White	Married, two children	>Ten years	Three
Kristene Kevin	Kristene—Director	Sixteen years	Female Male	Black White	Married, no children	>Twenty-seven years	None
Andrea Penelope	Andrea—Executive Director	One year	Female Female	White White	Married, two children	>Fourteen years	Two
Wyatt Caroline	Wyatt—Senior Athletics Director	Nine years	Male Female	White White	Married, two children	>Twenty-four years	Three
Ross Rachel	Ross-Associate Athletics Director	<1 year	Male Female	White White	Married, two children	>Ten years	Three
Craig Gail	Craig- Director of Academics	Two years	Male Female	White White	Married, one child	>Fourteen years	Two
Danny Pam	Danny-Associate Athletic Director	One and a half years	Male Female	White White	Married, two children	>Fourteen years	Four
Leyla Tiff	Leyla-Assistant Director	Seven years	Female Female	White White	Engaged, no children	>Ten years	Two

Data Collection

Borrowing from aspects of life story interview methods (Atkinson, 2007), semi-structured interviews focused on understanding the narrative arc, and narrative turning points (Wieslander & Löfgren, 2025), of each relationship. In line with previous narrative inquiries in sport management literature (e.g., Porter et al., 2024), each participant completed two virtual semi-structured interviews: one individual and one with their partner ($n = 3$ per dyad; $n = 27$ total). A semi-structured interview guide was created following both Hollingsworth and Dybdahl's (2007) and Kim's (2016) suggestions for narrative interviewing. Questions were constructed as open-ended and sought to elicit stories of experiences related to their relationships and major turning points in their relationships and in their careers, with specific attention the BPS health of participants across all stories. Interviews with employees focused on stories around their career in sport and their BPS well-being. Interviews with their partners focused on stories of how they have navigated their partner's career in sport and their own, as well as their partner's, BPS well-being. Finally, together participants explored the progression of their relationship and the stories of how career decisions and other major turning points were influenced by their relationship and their families and how these turning points impacted their BPS well-being. The average length of each interview was 55 minutes, with an average of two hours and 45 minutes per dyad. All interviews took place on virtual video-conferencing software, were transcribed verbatim and de-identified with a participant chosen or given (on participant request) pseudonym.

Data Analysis

A two-step narrative analysis was used. The first round was a narrative mode of analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995), examining "why and how things happened in the way they did" (Kim, 2016, p. 197). In this first round of coding, a relationship timeline for each dyad was constructed to identify the specific narrative turning points throughout each dyad's relationship timeline, adapting protocols from Allan et al. (2018). The research team then met to group code the relationship timelines, considering what themes were present across the stories included in each timeline.

The second round of analysis was an analysis of narratives, which seeks to arrange findings "around descriptions of themes that are common across collected stories" (Kim, 2016, p. 196). The research team first coded participant's stories based on the identified narrative turning points in the participant's relationship timelines. For example, if a move to a new state was a narrative turning point for a dyad, then all the stories that touched on the move across all three interviews were coded as that narrative turning point. Then, for each narrative turning point's category of stories, coding of the content of the stories followed Riessman's (2008) approach to narrative thematic analysis. The research team first individually open-coded the stories of each dyad. The research team then met to group code these stories with specific focus on the role of sport.

Trustworthiness

Narrative research takes the stance of “interpretation of faith” (Kim, 2016, p. 193), the belief that participants tell stories that are true to their subjective experience. In this research design specifically, the third interview proved a key trustworthiness measure. Many stories that were told in the individual interviews were re-told in the partner interviews, where one partner would fill in details the other partner had forgotten or neglected to add the first time the story was told. In this way, including the partner interview acted as a data triangulation measure, as it provided a way to validate, “the consistency of information at a different time and by different means” (Patton, 2015, p. 661).

In both phases of data analysis, the research team also shared and reflected on their interview notes. Notes taken during the interviews included both specific observations as well as the researcher’s thoughts throughout the interview to encourage critical and reflexive narrative analysis of participants’ stories. These reflections sensitized the research team to many of the unspoken aspects of storytelling, such as long pauses or fiddling with objects on their desk when telling a difficult story. Furthermore, in the third interview where each dyad was interviewed together, the interviewer was able to observe how each couple co-constructed their relationship narrative.

Additional trustworthiness measures included analytical memoing and researcher triangulation. Memoing is the process of recording reflexive notes throughout the research process that focuses on the relationship of concepts and the reasons certain data were coded in particular ways (Saldaña, 2016). Throughout the data analysis process, each member of the research team kept analytical memos to provide the basis for the group coding sessions. The group coding process was also a space for reflexive peer de-briefing, where investigator triangulation of the data was reached, as four members of the research team all provided their interpretations of the data (Patton, 2015).

Findings

Two narrative archetypes were constructed: *organized life around sport*, where dyads made major life decisions around the sport employee’s job in sport, and *organized life around family*, where the dyads made major life decisions around family. The themes (a) sport first (b) work environment, and (c) social health were constructed in the *organized life around sport* archetype, together showing how the sport employee’s career and work environments influenced their own and their partners’ BPS health. The themes (a) “right” fit, (b) career sacrifice, and (c) social health were constructed in the *organized life around family* archetype, together showing how, even though they made major life decisions to prioritize family, a career in sport still impacted everyday moments.

Organized Life Around Sport Archetype

This archetype represents relationship timelines of four dyads where the couple made major life decisions (i.e., narrative turning points) based on one partner's career in sport.

Sport First

Throughout the relationship narratives of the dyads in the sport archetype, the data suggested the sport employee's job, and career, was prioritized. Andrea and Penelope exemplified this, as the couple moved repeatedly for Andrea's career in sport, sometimes moving after only one or two years at an institution. Penelope, who is in the medical field, had to get a new state license whenever they moved, which limited her ability to find work quickly. Andrea recognized the impact of this on their family, stating "For me, a new job means throwing myself all in at it. For Penelope, she's had a rougher journey, because she doesn't have a job and that's hard." Interestingly though, Penelope cited her experience as a collegiate athlete as part of the reason why they were able to navigate Andrea's career, the multiple moves across the country, and challenges associated with her career licensure.

Some partners made career changes to support their partner's career in sport. For example, Caroline left her career, as both partners working full-time was difficult with Wyatt's career in sport. Caroline reflected on this decision:

Wyatt said from the beginning how much easier his life was with me not working, and I think that was really the big impact: it took a lot of stress off of him, off of our relationship, and things like that for me to stay at home.

Relatedly, Craig stayed in a job in athletics he disliked for the hopes he would move up in his career despite the negative impact the job had on himself and his family. His partner, Gail, reflected on the challenging times during Craig's career: "Honestly, I don't think I was very supportive... I was getting to the point where, maybe this isn't it. Maybe you're never (going to) be appreciated in this job, and maybe (you should) quit and do something else." Craig finally got a new job in sport, which was a major narrative turning point in their relationship story; however, despite this positive change with Craig's new job, Craig's career in sport continued to come first in smaller, everyday moments. Gail discussed how he will answer work calls despite being in the middle of "family time" to the point where their son has also noticed work comes first. Gail recalled her son telling her, "I don't play with daddy. I play with you, because Daddy's busy. Daddy's not around. Daddy's on the phone."

For Leyla and Tiff, who currently do not have children, this theme was also present in the smaller moments. Leyla's job in collegiate athletics administration has a lot of time demands, which Tiff understands as she also works in athletics as medical staff. To get around the time demands, Tiff often goes to work with Leyla and helps. Leyla explained,

(Tiff) is running the clock at (a sport competition) now so, she'll come in, we will eat the pregame meal together, she'll go do her job, I'll do my job. Even before, they needed somebody to do that, during COVID, that's when (my co-worker) was like, "Would your wife be interested?" and I'm like,

“Yes, she’d be great at that, that’d be fine,”...so yeah like it’s almost part of our relationship somehow.

Despite this allowing Leyla and Tiff to spend time together, this time was spent working. It is also important to note Leyla and Tiff both worked in sport and repeatedly mentioned the importance of having a partner who understood the demands and cadence of working in sport. This understanding and shared passion allowed them both to prioritize ways to integrate each other into their time at work, because they understood it may not be possible to see each other otherwise. For example, on game nights they could sit down for a meal together at 11 p.m. Despite sport coming first, they continued to adapt their relationship around their sport schedules. Thus, whether it was in the major life decisions and narrative turning points in the dyad’s relationship, or in everyday stories, sport came first.

Work Environment

Even though these couples had made specific choices to prioritize the employee’s career in sport, many sport employees still experienced negative working environments, which impacted their partner’s and their own health. Wyatt reflected on the presenteeism in sport and suggested it may come from the over-work culture in sport:

We have a bad tendency in college athletics that when you get promoted from within you never get to drop the stuff you were doing, you just take more on, and that’s been my case. Unfortunately, throughout this is, I’ve just taken more on and never dropped it.

He ended his discussion of his career path recalling his recent doctor’s visit: “I actually had an appointment with my heart doctor, and he sat me down and said, ‘Something’s got to change, like you have to change, you’re 39, and it’s not good.’” His partner, Caroline, agreed, having seen the impact Wyatt’s career has had on his overall health and wellness. Caroline even observed of Wyatt’s and his co-workers’ seasonal health saying, “No one’s thriving during football season.” Craig similarly saw a negative impact on his overall wellness after spending almost 11 years in a toxic work environment. He had gotten the job, despite him not being who his boss had wanted to hire, which had long-lasting negative impacts on their working relationship. Working in the toxic work environment created stress in his marriage, as Craig admits, “I’m not going to so (far as to) blame (my boss) for any early marital issues we had, but it certainly did not help.” Craig eventually went on anxiety medication due to the stress of working in that athletic department. Gail, also reflected on how difficult this time was on their relationship:

There has definitely been a time where we were both almost done. Craig and I both were so tired of living in (the state) and his boss (at the time) was absolutely horrendous, and he was miserable and depressed, and he just hated going to work every day, and I couldn’t stand it. It was awful.

After Craig was finally able to get a new job, Gail recalled it, “was a huge, I mean huge, success.” This change allowed for a turning point in Craig’s career that reverberated in positive consequences felt in both Craig and Gail’s well-being and their

relationship. Craig even attributed positive changes in his physical health to positive moments in his current position. He specifically noted how the father of a recruit recognized his impact on his son's positive impression of the athletic department. Craig, having a doctor's appointment scheduled for later that afternoon, said his blood pressure was the lowest it had ever been. Craig tied this instance of being recognized positively for his work directly to his positive physical health.

Andrea also discussed how her boss at her previous institution created a culture of toxic presenteeism. She spoke of one specific holiday weekend where she decided to get a cup of coffee instead of attending the baseball game. The next Monday during the morning staff meeting her boss called her out:

(He said), "I missed you at the baseball game." That's a shitty comment, like what are you talking about? So that was brutal, but I just accepted it, and I just let that become what I did. So, I wouldn't miss very much stuff.

However, in her position at a new institution, the culture seems to be much healthier. Her partner Penelope could even tell how the change in institution and position has had a positive influence on Andrea. She said, "I've never seen her...happier than she's been here." Therefore, despite the overwork culture in sport, positive work environments were a protective factor for employee's wellness.

Social Health

All the couples in this archetype discussed how the employees' careers in sport had negative impacts on the couples' social health. Gail specifically reflected on how Craig's career in sport has impacted their relationship: "Resentment, I mean, I have definitely resented him for feeling like my career is on the back burner or always plays second to his career in all the ways. Even still, sometimes I get annoyed." For Leyla and Tiff, the time demands of work in sport comes into discussions of having children. When thinking about what the time demands of a career in sport may mean for having to miss big family moments, Leyla reflected, "it might be hard for me to be like this (job in sport) is definitely worth it." With family structure being a key component of social health, Leyla's career in sport has a clear influence on the couple's social health. Influencing another aspect of social health, Wyatt's career in collegiate athletics also created challenges for him and his partner's ability to make friends and form a support group where they live. He reflected, "I mean, we go out to eat and people approach us about issues (in the athletic department). They don't care if I've got my kids there on a Sunday afternoon. They just come up and start talking and we've had a difficult time (making true friends)."

For these dyads, their social health was related to their physical and mental health. All participants discussed how the employees' careers in collegiate athletics created stress in social relationships, which manifested in mental and emotional stress that many times negatively impacted physical health, as Andrea's reflection of her inability to cope during a stressful coaching transition at work exemplified: "I drank a lot. I think I cope by drinking. That's never good...if I look back at that moment. I did not use good, healthy coping mechanisms." She even discussed how she felt guilty attending family funerals and friends' weddings as she missed work.

Overall, although a career in sport was clearly important to each dyad, having one partner working in collegiate athletic administration negatively impacted both the employee and their partners' BPS well-being.

Organized Life Around Family Archetype

This archetype represents relationship timelines of five dyads where the couple ultimately made major life decisions (i.e., narrative turning points) based on their family life.

Career Decisions

All dyads in this archetype discussed career decisions to prioritize time with their family. Several couples discussed moments when the sport employee took a step back in their career or took a decrease in pay to move to or remain in a job they believed to have better work-life integration. Pam recalled how Danny took a step back in his career in sport so they could be together: "We wanted to be closer to family potentially. (Danny) actually took a secondary role in the affiliate department. He went from being a director down to an assistant director, so he could move to (state) to be with me." Jennifer was recruited many times for director positions in other athletic departments, however, always chose to stay at her current job, because her husband, Mike, worked as an executive in his family business in his hometown, without an option to work remotely or in a different city. Jennifer reflected, "Since I've had this role, I've been headhunted a couple of times. The first one was...like triple my salary...but for our relationship, (our) community (here), it's not something I ever want to do." Kristene similarly had chances to move to another university during the many coaching changes she endured, however chose to stay, as her partner Kevin also worked at the same institution. Ross also turned down a position at his dream institution to remain at his current role and work towards promotion there. Interestingly, similar to the sport archetype, there were also instances when the partner of the sport employee made career decisions to prioritize family. For example, both Natasha and Pam had a career in collegiate sport, and specifically chose to leave their careers as they did not think having a family was feasible with both partners working in collegiate sport. Either way, our data suggested all couples in the family dyad made some type of career decision with the goal of spending more time with their family.

"Right" Fit

Even though these couples made specific decisions to prioritize family over career, the presenteeism and expectations of working in sport was still obvious in work-life negotiations. Thus, the dyads in the family archetype discussed the importance of the partner (of the sport employee) being familiar with or understanding the demands of the sport culture. Natasha and Ben met when they were both working in sport, and despite Natasha leaving the field, she has to remind herself of the time demands:

That's one thing I have forgotten, I think, as I'm further removed is like, "What do you mean they're calling you at 10 p.m., don't pick up!" And then

he's like, "But you used to do the same thing." (Like, I do remember), we were on vacation in LA with my friends, and I'm trying to set up a soccer interview from the museum and I'm always, "Wait yeah, I did do that."

Reflecting on this Natasha concluded, "I think my background in sports has really helped just like understanding it... I'm grateful I at least know where he's coming from, the long hours, and the fact that you can't always leave work at work the way other people can." Indeed, in recalling their engagement, Natasha, who was still working in college sport at the time, remembered, "I was following the (undergraduate university) tennis match" at the winery right before Ben proposed.

Although Mike never worked in sport, Jennifer discussed how his high-pressure job as an executive along with his people skills makes it easy for him to fit into her work life. Mike recalled many times when he would spend time with Jennifer's co-workers, coaches, and donors while Jennifer was working: "There's been times, we went to the (school) sports club, I got to go see (player) who played for (university)...I got to see a high school basketball coach...so you know, we got to go to that." Jennifer added, "I can see if Mike wasn't good with that and not easy with strangers, and I can see why that would be a really hard thing. But that's right, I would just pawn him off (when I was working games)." Similarly, Kevin, who does not work in sport, also prioritizes going to athletic events where his wife Kristene is working: "I love going to athletic events. I don't know anything about sports, but I love going to them." Kristene added, "He used to do that too when we were in college, he would come to the women's basketball games and sit up top and read his book." Despite differences in personalities, both Mike and Kevin were willing to attend athletic events their partners were working and adapted their own needs to those events.

Partners of sport employees were also willing to integrate family life into work. For example, Natasha recalled recently taking their children to see Ben at work:

I brought the boys, and we ate dinner and, "Look at dad with the radio with the microphone on," and my older son, (who is) four, and he went up on stage afterwards and put the headset on, it was very cute. So, it was only from six to seven. So, it's before their bedtime, so it all kind of worked out. So, I think I'll do that more this year. It's just a way that we could see him and be, I guess feel involved, in his work, instead of it being another night that daddy's away and I do bedtime by myself.

Rachel similarly discussed the importance of bringing their kids to see Ross work during a swim meet, sharing, "He wanted to be down there (by the pool) to show his support (for the team), but he wasn't just leaving me with both kids." Jennifer and Mike got married on the Saturday of a rivalry football game, and they made sure that Jennifer's co-workers still got to attend their wedding. As Jennifer recalled their wedding day:

My boss and my staff came, and they brought the (team) flag. So, they crashed our wedding, but we told them to. We were like, "Look, you're going to need drinks either way. We're going win and you're going celebrate, or we're going get our asses kicked and drink." So that was fun.

Another way couples in this archetype organized their everyday lives through sport was suggesting their health and wellness was determined by sport schedules. For example, they prepared for the fall to be difficult on themselves and their partners, while they could relax a bit in the summer when college sports were not in season. As Ben reflected on the summer months, “I’m always very happy in the summer. I do feel like that correlates with my peak mental and physical well-being.” Natasha, his partner agreed, noting she gets anxiety when football season starts up again: “Going from summer to fall and things do get busier, I get a little anxious... like the boys are back to school and Ben has been busy (with work).”

Overall, even as these couples made career decisions to prioritize family, it still took the “right” partner, who understood the demands of sport or could “fit in” to the sport world, as the sport employee still made every-day decisions that prioritized work in sport.

Social Health

Making the decision to prioritize family did seem to improve the BPS well-being of these participants. Both Mike and Jennifer commented on how being near family was important to them. For example, in discussing her relationship and mental health, Jennifer pointed to good communication with Mike, and the importance of community: “(Mike and I) usually eat dinner together... We try to do church on Sunday mornings when we have the time or we’re not traveling, and his dad and grandma go to the same church. So, we get to see some family.” Similarly, Natasha could not imagine trying to balance her own job, Ben’s career in sport, and the schedule of her children without living near both sets of grandparents. She recalled a specific moment she realized the importance of living near family:

The week after I had our first son, Ben went to (university) for a gymnastics meet. And it was one of those things where I said, “That’ll be fine.” And I had never had a baby before. So, when the baby got here, I said, “You’re not leaving,” and it was too late because the plan was already made. So, my mom and my sister came and stayed at our house for four weeks... I don’t know how I would have made it through (otherwise).

Ben added, “I am grateful for that. Her mom and her sister, who both live close by, were able to come over and they spent the night because the baby still wasn’t sleeping through the night, he was six-days old... coming back to that full circle idea of being close to our families.”

Despite the benefits of being near family and friends, many times at the cost of career moves, there were still moments when the sport employee’s social health suffered. For example, Ben has left family events early so he can go to work, and Jennifer discussed having to miss a family wedding. Though Kristene and Kevin had put their family first, both turning down jobs to stay employed at the same institution, they still saw decreases to their social health in the form of an inability to have children. Both Kristene and Kevin had prioritized their education and then their careers, albeit staying at the same institution, and, when they decided they were ready to have children, Kristene was unable to get pregnant. This all seemed to weigh on many of

the sport employees, with many participants still discussing guilt over not spending time with family and loved ones, even though they made major career decisions to prioritize family. Thus, overall, couples in this archetype still experienced diminished BPS well-being in some ways because of their career in sport, despite overall differing narrative arc than the other archetype.

Discussion

This narrative inquiry explored the relationship stories of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to construct their narratives of well-being within the context of sport. Importantly, our findings suggest that despite differences in decisions related to major narrative turning points (i.e., organizing life around sport or family), all dyads constructed everyday moments around sport, signaling an industry culture that prioritizes work over nonwork. This study extends our understanding of sport employees' holistic well-being in several ways. First, this study illustrates how the organizational culture of collegiate athletic departments influences the experiences of an employee's partner, with the partner's experiences having additional impacts on the employee. Second, as clearly demonstrated within our findings section, sport employees are recognizing, and at times prioritizing, their social health as the most salient in their everyday lives. Third, contrary to previous literature, a subset of our participants organized their lives around family, giving up opportunities for promotion to prioritize the needs of their nonwork domain. Fourth, work in sport had both BPS health benefits as well as negative impacts, suggesting *non-direct changeways* of health specifically related to sport identity.

Theoretical Implications

Importantly, by interviewing sport employees and their partners, this research illustrated the direct impacts of organizational culture on sport employee's partners, which has been hinted at in previous research (Graham & Dixon, 2017), but not explicitly studied. Partners, across both archetypes within our sample, made life-changing decisions with respect to their work and personal lives to support the careers of the sport employees. For example, partners made decisions to quit their jobs and become stay-at-home parents to shoulder more of the responsibilities of childcare and home care. Additionally, partners moved across the country, sometimes away from their support systems, so the sport employee could secure a promotion. Finally, partners often provided support to enhance the sport employee's BPS health which resulted from the negative impacts of the athletic department's culture (e.g., bringing kids to work events so the employee did not have to sacrifice family time for work obligations). Though all the partners seemed to make these decisions in collaboration with the sport employees, they expressed frustrations and sadness when discussing giving up a career they loved or leaving their family and friends who helped them manage the heavy workload while the sport employee worked.

Though sport employees and their partners discussed how an athletic department's culture had impacts on their BPS health, they recognized the impacts on their

social health most readily. This is perhaps because the impacts of social health were the most constant and evident within their everyday lives. For example, biological health seemed to fluctuate based on timing, where taking time away from work during the summer led to improvements to biological health and required overwork during football season led to decreased biological health. Similarly, psychological health was greatly impacted by the organizational culture of a department (i.e., sport employees saw decreases in anxiety and depression when they left toxic cultures). However, social health saw continued impacts from working in the sport industry, regardless of position and athletic department. This manifested in the ability to make and maintain personal friendships, resentment of the sport employees from their partners, and decisions around starting families. This occurred even in the dyads who made major life decisions around family.

Findings also expand our understanding of the way in which sport employees make decisions regarding their career, family, and well-being. Much of the previous work regarding work-family interface has suggested employees largely prioritize their career over their families (Taylor et al., 2021; Weight et al., 2021). As such, Taylor and colleagues (2021) theorized college sport employees will adjust their personal life domain to allow the prioritization of their work duties. In this way, potential incompatibilities are reduced, but all accommodations are made to the employees' personal life, suggesting a burden is placed on employees' families (Taylor et al., 2021). What is noteworthy, however, within our study's findings is data showed majority of couples (five of the nine) organized major narrative turning points in their life around family (as opposed to around work), even if that meant making decisions to not prioritize their career. These couples made conscious decisions to not pursue new career opportunities to remain close to their family or prioritize their partner's career. This finding is directly in contrast to the type of work-life adjustments Taylor and colleagues (2021) suggested college athletic employees engage in. However, even when participants organized their lives around their family, on a day-to-day basis they would place their work obligations before their family. In these instances, participants and their partners perceived a decrease in their overall BPS health because of their work, while simultaneously improving other aspects of their life by prioritizing their family. Finally, many participants in this archetype recognized the limiting factors associated with prioritizing their family (e.g., hindering their career growth/mobility). This suggests all employees did make some type of accommodations to their personal life, in accordance with previous research on the types of accommodations college sport employees make to their personal life (Taylor et al., 2021).

The participant stories also support the BPS conception of health that has already been suggested in other sport populations. This scholarship has either categorized health experiences of participants into the different BPS domains (e.g., van Voorthuizen et al., 2022) or has sought to understand the changeways of the BPS (i.e., how one domain influences the other; Shulze et al., 2021). However, the fact that participants' work-life negotiations are more nuanced than laid out in previous research further supports the need to consider sport employee well-being from a BPS

lens but exploring such negotiations as *non-direct* changeways in the co-construction of employee well-being.

Specifically, for participants in this study, identity as a sport employee (psychological) interacted with work life in sport and their familial relationships (social) and had impacts on physical health (biological). However, these interactions were neither wholly positive nor wholly negative, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of employee well-being. Previous work has suggested sport employees being highly identified with sport leads to better work experiences, such as increased work engagement, positive work attitudes, and sense of community in the workplace (Oja et al. 2015, 2023; Swanson & Kent, 2015). However, Huml and colleagues (2021) suggest there is a tipping point whereby positive work engagement turns to negative work addiction—an integration of psychological domain to social domain and back to psychological domain.

Overall, the findings of this study largely support both conceptions of health, as sport identity had both negative and positive influences on participants' holistic health. For employees in this study, their sport identity is so entrenched it became the identity of their relationship too, as both employees and their partners organized many of their day-to-day decisions (i.e., the time the partner and sport employee have dinner), their temporal understanding of their relationships (i.e., remembering major life events, such as the day they got engaged, or small life moments, such as remembering it took a long time to get cable setup after a move, because it coincided with a sporting event), and even conceptions of health itself (i.e., linking positive or negative health outcomes to sport) around sport, which ultimately enhanced aspects of their BPS well-being. For dyads in both archetypes, however, this construction perhaps further perpetuated long-term commitment to a negative work-life integration—the partner “gets it” so they always handle family chores on the weekend (positive social well-being) so the employee can work the Saturday football game, even if it means missing family events (negative social well-being).

However, the recognition and often acceptance of some of these negative BSP health impacts of working in sport may be justified by the sport employees' sport identity and passion for sport (psychological domain), as employees and their partners rarely discussed the sport employee leaving the sport industry even for the dyads who made other types of career decisions to prioritize family. This supports previous research that sport employees' sport identity, sport affinity, and passion can contribute to increased job commitment (e.g., Oja et al., 2015, 2019; Swanson & Kent, 2015). Extending previous literature, our findings suggest sport employees' partners often also identify highly with sport or have a shared passion for sport (i.e., previously worked in the industry, sport fans) or identify with their partner's job in sport (i.e., even if they are not a fan, they attend events their partner is working); such a shared identity positively influenced the dyad's relationship due to shared passion and/or shared understanding. Even so, for many couples the continued prioritization of sport in major decisions and everyday life, perhaps stemming from a shared sport identity that enhanced marital well-being, at the same time negatively influenced other aspects of health (i.e., missing family events, physical health issues) and ul-

timately did often lead to relationship tensions. This conclusion supports Oja and Zeimers' (2025) paradoxical view of sport passion in sport employees and extends this understanding to include the identity of sport employees' partners.

Similar tensions were apparent in the physical health domain. Despite some participants sharing negative physical health outcomes from the stress and overwork culture in sport, several participants noted that due to their athletic identity they understand the importance of maintaining physical health. This demonstrates that the same psychological factor (i.e., sport identity) that may lead to prioritization of work obligations (decrease in social health) could also promote positive physical health behaviors (increase in physical health).

Overall, the findings of this study suggest the BPS interactions constructing the holistic health of college sport employees were nuanced, in that the psychological domain of sport employee identity had both clear negative impacts and clear positive impacts on social and physical health of college sport employees and their partners, regardless of if the employee made major life decisions around their career in sport or around their family. These nuances complicate the theorized changeways of the BPS model of health in suggesting positive change in one domain might not lead to positive changes in all domains. This contrasts with other applications of the BPS in employee wellness and sport research, which has supported *direct* changeways (e.g., Whelpely et al., 2023). Our findings do not fully support direct BPS changeways, suggesting rather that the BPS health of sport employees is many times constructed through *non-direct* changeways due to their entrenched sport identity.

Practical Implications

There are various practical implications from this study. As the results suggest sport employees recognize social health as important to their overall well-being, on an organizational level, athletic departments and work teams should consider an employee's social health and view this facet of health as a changeway for biological and psychological health. Therefore, while resources such as health care benefits supporting physical and mental health are imperative, cultivating a healthy organizational culture that integrates an employee's family and loved ones is similarly vital for supporting employee well-being. Additionally, while sport is not an industry that operates on a traditional work schedule, sport organizations can offer employees hybrid schedules and flextime to mitigate the late night, weekend work, and frequent travel that may be required of employees.

Organizations may also benefit from forced vacation usage and required log off times to ensure employees are unplugging from work and engaging in self-care behaviors aimed at enhancing their BPS health. Participants in this study—and previous work on sport employees (e.g., Saxe et al., 2023; Weight et al., 2021)—noted a culture of presenteeism, which forced employees to forego using their vacation time or feeling as though they always needed to be available to their work. Similar to mandatory recruiting dead periods by the NCAA, sport organizations could enforce mandatory vacation time or shutdowns for employees. Though this may be challenging during season, during the off season or summer, sport organizations would be

wise to prioritize time away from work. In this way, the organization is illustrating the prioritization of time for nonwork duties (e.g., family or leisure time) to prioritize BPS well-being and decrease the negative impacts of an overwork culture. Systemic changes are needed to how, when, and where sport employees work to increase retention and improve BPS well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

No study is without limitations. Although participants demographics were representative of the demographics of Division I collegiate sport administrators (NCAA, 2023), participants were not racially or ethnically diverse. In future studies, purposefully recruiting participants with diverse backgrounds can provide more insight into how experiences of oppression and discrimination influence an employee's BPS well-being. The current study also limited the scope of social sphere to romantic partners of the employees. As other loved ones are also influential in an individual's social health, exploring the perspectives of these individuals will provide further insights. Furthermore, as findings suggest non-direct changeways of the domains of health, there may be both benefits and drawbacks to employees' sport identity, such as staying in a toxic environment while at the same time creating a shared experience with one's partner. Future studies around work-life integration would benefit from directly including measures of identity to further explore these tensions and the role sport identity plays in employee well-being.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship stories of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to construct their narratives of well-being within the context of sport. Sport was considered a fruitful context as previous literature has established the industry as having a culture that requires atypical work hours, emphasizes presenteeism, and is rife with burnout and overwork cultures (e.g., Saxe et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2024). Findings of this study suggest that for both partners who made major life decisions to prioritize career in sport and who made major life decisions to prioritize family, everyday life was many times still organized around sport. This both increased certain aspects of BPS health while at the same time negatively influencing other aspects, suggesting *non-direct* changeways. These findings are important considering the growing body of literature on employee well-being, as it suggests a more nuanced understanding of work-life integration. It is critical to better understand how to holistically support employees, and their loved ones, in the distinct and demanding nature of the sport industry to recruit and retain the best talent.

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A Comparative Analysis of Name, Image, and Likeness Policies at NCAA Institutions

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In the absence of uniform national standards, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions have developed distinct name, image, and likeness (NIL) policies. This study utilized a critical theory lens to examine those policies among athletic departments competing at the Power 4 level. Institutional NIL policies and related documents were collected from publicly available sources and systematically evaluated using a content analysis methodology. This analysis revealed four major themes across institutional NIL policies: (1) use of institutional marks, (2) use of institutional facilities, (3) educational programming, and (4) disclosure requirements. Findings indicate that, while many aspects of NIL policies at Power 4 institutions are isomorphic in nature, notable differences remain in certain components, including the scope of permissible activities and NIL deal reporting mechanisms. These discrepancies raise important questions about why institutions adopt varying NIL policies, how such differences may affect college athletes, and what this indicates about power structures in college sport. Identifying these policy variations is of value to better understand their implications for athletes' ability to monetize their NIL rights and navigate a complex policy environment.

Keywords: Collegiate athletics, college athletes, sport governance, policy analysis



On June 30, 2021, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) announced it would no longer prohibit college athletes from monetizing their name, image, and likeness (NIL) through commercial activities (Hosick, 2021). This policy change was forced upon the NCAA by previously enacted state legislation permitting NIL rights for college athletes and federal antitrust case decisions eroding the NCAA's ability to enforce rules that limited athlete compensation opportunities. Therefore, this decision permitted most¹ college athletes the ability to actively seek and secure contractual agreements with third-party entities for the expressed purpose of monetary gain. The ability for college athletes to secure NIL monetization opportunities from outside entities quickly transformed the collegiate athletics ecosystem. While proponents of NIL deregulation in collegiate athletics praise the restoration of college athletes' right to publicity and control of their personal brand, it has also resulted in various regulatory challenges and ethical concerns (Corr et al., 2023; Moorman & Cocco, 2023).

Much of the activity within the NCAA marketplace is commercialized and pseudo-professionalized (Southall et al., 2023). It is also highly regulated through association bylaws. However, as college athletes entered the uncharted waters of the NIL marketplace, challenges and concerns were exacerbated by the lack of clear and uniform guidelines to assist NCAA member institutions as they adjusted to the novel NIL economy (Berg et al., 2023). Given the preeminence of state legislation in bringing about the NIL era in college athletics, the NCAA's position on matters concerning NIL was inherently limited in scope and authority. Accordingly, NCAA member institutions were largely directed to refer to their respective state NIL legislation, if applicable (Hosick, 2021). Although the NCAA has since released additional guidance for institutions to consider and, as of the 2024-2025 academic year, enshrined new NIL bylaws into the Division I manual (NCAA, 2024), the presence of distinct and differentiated state NIL legislation gave rise to what many have referred to as a "patchwork of NIL laws" (Corr et al., 2023, p. 335). Given the absence of a national regulatory standard and the intensely competitive collegiate athletics culture in the United States, NIL quickly became an unregulated component within a highly commercialized enterprise, most commonly weaponized in the recruitment of prospective college athletes (Corr et al., 2023; Magnusen & Todd, 2021). Inter-state discrepancies between permissible and prohibited NIL activities created disparate recruiting advantages for institutions in states with more lenient NIL laws or those located in states that had not enacted NIL legislation (Berg et al., 2023).

In the wake of such patchwork NIL regulations, the NCAA and its various constituencies (e.g., conference commissioners, university presidents) have lobbied for the creation of a federal NIL law (Pope et al., 2024). Meanwhile, states continue to adopt legislation prohibiting the NCAA from retaliatory or punitive action against

¹ We recognize that international college athletes represent a sizeable subset of this population who still cannot engage in NIL deals and activities at the same level as their domestic peers due to work restrictions stipulated by their F-1 visa status (Newell & Sethi, 2023; Sethi et al., 2022; Solomon et al., 2022). When we refer to the NIL rights and activities of college athletes throughout this paper, we do so with this understanding implied.

college athletes, coaches, and administrators at state institutions in relation to NIL activities (McCann, 2025). This has curtailed the NCAA's ability to ensure the legitimacy of NIL transactions, and the lack of regulatory oversight has contributed to multiple instances of unfulfilled commitments between college athletes and institutional officials (e.g., coaches, administrators; Thamel, 2024) and/or affiliates (e.g., NIL collectives, boosters; Lavigne & Murphy, 2024). The NCAA contends uniform federal legislation that preempts state-level NIL legislation is the only course of action to reestablish its authority within the NIL marketplace and "protect student-athletes from exploitation" (Nakos, 2024, para. 9).

Although further regulation of NIL activities and compensation is an often contentious and debated topic within collegiate athletics, it is increasingly evident that discrepancies in current state laws, association regulations, and institutional policies are not widely understood (Berg et al., 2023; Corr et al., 2023; Moonman & Cocco, 2023). While extant research has examined variations among state NIL laws (e.g., see Berg et al., 2023; Czekanski & Siegrist, 2024, and Moonman & Cocco, 2023 for a complete review), no study to date has sought to examine and compare variations among institutionally formulated NIL policies at the athletic department level. Correspondingly, the present study examined and critically analyzed Power 4 institutional NIL policies. Researchers sought to aid in understanding potential differences, repercussions, and apparent advantages or disadvantages impacting college athlete NIL rights resulting from distinct institutional NIL policies. In accordance with the desired aim of the study and to inform the subsequent review of literature and methodological approach, the following research questions were developed:

1. What areas of variation exist between internal NIL policies among Power 4 NCAA member institutions?
2. How do these internal NIL policy differences impact the NIL rights and earnings potential of college athletes across Power 4 NCAA member institutions?

Literature Review

Policies in Collegiate Athletics

Historically, policies regarding college athletes have focused on the balance between ensuring academic success and providing participation in competitive sports (Eckenrod & Nam, 2021; Kuroda et al., 2023). Key areas within the literature include academic integrity, health and safety concerns, mental well-being of the college athletes, and, more recently, regulation of compensation (Messina & Messina, 2022; Navarro & Malvaso, 2015; Ryan et al., 2017).

Academic performance is a critical area for college athlete policies. Comeaux and Harrison (2011) indicate that the high demands of collegiate athletics are detrimental to academic success, especially for athletes in revenue-earning sports. The NCAA has implemented policies, such as the Academic Progress Rate (APR), to address these challenges, with research suggesting there have been numerous positive

effects but also persistent issues with both academic equity and support for athletes (Ridpath, 2010). Academic inequities are largely associated with the balance between academics and athletics that institutions provide for their athletes. It has been argued that it is common practice for institutions to prioritize athletic performance over academic achievement, leading to an imbalance that becomes a disadvantage for college athletes over time (Gould & Whitley, 2009; Gurney et al., 2016). Although high impact educational policies can positively benefit the college athlete experience, Ishaq and Bass (2019) outline several barriers to implementation, including poor integration between athletics and academic staff, funding or resource constraints, and college athlete time commitments.

In addition to academic performance, it is valuable to note that policies surrounding college athletes are ever evolving. Researchers have investigated how policy change can be used to better support college athletes. This includes an in-depth analysis of athletes' perceptions on social media policies (Snyder, 2014), a discussion of pregnancy and parenting policy for college athletes (Sorensen et al., 2009), and how financial literacy impacts college athlete success rates (Curington, 2020). The latest shift in this area of research has centered on brand growth and protection within collegiate institutions. For example, Kellison et al. (2016) examined brand management among top-tier universities, while Diem (2016) investigated the development of the collegiate licensing industry. The intersection between brand policies and the protection of institutional marks has now become increasingly important as the collegiate athletics industry has entered the NIL era.

Name, Image, and Likeness

With the introduction of the NCAA's interim NIL policy (Hosick, 2021), college athletes were able to receive compensation for NIL activities for the first time. Since then, the NIL market has experienced exponential growth (Opendorse Annual Report, 2024). It is now commonplace for university partnered websites to advertise the brands and merchandise of their athletes, with links to a plethora of documentation, including educational resources, NIL policies, state laws, and various avenues to contribute to a preferred NIL cause.

Numerous studies provide clarity on the current policies surrounding the NIL rights of college athletes (Moorman & Cocco, 2023; Solomon et al., 2022), as well as the persistent inequalities rooted in policy discrepancies (e.g., international athletes' inability to pursue NIL opportunities; Newell & Sethi, 2023; Sethi et al., 2022; Solomon et al., 2022). Additionally, Berg et al. (2023) analyzed the discourse surrounding NIL policies within state legislatures, while Czekanski and Siegrist (2024) situate contemporary NIL laws within the historical context of NCAA governance and amateurism. Taken together, the current body of literature depicts a fragmented and inequitable regulatory landscape that fails to guarantee equal opportunity for all college athletes.

This uneven landscape is particularly detrimental to athletes from marginalized and minoritized communities. For instance, Black women athletes, who often face the compounded effects of both racial and gender bias, frequently encounter system-

ic barriers that prevent them from fully capitalizing on NIL opportunities. Research has shown that NIL valuations are often tied to social media influence, marketability, and brand appeal (Stokowski et al., 2024), all of which are shaped by mainstream beauty standards and cultural norms that tend to privilege Whiteness and femininity aligned with dominant societal ideals (Cary & Sterling, 2024; Sailofsky, 2024). As a result, Black women athletes may be overlooked by sponsors and brands despite high athletic performance and leadership visibility (Myers et al., 2025). Furthermore, disparities in media representation and access to branding resources exacerbate the challenges they face in navigating the NIL marketplace (Corr et al., 2023).

International athletes represent another group disproportionately disadvantaged by current NIL regulations. Due to the constraints of their F-1 student visa status, international athletes are legally prohibited from earning income through NIL-related activities while residing in the United States (Newell & Sethi, 2023; Sethi et al., 2022; Solomon et al., 2022). This restriction excludes thousands of athletes, many of whom are integral to collegiate athletic programs, from the economic opportunities available to their domestic peers. Even those who manage to secure deals are often forced to conduct business outside the United States borders, incurring additional logistical and financial burdens that can negate the intended benefits of NIL monetization (Newell & Sethi, 2023).

These disparities are symptomatic of broader systemic inequities within collegiate athletics and underscore the urgent need for inclusive NIL policies that address the diverse realities of college athletes. Without deliberate structural reforms, NIL will continue to mirror and, in some cases, amplify the racial, gender, and geopolitical inequalities that have long shaped collegiate athletics.

Recruiting Implications

The recruiting implications of NIL have dramatically transformed the landscape of college athletics, earning the moniker “the wild west” (Magnusen & Todd, 2021, p. 13). Historically, the NCAA made concerted efforts to keep monetary considerations out of the recruiting process, fearing that such influences would erode the amateur nature of collegiate sports and draw them too close to professional models (Yen, 2023). However, the landscape shifted significantly in 2021, when college athletes were first legally permitted to profit from their NIL (Magnusen & Todd, 2021). This seismic change redefined recruiting strategies, as coaches recognized that “emerging high school athletes would be keener on schools that offer them the opportunity to make money” (Arunarathi & Gregorich, 2022, p. 1).

Although the NCAA aimed to curb illicit recruiting practices and create greater parity across programs, early outcomes suggest the opposite. Programs already operating at the highest competitive levels are now further distinguishing themselves by leveraging expansive NIL opportunities (Arunarathi & Gregorich, 2022). Institutions with more permissive NIL policies can offer recruits not only potential brand deals but also direct compensation for athletes beyond the limitations of traditional athletic grant-in-aid (GIA; Corr et al., 2023). As NIL agreements are independent of scholarship counts, athletes not receiving athletic GIA can still be recruited through robust

NIL packages, contributing to wealthier institutions' existing competitive advantage.

A particularly influential and controversial force in this evolving ecosystem is the rise of NIL collectives. Such collectives exist as organized groups of institutional donors, often alumni, who pool resources to fund NIL deals (Corr et al., 2023; LeRoy, 2024). These collectives, often operating semi-independently from athletic departments, have become central actors in recruiting and retention. By orchestrating lucrative NIL offers, they have transformed the role of donor support from one of passive financial assistance to active participation in athlete acquisition and mobility (Corr & Paule-Koba, 2025; Jimerson et al., 2025). In effect, booster collectives have blurred the lines between institutional support and third-party influence, accelerating disparities across programs and raising concerns about competitive equity.

NIL is being used not only to attract prospective recruits but also to incentivize college athletes to enter the transfer portal. Athletes who have had successful seasons often explore transfer opportunities in hopes of securing more profitable NIL deals (Corr & Paule-Koba, 2025). As Johnson (2023) notes, the “recent rule changes, combined with NIL, have given rise to a college free-agency market similar to that of professional sports,” leading to a 60 percent growth in Division I transfers (p. 46). With increased monetary incentives, coaches and NIL collectives alike are encouraging player movement, and schools with stronger NIL infrastructures – often backed by well-funded booster collectives – are positioned to attract top transfer talent at unprecedented rates. This practice has been further legitimized by a recent court settlement allowing athletes to negotiate NIL deals prior to enrollment and prohibiting NCAA enforcement against such activities (Christovich, 2025).

While the long-term implications of NIL on college recruiting continue to unfold, it remains clear that recruits now understand their enrollment decision can significantly affect their financial futures. In the wake of increasing opportunities for compensation (e.g., revenue sharing), NIL – particularly that issued by NIL booster collectives – will continue to shape the competitive landscape of college athletics for years to come (Yen, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Critical theory offers a robust framework for interrogating policy documents, particularly in spaces like collegiate athletics, where systems of power, control, and economic interest are deeply entrenched (Sveinson et al., 2021). Within the present study, critical theory shaped the research process from the formulation of research questions to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. At its core, critical theory challenges researchers to uncover how social, cultural, and economic power structures are reproduced through language, practices, and institutional policy (Jackson et al., 2021; Morrow & Brown, 1994). This lens is particularly relevant in the context of NIL policy in Power 4 collegiate athletics, where the intersection of commerce, education, race, and labor is increasingly complex and politically charged.

The decision to employ critical theory was rooted in its capacity to illuminate the ways NIL policies may perpetuate inequity, both intentionally or unintentionally,

through selective language, structural omissions, and assumptions that align with dominant ideological frameworks (e.g., neoliberalism, the NCAA's notion of amateurism). These frameworks have long-shaped collegiate athletics policy and rhetoric (Berg & Chalip, 2013; Chalip, 1996; Harry, 2025; Howe et al., 2023). Building on this tradition, this study is further informed by the work of Harry (2023), whose critical analyses of NIL discourse illustrated the way the NCAA and, correspondingly, its member institutions wield policy as a tool to control athlete autonomy while maintaining an illusion of progressivism and fairness. As Harry (2023) demonstrated, even well-intentioned policies often encode institutional interests, masking exploitative or exclusionary practices behind the language of compliance, education, and athlete empowerment.

Informed by this critical lens, the present study examined and analyzed NIL policies across Power 4 institutions to explore how policy content and language reflect and/or reinforce broader systems of privilege and exclusion. By critically analyzing these documents, the study aimed to uncover potential institutional disparities, identify the socio-political implications of policy structures, and assess how NIL policies may advantage or disadvantage particular athlete populations. Researchers sought to aid in understanding the potential differences, repercussions, and inequities emerging from distinct institutional approaches to NIL governance, contributing to a more transparent, inclusive, and equitable collegiate athletics landscape.

Method

Procedures

The purpose of this study was to examine the NIL policies of institutions within the Power 4 collegiate athletic conferences. The decision to focus exclusively on Power 4 schools competing in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference (B10), Big XII Conference (B12), and Southeastern Conference (SEC), was based on data indicating that most NIL-related compensation is earned by athletes at these institutions (Opendorse Annual Report, 2024). This narrowed scope also enhances clarity and specificity when analyzing the structure, themes, and implications of NIL policies at the highest level of collegiate athletics. Although NIL regulations also exist at the state legislative level (Berg et al., 2023; Moorman & Cocco, 2023), this study focuses solely on institutional-level policies. By excluding external frameworks such as state or NCAA-wide policies, the analysis was better able to identify and compare the internal governance strategies employed by individual universities in managing NIL activities for their athletes, coaches, and administrators. This distinction confined the study to a particular policy type, which allows for more targeted conclusions and strengthens the analytical focus (Berg et al., 2023).

Data was collected directly from each institution's official athletics website. All sources were publicly accessible to ensure transparency and replicability. The NIL policies collected for analysis were developed between 2021 and 2024. In addition to formal, labeled policy documents, any supplementary information related to NIL (e.g., frequently asked questions, guidance documents, NIL-specific web pages) was

included in the analysis if it was available on the institution's website. This approach ensured a comprehensive representation of institutional guidance on NIL. Each Power 4 institution ($n = 68$) had at least some publicly accessible NIL information. Of those, 93% ($n = 63$) included a formal institutional policy specifically outlining NIL regulations. Broken down by conference, 100% of SEC schools ($n = 16$), 94% of ACC schools ($n = 17$), 94% of B10 schools ($n = 17$), and 81% of B12 schools ($n = 13$) had published NIL policies.

Content Analysis

Content analysis was employed as the primary methodological approach to evaluate and interpret the NIL policies collected from each institution. This method enabled researchers to systematically examine text-based documents to identify recurring themes, patterns, and structural elements (Stemler, 2000). In policy research, content analysis is particularly valuable for exploring the rationale behind policy creation, assessing alignment with institutional values, and identifying potential implications for stakeholders (Stemler, 2015). Within the context of collegiate athletics, it has previously been used to highlight underemphasized issues and to recommend areas for future research and policy reform (Mallen et al., 2011). Neuendorf (2017) further asserts that content analysis plays a key role in shaping public understanding and discourse surrounding institutional policies.

Coding

Five researchers participated in a systematic content analysis of the collected NIL policies, using a collaborative and iterative coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis began with open coding, during which each researcher independently reviewed a pre-assigned subset of institutional policy documents. The purpose of this initial phase was to identify recurring concepts, language, and structural elements relevant to NIL governance without the constraint of predefined categories. The coding process was conducted manually using qualitative coding spreadsheets in Microsoft Excel, allowing for detailed annotation, side-by-side comparisons, and transparent documentation of emergent codes. Manual coding was selected over software such as NVivo or MAXQDA due to the manageable size of the dataset ($n = 63$ policies) and the research team's preference for hands-on engagement with the text during the early interpretive stages. Each spreadsheet included columns for verbatim policy excerpts, preliminary codes, notes on tone or context, and reflections on potential significance.

After completing the open coding phase, each subset was reviewed by two researchers to strengthen the reliability of theme identification and reduce individual interpretive bias, in line with the interpretive group strategy utilized in extant literature (Berg et al., 2023; Woolf et al., 2016; Yin, 2014). During this phase, researchers compared interpretations, discussed discrepancies, and refined or consolidated overlapping codes. This peer-review process was crucial for validating initial findings and ensuring the integrity of the analytical framework. Through iterative rounds of discussion, the researchers engaged in axial coding, grouping similar codes under

broader thematic categories that reflected institutional priorities and regulatory focus areas. These collaborative exchanges facilitated the emergence of four dominant themes across the dataset: (1) use of institutional marks, (2) use of institutional facilities, (3) educational programming, and (4) disclosure requirements. Upon establishing these preliminary themes, the entire research team conducted an independent cross-review of the full dataset and coding summaries. This step allowed each researcher to reevaluate the materials through the lens of the emerging themes and offer additional insights or suggest revisions that may have been overlooked during earlier phases (Howe et al., 2023).

In instances of interpretive disagreement or divergent thematic classification, the researchers engaged in collaborative discussion to achieve consensus. These conversations were guided by best practices outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and supported by dialogic strategies from Berg et al. (2021), which emphasize reflexivity and consensus-building in qualitative research. This iterative, multi-perspective process ensured that the final themes were both conceptually sound and grounded in the text.

The four main themes emerging from the content analysis (use of institutional marks, use of institutional facilities, educational programming, and disclosure requirements) do not represent the full scope of each institutional NIL policy. They were selected for their relevance and frequency across the dataset, offering insights into both the uniformity and variability in institutional NIL governance.

Researcher Positionality

As researchers, we recognize that our professional backgrounds and lived experiences informed the lens through which we approach this study. Such awareness is especially critical in qualitative research, where interpretation and thematic analysis are inherently shaped by the positionality of the researchers. This study was conducted by a five-member research team comprised of three current faculty members in the fields of sport administration and athletic leadership, and two active coaches working within Power 4 collegiate athletics. The academic members of the team possess scholarly expertise in sport governance, higher education policy, and athlete development, as well as experience conducting critical policy analyses within the collegiate athletics landscape. Their roles outside of direct team operations allowed for a broader, systems-level view of institutional policy and governance mechanisms. Conversely, the coaching members of the research team provide direct, real-time insight into the operational realities of NIL implementation at the institutional level. Their roles as practitioners in Power 4 programs offer a nuanced understanding of how NIL policies are communicated, enforced, and experienced by athletes, administrators, and support staff. Their proximity to athletes' daily experiences with NIL policy adds a valuable applied dimension to our analysis, grounding our findings in practical, lived realities.

We acknowledge that these dual perspectives (i.e., academician and practitioner) offer both strengths and limitations. While our proximity to the NIL policy environment enhanced our ability to interpret complex institutional documents with con-

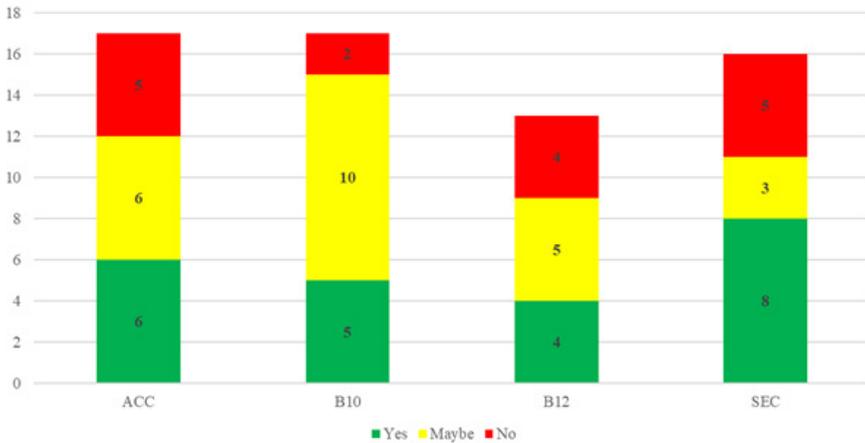
textual accuracy, it may also introduce implicit biases (e.g., institutional affiliation, stakeholder alignment, professional role). To mitigate these effects, we employed collaborative coding, peer review, and consensus-building strategies throughout the research process to ensure analytic rigor and interpretive fairness. Collectively, we positioned ourselves as scholar-practitioners committed to promoting equity, transparency, and athlete empowerment in the evolving NIL landscape. Correspondingly, our goal was not only to interpret the contents of NIL policies but also to illuminate their implications for practice, governance, and the lived experiences of college athletes.

Findings

An analysis of the documents revealed significant content overlaps across institutions, which is consistent with the historically isomorphic nature of policy development in collegiate athletics (Atwater et al., 2022). Many policies referenced or directly quoted NCAA Bylaw 22.01 (NCAA Manual, 2024), with 83% ($n = 52$) of policies including direct citations or paraphrased content from the NCAA's current NIL guidelines. In addition, multiple institutional policies incorporated relevant state legislation, including Mississippi's Intercollegiate Athletics Compensation Rights Act (2021), Florida Statutes (2024), and Oregon's House Bill 4119 (2024), as seen in the policies of institutions such as the University of Mississippi, University of Miami, and University of Oregon.

Use of Institutional Marks

As NIL deals have become more and more popular, a common topic that is broached is the use of institutional marks within an NIL deal. An institutional mark is described as any proprietary and licensed trademark, logo, color, or name that is indicative of a specific institution (Moorman, 2021). These include commonly known logos such as the Longhorn silhouette for the University of Texas, but can also include color schemes, like the maize and blue of the University of Michigan. Because of this proprietary aspect of these marks, many of the collected NIL policies indicate that there must be a formal agreement between the university or its official licensing company and the interested party to use institutional marks within NIL activities. However, only 37% ($n = 23$) of the policies outline a specific procedure for securing the appropriate agreements needed. Additionally, 26% ($n = 16$) of the policies specify that institutional marks may not be used in NIL activities under any circumstances, including Southern Methodist University's (SMU, 2021) policy which states that "a student-athlete may not be compensated for use of his/her NIL if it is provided...for an endorsement while using intellectual property owned by SMU (i.e., logos)" (para. 9). Figure 1 displays full findings of the analysis regarding NIL policy statements on the use of institutional marks within NIL activities broken down by conference.

Figure 1*Policy on Institutional Mark Usage in NIL Activities by Conference*

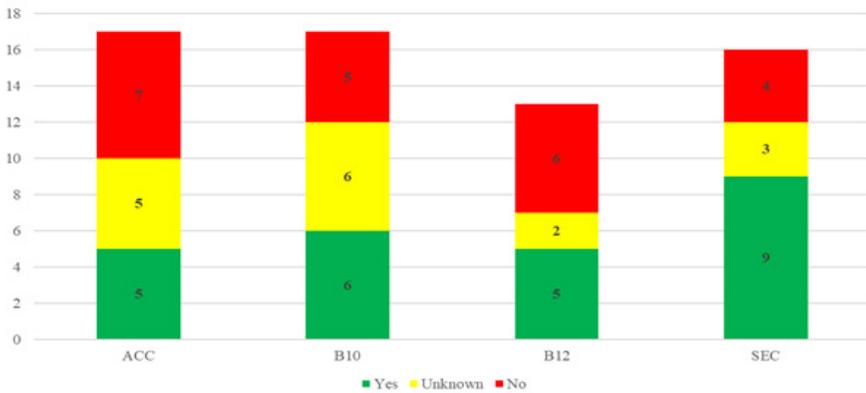
Note: Yes = NIL policy contains procedure to request use of institutional marks for NIL activities; Maybe = NIL policy does not outline procedure but does not explicitly ban use of institutional marks for NIL activities; No = NIL policy explicitly bans use of institutional marks for NIL activities.

Use of Institutional Facilities

This theme analyzes the regulations set regarding using institutional facilities for NIL activities, including promotional activities and creating social media content. Similar to the use of institutional marks, a common requirement found in the analyzed policies ($n = 25$) was the need for a formal rental agreement to conduct NIL activities within institutional facilities. For example, the University of Maryland (2024) outlined “Maryland Athletics Facility use is permissible for NIL activities provided all forms are signed and you have gone through the proper channels” (para. 5). Conversely, 22 of the 63 collected NIL policies indicate that institutional facility use is prohibited during NIL activities. In one example, Texas Christian University’s (TCU, 2024) policy states that “NIL activities should not occur on TCU’s campus. Student-athletes may not use TCU facilities in such a manner that creates the impression – either express or implied – that TCU endorses a third party or product” (para. 3). Interestingly, an institutional facility policy regarding NIL activities was not mentioned by 25% ($n = 16$) of the collected policies. This potentially leaves athletes at these institutions in the dark about resources for enhancing their NIL opportunities. Figure 2 highlights NIL policy statements on the use of institutional facilities for NIL activities per conference.

Educational Programming

Of the 63 collected NIL policies from the Power 4 conferences, 46% ($n = 29$) mention that some sort of educational programming regarding NIL is provided for their respective athletes. While no institution stated that they would not provide ed-

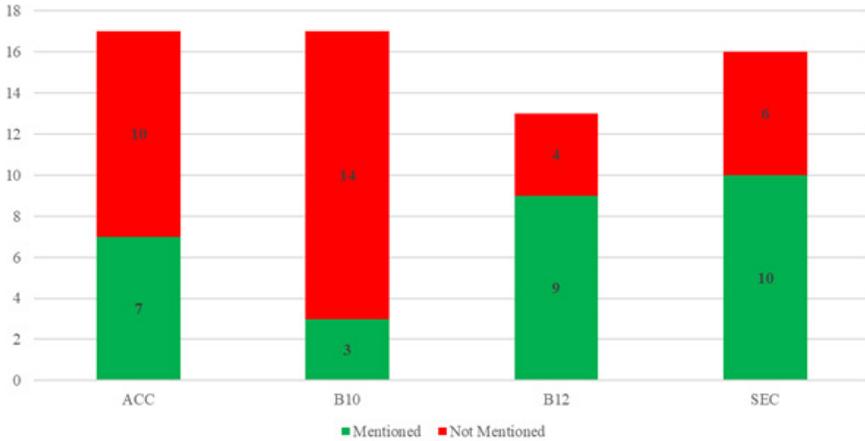
Figure 2*Policy on Institutional Facility Use for NIL Activities by Conference*

Note: Yes = NIL policy allows for facility use for NIL activities with a signed agreement; Unknown = NIL policy does not mention facility use for NIL activities; No = NIL policy explicitly bans use of institutional facilities for NIL activities.

educational programming about NIL, 54% ($n = 34$) do not mention any form of education relating to NIL or its activities. The SEC led the way with 10 of 16 member institutions (63%) outlining educational programs concerning NIL, including the University of Florida (2024) which boasts the Hawkins Center, Gators Experience, and GatorMade, all of which are programs that provide their athletes with workshops in financial literacy and brand building as it relates to NIL. The B12 is next with nine of the 16 (56%) member institutions mentioning educational NIL materials, followed by the ACC with seven of 18 (39%), and the B10 with only three of 18 (17%) institutions mentioning NIL education. Some schools have gone above and beyond with educational resources for their athletes, including Clemson University, which opened the Clemson Athletic Branding Institute (CAB) in 2023. The CAB is a “dedicated brick-and-mortar facility for student-athlete branding and education,” and gives Clemson athletes a space to seek help on topics ranging from taxes to finances to sponsorships (CAB, 2024, para. 1). Figure 3 summarizes the mention of NIL educational programming within institutional NIL policies by conference.

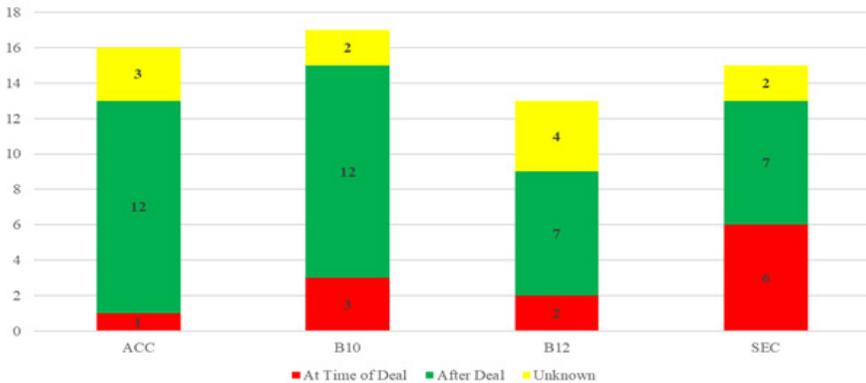
Disclosure Requirements

As of publication, the NCAA Division I manual mandates that all NIL deals valued at over \$600 must be disclosed to athletics compliance officials (NCAA, 2024). Because of this universal mandate, there exists a lot of homogeneity within the NIL policies of collegiate institutions that mirror the language used by the NCAA concerning disclosure of NIL deals. Sixty-one of the 68 (90%) Power 4 institutions mandate similar disclosure requirements for NIL deals within the information they have accessible. An outlier in this theme is Duke University (2024), whose NIL policy

Figure 3*Policy Mentions of NIL Educational Programming by Conference*

states that “Duke student-athletes may receive institutional assistance and services if they opt in to disclose all NIL activities that are \$600 or more to Duke University in a manner set forth by the Department of Athletics” (para. 10). While this statement addresses the possibility of disclosing deals over \$600, it does not mandate it, instead giving Duke athletes the option to disclose deals for additional resources from the university. Another example that breaks slightly from the NCAA regulations on disclosing NIL deals is Northwestern University’s NIL policy, which mandates that any deal over \$500 in value be disclosed (Northwestern University Name, Image & Likeness Policy, 2024). While these cases are unique, the content from institutional NIL policies surrounding disclosure requirements for NIL deals is wholly unoriginal and is based almost entirely on the NCAA rules concerning this topic.

In contrast to the homogeneity within NIL policies regarding the types of NIL deals requiring disclosure, there is great variance between these policies in terms of when these NIL deal disclosures are required. Almost 20% ($n = 12$) of NIL policies analyzed require NIL deals to be disclosed at the time the deal is agreed to and before the NIL activity occurs. Meanwhile, 62% ($n = 38$) of institutional NIL policies specify NIL deals can be disclosed in a specified time frame after the completion of the deal or activity, with policies outlining time frames ranging between one and 10 days post NIL deal or activity. Finally, 18% of policies do not specify an NIL deal disclosure time frame, leaving athletes without a clear understanding of their NIL deal disclosure requirements. Figure 4 shows variances in the timing of NIL deal disclosure requirements found within NIL policy statements, broken down by conference.

Figure 4*Policy on Timing of NIL Deal Disclosure Requirements by Conference*

Discussion

The present study examined NIL policies of Power 4 universities, revealing both commonalities and divergences in how these institutions regulate key NIL-related areas. While many aspects of the policies were consistent or identical, significant variation emerged in critical domains such as the use of institutional marks, facility access, and educational programming. These differences raise important questions regarding the rationale behind policy disparities across institutions and the potential consequences for collegiate athletes navigating the NIL landscape.

A prominent finding concerns college athletes' use of university trademarks and/or logos in NIL activities. Three distinct approaches were evident: outright bans on the use of institutional marks, clear procedures for obtaining approval to use such marks, and ambiguous policies lacking explicit guidance. The persistence of restrictive practices aligns with historical institutional priorities of protecting intellectual property, consistent with prior research documenting "zero-tolerance" stances on third-party use of university marks (Kellison et al., 2016). However, prohibiting college athletes from leveraging the branding of their teams represents a missed opportunity to support athlete empowerment and economic benefit. This restriction perpetuates traditional power imbalances in collegiate athletics, wherein institutions maintain control over brand narratives and commercial value, while athletes remain excluded from these benefits (Southall et al., 2023). Since organizational brands significantly influence consumer perceptions and athlete personal branding (Baker et al., 2022; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020), policies restricting co-branding limit athletes' potential NIL earnings. Empirical evidence suggests that athlete affiliation with institutional brands positively impacts their social media following and NIL deal value, especially at the highest levels of NCAA competition (i.e., Power 4 schools; Cocco et al., 2023; Kunkel et al., 2021).

Accordingly, the 16 Power 4 schools that explicitly ban the use of institutional marks within third-party NIL activities undermine their athlete's ability to optimize NIL earnings by limiting the positive spillover effects created from deals featuring both the athlete and institutional brand. A further 24 Power 4 institutions do not outline clear pathways for athletes to obtain the appropriate consent needed to utilize institutional marks within their NIL activities. Athletes at these institutions may be dissuaded from pursuing such a request or may assume the use of institutional marks is prohibited given the lack of mention within their institution's NIL policy. In either case, this again serves to limit the NIL earnings potential of athletes. This negative impact on athletes' NIL value highlights a critical area for policy reconsideration.

Institutional policies also varied about the use of university facilities for NIL activities. While the use of institutional marks was addressed in most policies, over a quarter of the policies failed to mention facility use, and more than a third explicitly prohibited facility access for NIL purposes. This includes the NIL policy at Stanford, which states an athlete "may not use Stanford housing, facilities, or equipment to conduct NIL activities" (Stanford, 2021, para. 12). This policy statement would imply athletes at the institution face a wide-ranging ban on the use of institutional facilities and equipment for NIL activities, including the use of content creation spaces, digital media labs, and university-issued laptops.

The omission or restriction on institutional facility usage for NIL activities may negatively influence athlete perceptions of institutional NIL support (Corr et al., 2023) and hamper their ability to generate income through camps, clinics, or private lessons, activities particularly vital to athletes in non-revenue sports (e.g., swimming & diving, tennis). These college athletes typically face lower endorsement opportunities and may lack the financial means to rent private facilities. Correspondingly, institutional facility restrictions risk exacerbating existing economic inequities within collegiate athletics (Opendorse Annual Report, 2024). In addition, broad prohibitions, such as those found within the NIL policies at TCU and Stanford, limit athletes' access to important content creation spaces critical for personal brand development in the digital age. This stands in stark contrast to universities like Clemson, which have invested in dedicated NIL support facilities to enhance athlete branding and recruitment efforts (Kelly, 2023). As more Power 4 programs invest in NIL infrastructure, policies restricting facility access risk becoming outdated and misaligned with athlete needs and institutional priorities. They also risk limiting the NIL rights and earnings potential of athletes, especially those in non-revenue sport programs that could use institutional NIL support the most.

Among all themes presented in the findings, NIL educational programming demonstrated the greatest policy variation, with over half of the institutions lacking explicit provisions for NIL education. This gap is particularly stark within the B10, where a minority of schools explicitly mentioned the availability or provisioning of NIL education resources. Even for institutions that do mention educational programming within their NIL policies, there is significant variation in the verbiage used. For example, the NIL policy at SMU states the institution "shall" require athletes to attend a financial literacy and life skills course, with specific hour and content

requirements outlined (SMU, 2021). Conversely, the NIL policy at the University of Louisville mentions NIL education resources available to athletes and “encourages,” but does not mandate the completion of a financial literacy course (UofL, 2024). This contrasting example highlights the potential for athletes at various institutions to have different levels of knowledge about their NIL rights and opportunities based on education requirements outlined in NIL policies.

Given the critical importance of financial literacy and contract negotiation skills for athlete success in the NIL era (Curington, 2020), this lack of institutional emphasis on education reflects a significant shortfall in institutional athlete support. The sparsely mandated environment for educational NIL programming raises concerns regarding institutional-athlete power dynamics. Given that knowledge is foundational to athlete agency and empowerment, athletes may lack the tools to negotiate effectively, protect their rights, and build sustainable personal brands without structured education. Ultimately, such factors serve to significantly diminish college athletes long-term financial and professional outcomes. This gap also contradicts the core mission of higher education, which inherently involves preparing students for success. Faculty partnerships and interdisciplinary courses present valuable opportunities for enhancing NIL education (O’Hallarn et al., 2023). However, these opportunities remain underutilized on college campuses in the United States. The findings underscore the urgent need for institutions to prioritize and expand NIL educational initiatives to better serve competing college athletes.

In contrast to the other themes, disclosure requirements exhibited notable homogeneity, with over 90% of Power 4 schools’ policies closely aligning with NCAA mandates. This consistency reduces ambiguity surrounding NIL deal disclosures, helping to prevent inadvertent policy violations that could jeopardize athlete eligibility. This type of consistent and unambiguous language is sorely needed in other areas of NIL policy, such as policy statements related to NIL activities involving international athletes. Institutional and athletic association NIL policies are overwhelmingly vague about international athlete NIL participation and the effect such participation may have on their student visa status (Newell & Sethi, 2023; Sethi et al., 2022; Solomon et al., 2022). For example, the NIL policy at Northwestern University simply advises international athletes to contact the international office at the institution and the athlete’s home country government regarding questions about engaging in NIL activities (Northwestern University Name, Image & Likeness Policy, 2024). Creators of NIL policy should strive to deliver clear and consistent guidelines on NIL opportunities and regulations for all athletes.

However, even though disclosure requirement statements are relatively straightforward in NIL policies, discrepancies in the timing and strictness of those requirements across institutions introduces potential inequities. While some institutions require immediate disclosure upon agreement, others allowed a 30-day window, creating a patchwork of obligations that athletes must navigate. Such inter-institutional differences are particularly challenging for college athletes seeking or actively transferring between NCAA member institutions. These inconsistencies may prompt confusion and reinforce structural inequities within collegiate athletics.

Applying a critical theoretical lens revealed not only what NIL policies included, but what they also omitted and whose interests they serve. While most institutional NIL policies focused on institutional compliance and athlete obligations, very few explicitly addressed marginalized groups traditionally disadvantaged within the NIL marketplace (e.g., Black women athletes, international athletes; Harry, 2025; Sethi et al., 2022). The absence of targeted considerations for these groups reflects broader ideological positioning that prioritizes institutional control and economic interests over equitable athlete representation and support (Corr et al., 2024, 2025). The invocation of regulatory language such as NCAA bylaws and state legislation serves to distance institutions from liability while centralizing governance over athlete monetization, reinforcing traditional power hierarchies. This dynamic marginalizes athletes' autonomy and obscures structural inequities embedded within NIL opportunities. For instance, Black women athletes, despite their visibility, face disproportionately fewer NIL opportunities due to entrenched racial and gender biases in sponsorships (Harry, 2025). Similarly, international athletes often encounter visa-related barriers to NIL participation that institutions rarely addressed in NIL policies analyzed in this study (Newell & Sethi, 2023; Sethi et al., 2022; Solomon et al., 2022). By moving beyond descriptive policy analysis, this study's critical approach highlights the ideological functions of NIL policy in maintaining power asymmetries and shaping access to opportunity.

Limitations & Future Research

Certain limitations exist within the scope of this work. As indicated, NIL policies were not publicly accessible for all Power 4 institutions. In addition, each collected policy was dated between 2021 and 2024. For example, many policies were dated as being created in the same week as the initial NCAA interim NIL policy in July 2021. There have since been multiple addendums and alterations to the regulations of NIL, meaning the most up-to-date policies were not publicly accessible in these cases or those policies had not been updated despite the evolving nature of NIL regulatory frameworks. Another limitation of this study is the dynamic nature of NIL, with rules evolving so frequently that its long-term impact on college athletics remains uncertain. The ever-changing landscape of NIL reflects the broader evolution of college sports. Furthermore, NIL policies vary across states, creating additional complexity. This study focused solely on institutional policies, leaving out the broader spectrum of policies that differ at state or conference levels. Lastly, the information concerning NIL was not standardized across institutions, with a wide variety of topics being covered within differing webpages. This inhibited our ability to make direct comparisons on certain subjects that may not be covered in all the policies.

The findings of this study underscore the need for ongoing reflexivity and equity-focused reform in collegiate athletics NIL governance. As NIL continues to evolve amid legal and cultural pressures, institutions must balance protecting intellectual property and regulatory compliance with supporting athlete empowerment, inclusion, and economic opportunity (Corr et al., 2025). Developing clear pathways for institutional mark and facility usage, expanding NIL educational programming,

and standardizing disclosure policies can reduce inequities and better align policies with athlete needs. In addition, intentional inclusion of marginalized athlete populations within NIL policy discourse and practice would be valuable to foster a more equitable collegiate sports landscape. Future research should continue to explore the lived experiences of diverse athlete populations under varying NIL regimes and assess the impact of policy reforms on athlete outcomes. Ultimately, achieving equity in the NIL era requires institutions to critically examine and revise policies that perpetuate historic power imbalances while proactively supporting the diverse identities and aspirations of all college athletes.

Additional future research could focus on NIL policy impacts stemming from provisions included in the landmark *House v. NCAA* federal antitrust case settlement. Among other items, the settlement allows institutions to share portions of athletic department revenues with their athletes and requires enhanced scrutiny on third-party NIL deals involving associated entities, such as NIL collectives (Dellenger, 2025). To facilitate revenue sharing with athletes, schools are now entering into contracts which grant them the exclusive use of their athlete's NIL rights and limit the ability for athletes to engage in third-party NIL opportunities (Prisbell, 2024). Furthermore, third-party NIL deals valued over \$600 must now be submitted and approved by an independent clearinghouse as being for a valid business purpose at fair market value before the athlete can fully enter into the agreement (Dellenger, 2025). These developments require further research on impacts to institutional NIL policies, particularly those related to the use of institutional marks and disclosure requirements for third-party NIL deals.

Implications & Conclusion

The findings of this study call into question the demand for uniformity within institutional NIL policies among NCAA member institutions. It is clear that NIL has not created parity among NCAA's membership but rather encouraged further disparity both inter-institutionally and among college athletes. While institutions in the Power 4 have a lot of similarities in their policies, there are still many key differences. These differences can be read as a failure by the institution to properly inform and prepare its athletes. NIL education is a requirement by the NCAA, but each member institution has a varied interpretation of what education should be available. Some institutions have provided ample education with easy access, while some have obscured those resources. Obscurity is not just found in educational opportunities, but also in policies surrounding the use of institutional marks and facility rentals. This mismatch across the country in NIL policies has encouraged ambiguity and created unclear paths for college athletes to capitalize on monetary opportunities.

At its core, NIL deregulation was established to allow a college athlete to be fairly compensated for the use of their image. While there have been initial attempts at implementing this into the world of collegiate athletics, the process has been arduous, slow, and often inadequate. There is a lack of continuity and clarity among NIL regulations, creating inequitable circumstances for many college athletes and reinforcing the traditional hegemonic structure long found within collegiate athlet-

ics where institutions control the commercial value of the product (Southall et al., 2023). The analysis provided in this research highlights the need for clarity and understanding of the information conveyed within current NIL policies. It also represents a disturbing parallel with the disparate set of regulations found in state-level NIL legislation (Berg et al., 2023; Czekanski & Siegrist, 2024; Moonman & Cocco, 2023). Regulations and policies governing the NIL rights of college athletes at all levels – institution, athletic association, state, and federal – should be developed with athlete support and success at the forefront. Obscured education and general ambiguity, stemming from a lack of uniformity, only harms the NIL earnings potential of college athletes. It is imperative to identify and improve upon these discontinuities in NIL policy to improve understanding and better the experience for all college athletes.

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Why are they leaving?: An investigation into the experience of Division I men's basketball athletes who enter the transfer portal

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Historically, transfer rules within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have been prohibitive, limiting the autonomy of college athletes. In recent years, the NCAA introduced the transfer portal which does not require athletes to notify their current institution when they plan to transfer or necessitate they sit out a year the first time they transfer. The process and culture around transferring has changed drastically, prompting further exploration into the movement between schools and conferences. This study employed a phenomenological research design by conducting two rounds of interviews to uncover the lived experiences of Division I men's basketball athletes from one university who entered the transfer portal and left their institution following the 2021-2022 season. Two semi-structured interviews, one season apart, were conducted with three athletes, examining questions around team culture, relationships with staff and teammates, and indicators of well-being. Findings suggest it was the relationship with their coaches, or lack thereof, that severely influenced their decision to enter the transfer portal. Overall, athletes felt supported by their teammates, but that was not enough to change their experience on the team. Following their transfer, athletes confirmed the importance of their player-coach relationship in their college athlete experience, and reflected on the ever-changing environment of college basketball as a business. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.



Historically, transfer rules within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have been prohibitive, limiting the autonomy of college athletes (Johnson, 2019). Previously, when pursuing a transfer to another Division I program of the same sport, the NCAA required all college sport athletes to gain permission from their current institution before transferring. Additionally, if a player was to transfer, they were ineligible for competition the entirety of their first season at their new institution (Johnson, 2019).

Recently, this process has changed. Following settlement of lawsuits such as *Battle v. NCAA* and *Farrakhan v. NCAA*, in October 2018, the NCAA were forced to eliminate the requirement for athletes to gain permission from their current institution before transferring, allowing athletes to enter a national transfer database, known as the transfer portal (Johnson, 2019). This decision not only allows greater autonomy of movement for athletes but also allows players to secure a scholarship and play immediately at their new institution. The installation of the transfer portal further enables greater communication between players and prospective programs, allowing coaches to contact players as soon as their name enters the portal. Since this ruling, there has been an uptick in the number of men's basketball players entering the portal each season, with 957 in 2019 the year it was introduced, 967 in 2020, 1,653 in 2021, 1,724 in 2023, 2,083 in 2024, and 2320 in 2025 (Salao, 2025).

Before the establishment of the transfer portal, literature started to explore the demographics of college athletes who were transferring as well as their needs during the transfer process. According to Pifer and colleagues (2021) Division I men's basketball (DIMBB) transfers from the 2012-2013 and 2016-2017 seasons occurred more frequently during coaching changes, between mid-major programs (i.e., Division I conferences outside of the following: Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big 10 Conference (Big-10), Big 12 Conference (Big-12), or Southeastern Conference (SEC)), and between schools in the same state. Further, they note between the seasons of 2012-2013 to 2016-2017, studied institutions experienced an average of 0.7 transfers per season (Pifer et al., 2021). With regards to demographics, Verburg (2022) found college athletes who transfer are more likely to have a higher athletic identity than college athletes who have not transferred. Further, Homan (2019) found college athletes who transferred indicated needing the following from support staff: establishing communications, building relationships, and facilitating early introductions, in order to enhance their experience at their new institution.

Finally, scholarship has recently enhanced our understanding of the role of a coach in the transfer process. College athletes can transfer because of "relationships, coaching change/coaching style, lack of playing time, not the right fit, homesickness" and in a more general sense, "generational differences, social media, technology" (Massengale, 2019, p. ii). Being a "players' coach" allows for positive relationships with players, where choices are allowed, rationale is given for tasks, there are limits and rules, feelings are acknowledged, there is space for self-growth and independence, feedback is accepted, harsh and demeaning criticism and language is avoided, as well as the absence of ego-involvement (Mageua & Vallerand, 2003). Whereas demanding coaches who are negative, assertive, only focus on winning, do

not accept input, and have strict rules (Mageua & Vallerand, 2003) create a barrier between themselves and their athletes.

Yet, integral to this topic, and currently unknown in sport scholarship is a comprehension in athletes' motivation of transferring, specifically since the creation of the transfer portal. Thus, a holistic investigation into why DIMBB players are entering the transfer portal and transferring is necessary to yield greater understanding of the current state of DIMBB programs. The present study explores what experiences influence DIMBB athletes' decisions to enter the transfer portal and leave their institution. Two sets of interviews, one season apart, with three DIMBB athletes who all left one institution following the 2021-2022 season, were conducted to address why these athletes left and if they were satisfied with their decision, while considering questions about team culture, and relationships with staff and teammates.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Relational Psychological Contracts

A theoretical framework that can be applied is relational psychological contracts (RPC), which details an exchange agreement between an organization and an individual (Rousseau, 1995). The term psychological contract was first coined by Argyris (1960) where he implied the exchange agreement detailed tangible resources. Later, Menninger (1958) posits these exchange agreements and relationships extend past the tangible as the intangible is also involved. Coyle-Shapiro (2008) outlined the difference between Rousseau (1989) and Levinson and colleagues (1962) takes on psychological contracts noting that Rousseau (1989) proposes obligations arise “out of a perception that a promise has been made to commit to a future action” (p. 26) and Levinson and colleagues (1962) position of obligations was that “expectations arise from needs” (p. 26). Further, Coyle-Shapiro (2008) defined Rousseau's reimagined view of the psychological contract as “an individual's beliefs concerning the mutual obligations that exist” between the employee and the employer, as well as the notion that “these obligations arise out of the belief that a promise has been made either explicitly or implicitly” and thus, “sustained through the norm of reciprocity” (p. 25). Massengale (2019) went further by suggesting positive relationships lead to positive outcomes. If coaches want players to perform at the highest level consistently, the college-athlete “must feel loved and appreciated by coaching staff, teammates and other important personnel around campus” (Massengale, 2019, p. 19), which would be considered a RPC as it deals with verbal and nonverbal communication, intangible expectations and needs, this idea of reciprocity, and feelings such as loyalty. Additionally, Coyle-Shapiro and colleagues (2019) described another variable set of resources exchanged in RPC—ideological currency, which is defined as “credible commitment to pursuing a valued cause or principle (not limited to self-interest) that are implicitly exchanged at the nexus of the individual-organization relationship” (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003, p. 574). Coyle-Shapiro (2019) used this definition to explain that certain individuals believe “the organization provides the context in which the employee can contribute directly or indirectly to the cause” (p. 151) which

can be connected to the fact that athletes want to feel valuable and make an impact on their team.

Barnhill and Turner (2013) noted college athletes are more likely to leave their institutions if they believe their psychological contract is breached. Barnhill and Turner (2013) also noted that when coaches fail to fulfill obligations or perceived promises in the eyes of college athletes, relationships are altered, trust is lowered, and athletes start to feel less confident of the outcome of their relationship with the coaches. Essentially, athletes feel a psychological contract violation, which elicits negative emotions, and thus elicits feelings that lead them to leave their team. After perceiving a breach but before athletes get to the point of leaving their team, Coyle-Shapiro and others (2019) noted they “reciprocate accordingly by reducing their effort” (p. 159) in their role. In this case, athletes might not train as hard in practice, care about attendance, or play their best during games. The higher the psychological contract violation, the higher the intentions are to leave the team and end the relationship between coach and athlete; but this has not always been the case in the past as there were obstacles that prevented the college athlete from leaving (e.g., NCAA regulations such as sitting out a year after transferring, waivers, and academic outcomes), thus forcing the college athlete to continue the relationship although they do not wish to (Barnhill and Turner, 2013). These factors, while not as prevalent currently, were present in college athletics and more specifically, would start during the recruiting process for college athletes.

The recruiting process for a prospective college athlete is meant to form genuine relationships and is different from the reality of being on the team (Massengale, 2019). This can lead to breaches and violations of the psychological contract which occurs when there is a discrepancy with what was promised and what actually happens (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). This is why coach responsibility is such an integral part in the college athlete experience and thus the RPC, especially since “poor relationships with coaching staffs can or cannot filter into personal relationships between teammates” (Massengale, 2019, p. 34). College athletes want to feel worthy and wanted, so when they feel appreciated in their teams, they are prone to sacrificing more for the team (Massengale, 2019). This cannot happen until coaches are “concerned with every aspect of the student-athlete including academics, physical, emotional, and spiritual (depending on university) well-being and to not only focus on what the student-athlete can do for them” (Massengale, 2019, p. 31). More recently, Lilly (2020) outlined the relationship between psychological contract violation and the cycle of mistrust. After the violation has occurred, the cycle of mistrust is perpetuated through “transactional cost behaviors of both the victim and the perpetrator” (Lilly, 2020, p. 35) and “can only be broken if one party exhibits specific behaviors that focus on resolving the issue rather than focusing on ‘beating’ the other party” (p. 36). Further, when athletes undergo any kind of negative experience, they are more inclined to blame the perpetrator — the coaches — for everything connected to that experience which in turn increases the level of mistrust directed towards the perpetrator. Additionally, violations should be viewed as a process that is sparked by triggers which propel individuals to be consciously aware (Lilly, 2020). This, in

turn, portrays violations and breaches as a process, rather than one-time offenses (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019). It is up to coaches to show the college athlete they care more than just about what happens on the basketball court, because while the athlete is in college, coaches fill the role of parents (Massengale, 2019) and are an integral part of college athletes' lives. Considering this theoretical framework, the current study examined how a broken RPC could lead to an athlete's desire to transfer.

Contextualization of the College Sport Landscape

As previously mentioned, there has been a substantial increase in between-institution movements for college athletes. In Division I alone, there has been a total of 34,999 total transfers between the 2020-2021 and 2022-2023 academic years (National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2024). This increase can be partially attributed to substantive legislation changes such as the creation of the transfer portal (Johnson, 2019) and name, image, and likeness (NIL; Brutlag Hosick, 2021). The transfer portal, implemented in 2018, has significantly lessened the restrictions athletes faced when transferring institutions (Johnson, 2019). Impacts of the transfer portal can also be coupled with the adoption of NIL, which occurred in 2021. College athletes are now able to profit off their personal branding, including their name, image, and likeness (Brutlag Hosick, 2021). Along with the implementation of NIL has been the rise of collectives, or organizations that help facilitate NIL deals for college athletes (Nakos, 2024). Recent reports indicate NIL collectives have and will continue to play an important role (e.g., a multi-state challenge led by *Tennessee, Florida, New York, the District of Columbia, and Virginia v. National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2024*; Skrmetti, 2024) in athlete movement as they are able to leverage recruitment of athlete talent with promise of NIL deals (Nakos, 2024).

As aforementioned, limited scholarship has explored the impact of college sport litigation policies. Further, within more mainstream journalism, the emphasis of athlete movement is clearly on Power Four conferences (ACC, Big-10, Big-12, and SEC) within the Division I level. However, these legislative outcomes have also impacted mid-major conferences. For example, Nagel (2024) reported an increase in the number of mid-major "star" basketball players entering the portal as a method to advance to Power Four conferences. In addition, sport news journals have alluded to mid-major programs acting as a steppingstone for athletes (Rhoden, 2024). Athletes can come into a mid-major program, secure a starting role in their early years, and transfer to a more competitive team within the Power Four conferences (Moore et al., 2024; Rhoden, 2024). Thus, considering recent legislation changes and acknowledgement of intercollegiate sport as a rapidly changing industry, it is essential to contextualize motivations and experiences of college athletes as they grapple with transfer decisions.

Method

Procedure

A phenomenological research design was utilized to explore the experiences of Division I men's basketball players to "interpret their experiences, how they con-

struct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Agazu et. al., 2022, p. 1500). Phenomenology consists of contextualizing, understanding the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon with emphasis on staying true to the way the interviewees view their life and accepting their experiences as how they describe them (Bevan, 2014). The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Division I men’s basketball athletes who entered the transfer portal and ultimately left their institution?
2. What experiences influenced Division I men’s basketball athletes to leave their institution?
3. In what ways has the transition to a different institution impacted the experience of Division I men’s basketball players?

By exploring the experiences of DIMBB athletes, the intention was to hone in on these experiences by examining questions around team culture, academic and social program offerings, relationships with staff and teammates, and indicators of well-being. RPC helped shape the interview guide by placing importance on the ideas of intangible and tangible needs being met, feelings of fulfillment, and an emphasis on coach-athlete behavior and relationships.

Interviews with each participant were the instrument of data collection. Individual athletes’ experiences were the main focus of the study. Thus, interviews afforded an opportunity to explore certain concepts and perspectives as well as accommodate any clarification needed, instead of focusing on how the athlete exists in their team environment (Britten, 1995; Creswell, 2013).

Participants

Criterion and purposive sampling were utilized to recruit DIMBB athletes who left the same university in a Northeast conference and transferred to three different institutions (Creswell, 2013). Potential participants were recruited through industry connections if they met the following criteria: have played men’s basketball at the Division I case institution and transferred from the original institution after the 2021-2022 season. Three players agreed to participate; all were between the ages of 20-23 and identified as Black or African American.

Data Collection

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for flexibility, inquiry, and follow-up questions to participants’ responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All interviews took place via Zoom to account for multiple geographic locations. Further, all interviews were conducted by the primary investigator. First, participants were asked a series of introductory questions focusing on why they chose their original university and demographic information. Next, participants were asked behavioral, knowledge, and feeling questions aimed at understanding the entirety of their experience (Agazu et. al., 2022). The first segment of questions focused on contextualizing their experience at their original institution with questions such as, “tell me about your relationships with your past teammates and coaches?”. To understand

the culture of the institution questions such as “did you perceive a difference in the culture from the time you were recruited to the time you left, and if so, how?” were asked. Finally, questions about the transition of deciding to leave and how impactful the transfer portal was in the process which involved questions like, “when and how did you know you wanted to enter the transfer portal?” were asked.

In the second round of interviews, questions were similar to that of the first round of interview questions but solely based on players’ experiences at their new institution after transferring. Questions included, “tell me about your relationships with your teammates and coaches at your current institution?” and “tell me about the culture in your current men’s basketball program?”. In addition to the questions regarding culture, relationships, and resources offered, questions about team satisfaction were asked such as, “in general, are you satisfied or happy being a part of this team?” and later probed with, “after being on this team for a season, do you feel comfortable with your decision to transfer?”. Interviews took a maximum of 31 minutes.

Data Analysis

Following the first round, interviews were transcribed verbatim using Zoom’s transcription tool and researcher assistance. This final transcript was sent to participants for member checking (Merriam, 2009). Member checking is important for both researchers and participants to increase the trustworthiness of the data by giving participants the chance to verify and confirm that their responses were accurately transcribed (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Following, the research team read and coded each interview individually, compiling key information and quotes throughout. Throughout this process, “in vivo” coding was utilized to keep participants’ language as intact as possible (Saldaña, 2015). Then, the research team met for a total of two times and conducted a thematic analysis. First, all codes from all interviews were discussed and agreed upon. From there, pattern codes were created. Here, the research team grouped codes from all interviews into emerging patterns (Saldaña, 2015). During the second meeting, the team reviewed all codes and generated them into overarching themes (Kiger & Varpuro, 2020). This procedure was repeated following the second round of interviews. Similar research design has been used recently in the *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport* (See Alanis et al., 2024 & Elliot & Kellison, 2021), deeming this design appropriate for the current study.

Findings

The following section comprises general data reflecting the effects of the transfer portal, as well as specific themes like *player-coach relationships* and *team culture*, from the two rounds of interviews with the participants. Subthemes are also present within each of the three themes. Following, players reflect on their experiences utilizing the transfer portal in the last theme, *effects of transfer portal*. It should be mentioned that Player 1 moved laterally from a mid-major institution to another mid-major institution, Player 2 moved to a Football Championship Subdivision (FCS)

institution, and Player 3 moved up into a Power Four institution, later transferring to another Power Four program.

Player-Coach Relationship

A key theme that emerged from the data was the player-coach relationship. This theme illustrates the vitalness of these player-coach relationships and includes sub-themes of the positive and negative experiences that ultimately shaped athletes' time at their institution, as well as the transactional aspects of the player-coach relationship.

The Centrality and Weightiness of the Player-Coach Relationship

Participants noted how essential their relationship with their coaches was in their experience at their initial institution, and that unfortunately, they felt there was not a relationship with the coaching staff. As Player 1 posits, "they really didn't know much about me, and it was kind of hard to play for people like that". This lack of connection with the coaches, specifically their head coach, was felt by other players, thus making it hard for them to be on the same page:

I probably only met with him – besides, my transfer meetings – probably like twice. So, like never meeting with your head coach, and especially being the point guard, which is supposed to be like the extension of the head coach was like, 'Wow, we never meet, we never talk'. And then I know my freshman year was so hard for me to understand what he was saying, or like trying to be on the same pages as him because most of the coaches I've ever played for I've been really close with. [Player 3]

Similarly, Player 2 explained how he did not feel close with any of his coaches, especially the head coach. He describes that in a five-person coaching staff, he had real relationships with two or three of them where he could "go to them for almost anything, not everything" and regarding the head coach, he "probably wouldn't be able to go to him for as much" as the other assistant coaches. Player 1 echoed this point, even going further about how a transactional culture where coaches did not value building relationships, deteriorated the player-coach relationships:

Some people might be able to function in an environment where it is strictly business, but some people just may need help from the leadership on the team. I feel like they could have been better as a coaching staff. I think you need to build relationships with your players, just because, these people they put in trust in you — we're away from our families and y'all are the adults in our lives. So, I feel like they can improve on that — just building a relationship and establishing a more friendly culture — like welcoming.

Further, participants reported it was often hard for the coaches to distinguish between them as players and them as people. For example, it was revealed that none of the coaches showed up to their players' graduation ceremonies, an act that participants took notice of and did not appreciate.

An observation that I made is, you know we have about four or five graduates this year, and I didn't hear of any of the coaches attending any graduations or telling anybody congratulations. So, I mean, I feel like it was pretty

big, because outside of basketball, we work hard to graduate. I attended my teammates' graduations, so I feel like it was kind of a big deal, not to hear from – I mean I heard from a few people, but from the head... you know what I mean? [Player 1]

There was also a common theme of replaceability throughout. During the season coaches made it known that these players could be replaced at any time, a statement that was discouraging to players as they left their families and hometowns to play basketball for these coaches:

One thing that always kind of stuck in the back of my head, which gave me bad vibes is, at the end of every huddle, or sometimes when he [head coach] gets irritated during practice he'll always say, 'If you can't do your job, I can find somebody else to do it,' and I feel like that's not really what you should be saying to your players as from a confidence standpoint, and just as a respect standpoint as well...Some kids are dropping their whole lives, all their friends, family, just to play in [city], and for you to just say 'Yo, I can replace you whenever I need to'. It's just kind of demoralizing. [Player 2]

Lastly, the news of participants' intent to transfer was not received well. Players noted the head coach would act disinterested or begin to act defensive. In return, participants pushed farther away from the program. Player 3 detailed his experience and the sudden switch up he received from his head coach:

Like previously, me and my coach were all buddy-buddy. But then, when I decided to leave, just, a complete energy changer. Just not speaking at all... We were pretty successful, especially towards the end of the year... but at the end of the day, I don't think we were taking the necessary steps in place to be effective or be a threat. There were a lot of other distractions that were going on, and I wasn't happy with it. So, I kind of expressed this to my coaches, and when I was leaving, they kind of took it their own way. So, I was coming off aggressive – is how they took it I guess – [I'm] not aggressive at all. But, uh, they kind of took it the wrong way...the first conversation we had, and then from there, is when I kind of ultimately made my decision.

Another Chance at Player-Coach Relationships

Participants noted how integral their relationships with their coaches — again with an emphasis on their head coach — were when describing their experiences at their new institution. Boundaries and professional relationships with their coaches came in different varieties.

Player 1 had more of a genuine professional relationship with his head coach where they discussed the athlete's longevity as he mentioned, "I mean, with the head coach we really didn't even talk that much. But when we did meet, we talked about how it was going, or even like a professional option...and he'd talk about his connections in the league for me". While Player 1's experience is more professional, he does not relay any negative feelings of this professional relationship with his head coach.

Player 2 on the other hand, felt closer and more relaxed around his head coach in a more personal manner, which allowed the participant to be more comfortable as he noted,

Yeah, it was never awkward. I feel like at my last institution, I couldn't really be myself one-on-one or however many coaches I was talking to. But here I feel like I could always be myself. We'd either be cussing, you know what I'm saying, just regular lang[uage], like I'm not always professional around them. I can just be myself.

Player 2 also reminisces about the "little stuff" like when,

We'd be wrestling, making jokes, and then, when it's time to suit up and get serious, you know, he's not necessarily yelling at you during the game, he's just showing his passion and encouraging you. So, I mean all these relationships with the coaches were very intact.

Player 2's experience is a healthy balance of a personal and professional player-coach relationship, as there is a perceptiveness and care of athlete well-being which ultimately led to a positive experience for Player 2.

Player 3 gave a unique outlook as he had a different role on the team due to his injury and therefore spent a lot of time with his coaches. He felt comfortable going up to talk to coaches off the court as he said,

I had a good relationship with a couple of the coaches, and it was always easy to go up there, and I spent a lot of time with them with me being hurt. So, off the court I got a chance to socialize with them and try to get to know them as much as I could within the year I was there, but it was a good time.

Player 3 ultimately reminisced about positive surface-level interactions with his coaches even though they were not very close personally.

The Transactionality of the Player-Coach Relationship

Finally, participants brought up how they viewed their role on their respective basketball teams as transactional, and one player [Player 3] even described "the basketball world as 'one big business'" where their coach acted as the boss and the athletes were employees. The tonality of these feelings came off as matter of fact, with an acceptance of the situation rather than being upset or hopeful that he would be on a team that provided more than just a give-and-take relationship as Player 3 posits, "It's very hard to obtain a very pure relationship" with the head coach.

Additionally, players noted this transactional system affected the relationship players had with their head coach, deciding how close one is with their coach and whether the head coach will listen to the athlete. Athletes acknowledged their 'on the court' role impacted their experience; Player 3 even went so far to say, "I mean, as everyone knows, it's just about production at the end of the day". Therefore, a player who is performing the best on the court will yield a better relationship with the head coach than someone who is on the bench or injured for example, paving the way for favoritism and the idea of "one main guy" to take a front seat in the team dynamics. Player 3 had strong feelings about this topic as he mentioned that,

You'll never see too often a bench player with a good relationship with his head coach. It's always like, the best, best, player, or you know, like someone that's doing something for this person, *then* they'll have a good relationship with him. But if you're not contributing in a major way, or contributing in a key way, or if you're not contributing in a way maybe the coach wants you to, you probably won't see a relationship with that coach, and that just shows how much of a business it is because if you're doing something for that person or for that coach, then they'll hear you out.

In addition to accepting this reality, Player 3 showed an almost jaded attitude as he noted he expected the same transactional mentality to be present at his next university, "I expect the same thing where I'm going now. But it could be a 'fit' thing, I mean, I just *expect* it to be that way".

Player 1 brought up the transactional mindset in terms of how his coaches made no effort to get to know him, "I feel like I can't play for someone who doesn't know me, and I don't know anything about them. That's why I would say strictly business." He also responded similarly with Player 3's sentiment about favoritism in coaches and how production on the court equated value on the team by saying,

You know how coaches are. They pick and choose who they want to criticize. So, every coach has their favorites. But my coach is one of those people if you weren't the main person, and made a mistake, he just amplified it. So, you just had to deal with it – a lot of coaches are like that. And so, until you're that main guy, you're always getting criticized. I mean I had to trust him and so whatever decisions he made – we won by it, or we lost by it. So, it's something you have to live with. [Player 1]

While Players 1 and 3 point out this transactional mindset and a feeling of usefulness when not actively playing basketball on the court, Player 2 showed the duality of team roles as he happily shared the positive environment his coaches and teammates created at his second institution off the court which translated to connecting on the court. He even went as far as talking about criticism in a positive light, which was the first time that occurred throughout the entire interview process throughout all participants.

The coaches would just always re-emphasize at practice whenever somebody is going through it, is that 'we're correcting because we love you, and we're not telling you anything that shouldn't be said' so as long as that was in the air, I mean, the vibes were pretty good at practice, traveling, everywhere for real.

In general, Player 2 outlined an environment at his new institution filled with transparency, communication, and one where coaches were perceptive and responded to their athletes when need be.

Team Culture

While we found the player-coach relationship to be critical in an athlete's basketball experiences, this theme and subthemes discuss the influence the coach(es) had on the team culture, and how this impacted athletes' experiences. Lastly, we explore the influence of participants' teammates and their contribution to the team culture and participants' experiences.

A Winning Culture: The Necessity to Feel Useful and Valued

Participants revealed their need to feel useful and valued on their initial team, a common sentiment across all college athletics. However, with this particular team, they note their value was directly, and only, tied to their game performance, or a winning culture, “I think winning is expected at [institution]. I mean that’s why they tell you it’s strictly business, and they were consistent with it, the strictly business part” [Player 1]. As such, participants noted if you could not contribute to winning a game, you were pushed to the side. Additionally, standards to uphold a culture of winning were not equalized across all players, leading to favoritism, different courses of action for players’ missteps, and a transactional culture:

I feel like some people were treated differently than others when they came to like, the disciplinary actions, maybe acting out in practice, or maybe others talking back ... it caused a little turmoil in the locker room with guys, where they felt they couldn’t do this and be themselves in a working environment...[But it is] still a job at the end of the day. Still business at the end of the day. [Player 3]

On top of that, when injuries occurred, or players experienced less playing time, they felt pushed to the side, and were unsure of their place on the team. Player 2 summed up his experience dealing with an injury and his perceived place on the team afterward,

[There were] a few times where guys got injured – serious injuries. [Teammate] injured his shoulder, and he had surgery on it, and well, I can vouch for this, too, because I got injured, as well. But when you’re out for a significant amount of time it’s kinda like the coaches put you to the side, because they can’t really do anything with you...I was injured for about five to four months, and after I got my surgery, it was about two texts, and then after that, it went to the... not cold shoulder, but it’s just like you’re here. They’re not really acknowledging you.

In addition, Player 3, after he transferred, sustained an injury. Following his transfer, he continued to perceive diminished engagement from the coaching staff, which he attributed to his inability to participate fully due to injury. Player 3 discussed his experience by saying, “Yeah, I didn’t like going to too much of anything just because I was hurting. I really wasn’t participating. And it was my first year out there in this small town. I wasn’t looking forward to just attending events” and thus felt discouraged from team activities at times.

Moving Beyond Winning

For participants, standards and expectations were at the forefront of a positive and impactful team culture. Looking primarily at their second institution, repetitive team activities and following through with expectations set from day one by both the coaches and returning players were integral in creating a culture that all players bought into. This allowed zero room for loose interpretation and a difference in consequences if a problem were to arise, making sure everyone was held to the

same standard — even with things such as stretching. Player 2 outlined his feelings when going to practice, mentioning that he’s “pretty happy” and that it is a “good environment”. Further he posited, “everybody is criticizing you, you know what I’m saying, everybody is instructing you out of love. They’re not ever gonna say anything to steer you wrong. They’re just saying that because they love you” noting this positive culture where players felt comfortable with coach intentions and directions. Additionally, Player 2 mentions how his coaches and teammates inspired him to utilize the resources at his new institution by saying, “Yeah, I did [find the resources valuable] just because of – not the resources themselves, but just the motivation that people instilled in me, just to be the best version of myself and use those resources.” Player 3 adds,

Yeah, it’s a very tight knit team circle. Everyone is pretty much on one accord. It’s very strict, very regimented, very active, and very busy. It’s all about work, though, like it’s a pretty hard working culture, hard nose culture, blue collar culture. I think that the coach did a pretty good job of, day one, kind of setting the tone and the rules of how things are going to be and then the returning guys also kind of set that standard on, “it looks like this, we do this” like we even stretched as a team together. And if someone was out of line, we’d redo all the stretches.

Player 3 went into more detail about the team culture and how that affected his relationship with his teammates. Since values, expectations, and standards were set early on from the coaches, athletes were allowed and even encouraged to build stronger relationships with their teammates.

I think my relationship was pretty good. A lot of the stuff we did, we did it as a team, no matter what it was, and I mean kind of just by force and by nature, you’re gonna kind of gravitate towards those people ... We ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner together every day as a team, like met every day as a team together at 4:00, and we just had a lot of extracurricular activities outside of basketball that we did together that I think really helped gel the team, that it wouldn’t have gelled if we didn’t do those things together.

Team culture can be expressed and understood in different ways, one impact being a reignited feeling of belonging and love of the sport of basketball that the participants had not felt, or actively lost, at their previous institution that motivated athletes to do their best in an environment they felt more comfortable.

I feel like last year at [previous institution] I kind of woke up every day feeling like, “Why am I going to practice? Why am I doing this? I’m not having fun at all with basketball”. This year it was kind of different just because I’m more involved, playing more of my style of game, and yeah, I’m good. I feel like a piece of the team, so I feel like going to practice and working hard. I’m working on my game. I’m actually getting ready to play instead of just going through the motions. [Player 1]

Moreover, a coach’s care of an athlete as a person versus a basketball player was an integral turning point for athletes when distinguishing their team culture. Athletes mentioned recruiting based off of personality and the importance of creating a sus-

tainable culture that motivated players to win. This was recognized in ways such as coaches actively showing they value their players as more than just athletes, even when they do not have playing time — impacting more than just on-the-court performance but culture and relationships as well.

Coach [name] was a really good coach. He was a player’s coach, so you know, off the court we just do little things that would amount to just *more* that really showed me that he really cares about kids and not just basketball.” ... “Coach [name] recruits guys based off their personality, and sometimes it’s not all just basketball. We had some guys that made an impact on the team that didn’t even play. [Coach would] just encourage us at practice, and make sure everybody is doing what they need to do. [Player 2]

Teammates as a Support System

Integral to their experience at their initial institution, were their teammates. In multiple ways, they acted as participants’ support systems: whether it was to de-stress, understand what they were going through, or ask for advice on what to do. Language such as “my brothers” and “my family” was prevalent throughout all interviews, along with the acknowledgment that all the players got along really well overall. Player 2 illustrated this by saying, “the main mental break for me was just being around my teammates [lists names of teammates] – just really hanging out with those guys off the court really let me be loose”. Additionally, Player 3 spoke about his ongoing bond with his teammates, who he deemed were a part of his safe space:

My past teammates, I love them. I talk to them – most of them – as often as I can...I talk to [Teammate], a lifelong friend, I talk to [Teammate] – on the game [2k] with him pretty much every day. So, we all pretty much came to [University] at the same time, had to figure everything out at the same time... You let someone into your safe space or someone’s in your safe space, automatically, you’re gonna build a bond or connection with them because you’re doing something that’s special to you with them.

Further, there was a shared level of discomfort among the players, regarding the culture of the team as shaped by the head coaches. When it came time to make personal transfer decisions, all the players talked about it beforehand and voiced their opinions on wanting to leave, as they felt their initial institution was not the right fit for them:

My teammates, I mean, we all knew that a lot of people were gonna leave. So we talked amongst ourselves before the news came out. I mean a lot of players voiced their opinions on wanting to leave, so it wasn’t surprising anyone. [Player 1]

It is important to note, participants did not mention the role of their teammates during the second interview. However, as aforementioned, participants still keep in touch with their teammates from their initial institution, marking the strength of these relationships. It could be possible that this is because participants were at their initial institution for longer than a season, providing time to strengthen these relationships.

Effects of Transfer Portal

Below highlights two subthemes that summarize participants' experiences regarding the transfer portal: *more time to play* and *a second chance and mobility*.

More Time To Play

Participants indicated the new rules of the transfer portal, specifically how they did not have to sit out a year after their first transfer, was an influential reason why they decided to transfer. They liked the idea that they could immediately begin to immerse themselves with their new team on and off the court and continue to play their sport at a high level, exemplified in the quote from Player 2 below:

Yeah, I feel like that... One year to sit out was making a lot of dudes scared of transferring. But now that you get your one free year, I feel like that's really good, because you know sometimes when mistakes happen, and you don't really know how college is your first time round as a freshman. So, like now that you get your one free year to, you know, make a better choice. I feel like that's a good look on the transfer portal.

In adjacent reasoning, Player 1 noted he knew he wanted to transfer when he was not getting enough playing time at his initial institution. He explained it felt personal as his performances were good and he knew he would have better playing time elsewhere:

I kind of wanted to leave when - it was a time when I stopped playing a lot, and it was moments where I would play well, and I would still be taken out and wouldn't be put back in. And even when I'm playing well - so I kind of felt like it was personal... I mean at that point I don't want to play for someone that personally has a problem with me when it is not about basketball anymore, because if someone was producing and you still not playing though it's - it seems like you're personally attacking that person. So probably like mid-way through conference play I knew I wanted to leave.

A Second Chance and Mobility

Participants overall noted the ease of mobility they received when entering the transfer portal. Player 2 commented that sometimes you do not find the right fit on the first try, and was grateful the transfer portal afforded him a second chance to find that "right fit" when it comes to his team and that culture:

I was just contemplating like, is this the place for me? Do they have a need for me not a want, you know, like, does this team succeed without me or with me like? I really put that into factor ... I feel like, a week before the deadline [to enter the portal] I was just contemplating. I feel like if you're contemplating on whether to stay home or not. Well, your "home" [in air quotes], then I feel like it is not home to you.

In a similar notion, participants felt comfortable at all points through the transfer process via the transfer portal. They all indicated it offered them increased mobility, and they felt in control of their ability to leave their previous institution whenever they wanted to in order to find their new home. In other words, they never felt stuck.

Specifically, Player 3, expressed he knew this process helped his ability to find the right fit, and he wanted to utilize it again to seek the best opportunities for him,

Yeah, I don't know. I thought – I don't know what the process was like before, but I know the portal kind of made me comfortable to go in. For me, knowing that me going out there, I would have some options based off me having a good freshman year, and a good sophomore year. That could be frustrating if maybe you don't play so well, and you don't have many options but for me, it was pretty calming knowing and going out there that I would still have options to go find a home and start over.

Player 1 detailed a similar experience. For him, entering the transfer portal did not increase his workload a lot, making this process very smooth and seamless for him,

It's pretty smooth just because I didn't have to search for school. Pretty much all I did was express that I wanted to leave my original school and all the coaches pretty much recruited me. They all contacted me. So, it was pretty cool.

The ease of recruitment and transfer process overall led players to feel they were in control of this process and could make the move that best suited their needs.

Discussion and Implications

Discussion

The purpose of this project was to understand the lived experiences of Division I men's basketball college athletes who transferred from one university after the 2021-2022 season. Findings alluded to the importance of the player-coach relationship whether they be positive or negative, and how a coach can impact team culture, which illuminated why DIMBB athletes were transferring. More specifically, player-coach relationships that were both personal and professional yielded higher feelings of satisfaction as well as clear lines of communication between the athlete and the head coach after transferring. Whereas player-coach relationships that were strictly professional and impersonal, left room for athletes to feel that something was missing from their college athlete experience. Additionally, when coaches made athletes feel replaceable and as if their value was tied to their on-court performance, it proved detrimental to athlete well-being as they felt basketball was strictly a business and their value was tied to their on-court performance, in turn impacting the entirety of the team culture. When some level of personal care was given to athletes after transferring, they did not adhere to this idea of basketball as a business as much (though it was still present), because they understood their coach cared about them professionally and personally, and so they felt like they were part of the team, which was not the experience they had at their original institution.

Ultimately, athletes left their institutions based on these poor player-coach relationships and not feeling valued enough on their teams. Inter-athlete relationships were not a reason for transferring as athletes saw their teammates as brothers and were even brought closer by the poor treatment of the head coach. After transferring,

athletes had a newfound sense of team culture based on not only the relationships between them and their head coach, but the set of values, rules, and accountability all athletes adhered to in their new teams. Athletes were able to feel a sense of belonging and a reignited love of basketball that was lost at their previous institution, and overall, athletes reflected on a more positive college athlete experience.

To the best of our knowledge, there is no research detailing the lived experiences of athletes who enter the transfer portal, their motivations for transferring, or an examination of their transfer experience a year after transferring. While Barnhill and Turner (2013) focus on the psychological contract breaches of college athletes and transfer intent, we are extending their work by providing a more holistic view into college athlete well-being, team culture, player-coach relationships, and the college athlete experience.

Theoretical Implications

Past literature on RPCs has primarily examined workplaces and employees which traces back to work by Argyris (1960). In general, psychological contracts have been examined in the past through many lenses, by different researchers, in many different time periods. This study examines RPC in collegiate athletic teams with the ‘workplace’ being the coaches and the ‘employees’ being the athletes.

Player-coach relationships were core to the college athlete experience, and a topic all athletes emphasized as essential. These player-coach relationships in turn explained some reasoning behind why these athletes were transferring, as they had not established good communication and positive relationships and were looking for these attributes in their new institutions, something Homan (2019) also finds. Menninger (1958) brings attention to the importance of intangible aspects in exchange agreements and relationships, which is what we saw was valued higher by the athletes (i.e., open communication, trust, loyalty, and support that was found in player-coach relationships and team culture), than tangible aspects such as academic and athletic resources (i.e., team gear, meals, new facilities) that Argyris (1950) highlights. While originally RPC refers to an employee and an employer, this study expands on this theory by viewing it through the lens of college athletics – where the college athlete is the employee and the coaches are the employers. This in turn validates the concept of RPC in college athletics, something Barnhill and Turner (2013) allude to as well. With the implementation of the transfer portal, college athletics has become a transactional environment that imitates a business-like culture, thus furthering what we know about RPC and expanding the environments it could be applied to. Players who are expected to perform at a high level need to feel valued by the coaching staff, which according to Massengale (2019) is what the RPC is. This was not the case for these athletes at their original institution. As a result, they felt the need to transfer in order to feel cherished and able to perform for their teams and for coaches. This aligns with findings from Coyle-Shapiro and colleagues (2019) regarding ideological currency and fulfillment. Athletes felt coaches were not involved and did not care about the person behind the player, something Massengale (2019) outlines. Athletes gave examples of coaches not attending graduations, not having

any communication outside practice, and coaches telling players they are replaceable. This is affirmed when Player 1 says his coaches did not attend any graduations for all graduates during his time at the university. After transferring, some athletes found a better fit when coaches took time to know the person behind the player, allowed the athlete to feel comfortable around the coaches, and overall respected them and showed their care of the athletes' well-being. When coaches take time to learn about every aspect of the college athlete rather than a transactional mindset of what the athlete can do for the coach, there is a higher chance of positive relationships, open communication, and a better college athlete experience.

Additionally, there was a discrepancy between the obligations and perceived promises that were made in line with what Rousseau (1989) outlines, where athletes, in this case, were promised care under their original team environment they are in both professionally and personally, but these obligations were not met. Even when looking at Levinson and colleagues' (1962) definition of psychological contract where needs precede expectations, athletes' needs were not met and the expectation for coaches to support athletes past what they could provide on the court was not upheld. This lack of care from coaches ties into a reduction in effort from athletes due to the violations occurred (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019), which led to a lack of motivation for athletes and loss of love for their sport. Barnhill and Turner (2013) reinforce the idea that when a psychological contract is broken, it leads to a psychological contract violation, which in turn leads to lower cognitive trust and higher intentions of leaving their team. This cycle of mistrust after the psychological contract violation coincides with findings from Lilly (2020). Since the coaches — the perpetrators of the violation — did not try to alleviate the mistrust that stemmed from the violations, the disconnect between them and the athletes created a rift that was unable to be mended. Therefore, further illustrating the importance of positive coach-athlete relationships and the necessity of clear communication and consideration of all parties involved. These violations and breaches led athletes to make the decision to leave, which unlike Barnhill and Turner note (2013), was easy and accessible due to the transfer portal. The obstacles that may have prevented college athletes from transferring in the past are now inconsequential as the transfer portal has created more mobility, freedom, and transparency in the transfer process, and thus, allows college athletes to break the psychological contracts they were in with their coaches by leaving their team and moving on to improve their college athlete experience. While Massengale (2019) talks about how coaches fill the role of parents, findings from the current project suggest teammates and team culture play a similar role as athletes described their teammates as “brothers” and “family”. The RPC can be applied to teammates as well as coaches, as athletes felt a special bond to teammates and were able to create support systems and receive intangible needs such as loyalty and trust from one another. Massengale (2019) also points out that negative relationships with coaches affect how teammates interact, therefore connecting player-coach and athlete-athlete relationships. These negative relationships can be prevented if realistic

expectations are set during the recruitment and socialization process, with constant check-ins being implemented to avoid psychological contract breaches, and coaches being cognizant to fully comprehend and acknowledge athletes' needs and expectations (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019).

Managerial Implications

Coaches and administration in Division I college athletic departments can use this research to better understand what their athletes may be going through, what their wants and needs are, and how coaches and administration can make the college athlete experience better.

Caring for the person behind the player seems like an easy feat but is often forgotten when coaches' main objective is to win games on the court. This includes actively communicating with players on and off the court, taking interest in their personal life, and creating a comfortable environment where athletes can be themselves — even if that means not being 'professional' in the traditional sense of the word. When establishing an encouraging culture in multiple facets of a college athlete's life, the athlete will want to perform better for the team and ensure a positive and sustainable college athlete experience. The transfer portal should not be something to fear or look down upon as it allows athletes more autonomy and mobility in their collegiate career and gives them a second chance when the first institution may not have been the right fit. Overall, college athletes need support that varies from athlete to athlete, and thus, coaches and administration should listen to college athletes and provide the necessary care that comes with being an athlete in Division I athletics.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study outlines the experiences of Division I men's basketball players, there are limitations. First, not all the athletes who transferred from the original institution wanted to partake in the study; what started with six athletes ended up resulting in three athletes being interviewed. With this in mind, this research study was conducted with a small sample size, one specific sport, one gender, and therefore the generalized ability of the findings is limited.

In future research, this framework could also be applied to the evaluation of coaches as interviewing more college athletes on their experiences may lead to a better way to assess coaches rather than just wins and losses. Additionally, interviewing more athletes, in different sports, and adding women to the study may prove more effective in gaining a well-rounded view on the current college athlete experience with respect to the transfer portal across the board. A third follow-up interview may prove effective to see a more longitudinal look at the effect of college athletes transferring and the college athlete experience.

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Chasing the AD Chair: Bridging Career Paths, Professional Development, and Mentorship from Classroom to Athletic Department Leadership

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As intercollegiate athletic programs evolve, the role of the athletic director (AD) has become increasingly complex, with varied career paths leading to this position across different NCAA divisions and NAIA institutions. Traditionally, the AD career trajectory followed a linear progression, often starting with coaching experience. However, recent research reveals individuals from diverse professional backgrounds and educational experiences now enter the AD role. This study explores the career trajectories of ADs based upon work experience, internships, education, mentorship, and professional development across NCAA Divisions I, II, III, and NAIA, aiming to identify unique pathways specific to each division. A total of 160 participants completed surveys related to their path to the AD chair. Through chi-square analyses and analysis of variances (ANOVAs), the study reveals statistically significant differences in work experience across the four groups. Key findings include variations in prior roles such as associate AD and head coach, as well as differences in internship experiences. Specifically, the results indicated a high prevalence of coaching backgrounds among NAIA and Division III ADs, while those ADs in DI more often come from roles as an association or assistant athletic director. The results highlight the importance of practical experiences in shaping career trajectories, offering valuable insights for faculty mentoring students aspiring to become ADs. These findings can guide faculty as they create curriculum for students related to selecting appropriate educational and practical opportunities based on their aspirations within different divisions.

Keywords: athletic director, career, internships, intercollegiate athletics



As intercollegiate athletic programs continue to evolve, the role of the athletic director (AD) has become increasingly multifaceted and complex. For faculty mentoring students aspiring to become athletic directors, it is crucial to understand the diverse career paths that lead to this position. These paths can vary significantly across different National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) divisions and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) institutions, with each requiring unique skills and experiences. Traditionally, the journey to becoming an AD was considered to follow a linear progression, often beginning with coaching experience. However, research has shown that this is no longer the case, as athletic directors now come from a variety of professional backgrounds and educational experiences (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Lumpkin et al., 2015).

Research by Lumpkin et al. (2015) highlights notable differences in the backgrounds of athletic directors across NCAA divisions. Specifically, Division I athletic directors were more likely to have no coaching experience compared to their counterparts in Divisions II and III. Division I ADs may need more expertise in administration, as they will be required to navigate the complex financial and strategic aspects of a larger more lucrative athletic department. On the other hand, students aspiring to become ADs in Divisions II, III, or NAIA may be more likely to benefit from a coaching background, where the focus is often on student-athlete development and maintaining strong relationships with sports teams.

Although differences in career paths have been noted in the literature, practical guidelines suggest that ADs in Division II institutions still need experience beyond coaching. An NCAA working group created a “guidebook” for those interested in being an AD at the Division II level. In the forward of the book, Schroeder and Brasfield (n.d.) note:

If you are a Division II assistant or associate AD, you probably have a specific task – for example, rules compliance or communications – without much assistance. If you are the sports information director, you may not have given much thought to compliance, ticket management or drug-testing policies. If you are the compliance person, you may be deficient in promotional skills or how to relate with media. It’s understandable, but those deficiencies hinder your quest to fill one of the few positions that come available each year. You must be able to set yourself apart by demonstrating a broad skill set, and you especially must be able to present business or fundraising experience (p. 1).

This quote underscores the importance of a well-rounded skill set for aspiring athletic directors.

This study builds on the work of Lumpkin et al. (2015) and Fitzgerald et al. (1994) to examine the varying experiences and educational backgrounds of athletic directors across NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions. By exploring these differences, the study seeks to provide insights that can help students navigate

the diverse career paths leading to the athletic director role. Additionally, this study introduces new factors — such as internships, graduate assistantships, professional development, and mentorship — that may play a significant role in shaping students' career trajectories to the athletic director position, with these factors potentially varying by division. These insights will provide faculty with valuable information to guide students in selecting appropriate educational paths and gaining relevant experience aligned with their aspirations to become athletic directors. The study will address the following research questions:

1. What significant associations exist between the work experiences of athletic directors at NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions?
2. Are there significant associations in the educational backgrounds of athletic directors at NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions?
3. What significant associations exist related to professional development training for athletic directors at NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions?
4. What significant associations exist related to mentorship development trends for athletic directors at NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions?

By answering these questions, this study will provide essential insights that will help better prepare students for athletic director positions, tailored to their division of interest. By understanding the specific needs and opportunities within each division, faculty can better support students in tailoring their educational and career strategies, ensuring they are well-equipped to pursue the athletic director role that best aligns with their goals.

Literature Review

Understanding the career paths and educational backgrounds of ADs across various collegiate athletic divisions is crucial for preparing students to pursue leadership roles in athletic administration. While previous studies have examined the career paths and education of athletic directors, there remains a gap in understanding differences across NCAA divisions and the NAIA, specifically related to internships, professional development, and relationship development. Insights into these pathways can help faculty design curriculum and courses that align with the career goals of students. Furthermore, by examining these pathways, students and entry-level employees can gain a clearer understanding of the steps needed to reach their desired career destinations.

Career Pathways of Athletic Directors

Research on ADs often focuses on how the ADs got into their current positions. The focus looks at different elements of the ADs background such as work experience, education, internships, and graduate assistantships. This section will review previous literature to provide insight into these elements of the career pathways.

Work Experience

One factor to review when trying to prepare ADs is the work experience the individual had prior to becoming an AD. Early research on the career paths of individuals who become ADs shows those serving at NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Power 5 institutions often have backgrounds in fundraising and development (Kirkpatrick, 2018). At the NCAA Division II level, Elliott and Webster (2020) found 23.5% of the ADs in their study had previously held head coaching positions. Similarly, Lumpkin et al. (2015) conducted content analysis of athletic director biographies and observed that ADs in NCAA Division I were more likely to have no prior coaching experience compared to those in Divisions II and III, further emphasizing the shift toward more business-focused leaders in the highest tier of collegiate athletics. This finding was inconsistent with previous research that asserted the career paths of ADs included coaching experiences (Fitzgerald et al., 1994). The work of Fitzgerald et al. (1994) suggested ADs careers include varied backgrounds of both coaching and administrative roles.

Education

Another factor that is often reviewed is the educational background of the ADs. Elliott and Webster (2020) revealed Sport Administration was a common academic discipline among athletic directors, with 46.4% of respondents holding degrees in that field. Research by Lumpkin et al. (2016) and Kirkpatrick (2018) suggested advanced degrees are common among athletic directors. Many viewed the master's degree as a credential necessary to enter the profession, emphasizing the importance of understanding the AD's role across NCAA divisions and the education needed for the position (Bernhard, 2016).

In an attempt to understand the educational element, it is important to understand the sport management curriculum. DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016) found students in sport management programs expressed satisfaction with the sport management curriculum and found value in courses like sport management, introduction to the sport industry, and sport marketing but felt less engaged with sociocultural courses such as sport and society. This finding indicates a possible gap in understanding courses that best prepare students for serving in the AD position. While these courses offer important sociocultural context, they may not always provide the practical tools necessary for roles such as athletic director, particularly in divisions where budget constraints and institutional demands are at the forefront.

Sellers et al. (2023) found courses like introduction to sport management and legal aspects of sport management were highly regarded by students, while courses such as sport finance and case studies were considered less enjoyable and more challenging. Future research is necessary to understand the value these courses, especially in areas that directly impact athletic directors' roles, such as financial management and legal matters in sport. In NCAA Division I programs, where the complexity of athletics administration is higher, ADs often deal with more intricate financial and legal matters, so the integration of business-oriented coursework (e.g., sport finance, risk management) would be critical for preparing these leaders.

Popp et al. (2015) evaluated master's-level sport management programs and found students who were pursuing leadership roles in athletic administration expressed a desire for more business-oriented coursework. These findings suggest that incorporating business and management courses into the curriculum is necessary to equip future athletic directors for the leadership demands of higher-tier programs, however future research is needed to determine if these courses properly prepare students for roles as athletic directors in NCAA Divisions II, NCAA Divisions III, or NAIA institutions where there may be a higher need for coaching or leadership experience.

Internships

DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016) went further and evaluated how well sport management programs prepare students for careers in the industry. The research included student participants who just completed their internships as well as participants who served as site supervisors for student interns. Student participants indicated finding value in the mandate to have an internship as a requirement of their Sport Management degree program. This study highlighted the significance of providing more internship opportunities for students. Additionally, the study emphasized the need for more applied learning within courses. However, later research from Hawzen et al., (2018) examined the concept of "cruel optimism," where students are motivated by idealized dreams of working in sports, despite the industry's exploitative nature, particularly in the realm of unpaid internships. Walker et al. (2020) noted that many sport management students view their internships as unpaid, time-consuming, and lacking in educational substance. Their study suggested institutions may inadvertently legitimize exploitative labor practices by awarding academic credit for unpaid internships.

Research by VanSickle et al. (2023) found a trend toward a decreased emphasis on experiential learning in sport management curriculum, which may reflect shifting priorities within the field of sport management education. However, for aspiring ADs, particularly in NCAA Division I, where the leadership and operational demands are highest, a robust internship experience, hands-on practice, and a curriculum that combines both theoretical and business-focused content may be critical.

Mashburn (2023) argues existing literature on sport management internships tends to focus on student satisfaction with their internship rather than assessing how well sport management coursework prepared the student for their internship. Brown et al., (2018) noted that unless students, institutions, and site supervisors collaborate, internships may fail to promote critical thinking and reflection. Similarly, Odio and Menaker (2023) argue internships should cultivate transferable skills aligned with student development and not just fulfill organizational needs. These recent studies challenge the notion of a required internship and possibly question if the internship is necessary in helping students achieve career goals of serving as an AD in each division.

Graduate Assistantships

Another area of focus related to career pathways is graduate assistantships and their role in assisting students to reaching the AD position. Bernhard (2016) found graduate students aspiring to work in intercollegiate athletics often choose their graduate program based on the reputation of the athletic department and the availability of graduate assistantships. Smith et al. (2017) indicated that although graduate assistantships provided an opportunity to gain entry into the field, not all opportunities provide the same value. These studies highlight the need for further research to determine whether holding a graduate assistant position is a critical step on the path to becoming an AD.

Professional Networks and Mentorships

Professional networks, mentorship, and relationship-building are perceived as critical factors influencing the career advancement to the athletic director role. Welch et al. (2021) highlighted the unique challenges faced by ethnic minority female ADs, who often encounter compounded barriers due to both gender and racial biases. Their study emphasized the importance of professional relationships, mentorship, and support networks in overcoming these barriers. The findings of this study underscored the importance of mentorship programs and networking opportunities for aspiring athletic directors. Similarly, Hancock and Hums (2016) explored the challenges faced by female administrators in advancing to senior leadership positions within NCAA Division I athletic departments. Their study highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationships with supervisors and mentors and access to professional development activities aided in participants' career advancement.

Research on professional development within athletic departments highlights the importance of communication and relationship-building in effective leadership. Elliott et al. (2023) examined the dynamics between athletic directors and their direct reports within NCAA Division II athletic programs. The importance of communication was a key theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. . Additionally, the relationship between ADs and university presidents plays a significant role in career success. LeCrom and Pratt (2016) studied the relationship dynamics at the NCAA Division I level between athletic directors and university presidents. Through qualitative interviews with athletic directors, the study highlighted how ADs feel there should be trust and open lines of communication in the relationship. Additionally, presidents who respect the athletic director's expertise led to more positive relationships between the two parties.

These findings indicate that while professional networks and relationships play a critical role across all divisions, the nature of the relationships and their impact can vary by NCAA division. NCAA Division I programs, due to their size, visibility, and complexity, may place more emphasis on high-level connections with university presidents, whereas NCAA Division II institutions may focus more on day-to-day communication between ADs and their direct reports.

Furthermore, Bravo et al., (2012) surveyed athletic administrators and found communication skills, relevant work experience, and work ethic were valued highly

in the hiring process. However, recent graduates often lacked these attributes, highlighting the need for sport management programs to provide rigorous, experiential coursework that cultivates these essential skills.

Preparation in Evolving College Athletics Landscape

Based upon the different education and professional experiences of ADs across NCAA divisions and NAIA institutions, there appears to be a need for more research to understand the preparation of ADs. An additional gap in previous research suggests preparing future athletic directors requires not only providing technical knowledge but also fostering the development of these skills through internships and mentorship.

In conclusion, while there are general trends in the preparation of athletic directors through work experience, education, internships, mentorships, and professional development, the specific needs and demands can vary significantly by NCAA division. This research addresses the gap in the literature related to understanding the necessary education and experiences required for ADs by division to help better prepare students for these roles.

Method

To answer the four research questions of this study, a systematic approach had to be used to collect data. The following section will provide insight into this systematic approach. The participants, the survey instrument, and the data analysis techniques used to answer the questions will be discussed.

Participants

This study surveyed ADs at NCAA and NAIA member institutions. The target population included individuals who were designated as ADs on the official institutional websites of NCAA and NAIA member schools. A comprehensive list of NCAA and NAIA institutions was compiled, and the survey link was distributed to those individuals listed as the AD on each institution's website. A total of 1,130 ADs were invited to participate in the survey.

A total of 160 participants completed the survey, which is 14.2% response rate. Although the response rate is relatively low, the participants represent each division, and the rate aligns with those reported in previous studies within the sport management field (see Bravo et al., 2012; Sattler, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2022; Stokowski et al., 2018). Of the 160 participants, 33 (20.6%) were from NCAA Division I, 22 (13.8%) were from NCAA Division II, 63 (39.4%) were from NCAA Division III, and 42 (26.3%) were from NAIA institutions. Approximately, 75.6% of the respondents were male and 24.4% were female. The average age of participants when they became an athletic director was 40.61 years ($SD = 7.98$), with the youngest at 23 and the oldest at 64. On average, participants had worked 8.95 years ($SD = 6.85$) in their current AD positions and 11.74 years ($SD = 8.53$) total as an athletic director

throughout their careers. Table 1 provides the response rates by division while Table 2 provides a demographic comparison between the study's sample and the 2023-2024 NCAA demographics for ADs at all levels and NAIA (A. Grosbach, personal communication, May 14, 2025, *National Collegiate Athletic Association B*, n.d.). For all divisions of the NCAA, 75% of ADs are males and 25% are females (NCAA, 2025).

Table 1.
Response Rates by NCAA Division

Division	Total Member Institution in Division	Total Number of Responses in Each Division	Percent of Division Represented by Survey Responses
Division I	365	33	9.04%
Division II	304	22	7.24%
Division III	431	63	14.62%
NAIA	237	42	17.72%

Table 2.
Comparison of Demographic Information between Study Sample and NCAA/NAIA Data

Division	Percentage Male in Study	Percentage Female in Study	Percentage of Male ADs	Percentage of Female ADs
Division I	97.0%	3.0%	84.0%	16.0%
Division II	77.3%	22.7%	76.0%	24.0%
Division III	71.4%	28.6%	66.0%	34.0%
NAIA	64.3%	35.7%	79.8%	20.2%

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was developed by the research team following an extensive review of the literature on the roles and responsibilities of athletic directors, with a particular focus on the prior roles, educational backgrounds, and professional development experiences used in previous studies (See Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Lumpkin et al., 2015). The survey instrument also included experiences such as internships, graduate assistantships, and other career-related training that may not have been included in previous studies related to the career path of athletic directors. Based on this review, the survey was designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data, addressing several key areas relevant to the research questions. The final version of the survey consisted of a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions.

The survey instrument is included in appendix A. Prior to distributing the survey to the broader sample, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of athletic directors from three NCAA conferences. The purpose of the pilot study was to assess the clarity and reliability of the survey questions and to ensure the survey instrument was effective in capturing the intended information. Feedback from the pilot study participants led to minor adjustments in the wording and formatting of some questions. The revised survey was then distributed to all athletic directors in the sample.

The survey was distributed electronically via a secure online platform, with a link sent to the email addresses of ADs listed on institutional websites. Participants were given a two-week window to complete the survey, with reminder emails sent at the one-week mark. The survey was voluntary, and respondents were assured that their participation would be confidential, with all responses aggregated for analysis.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of the data collection process, the responses were cleaned and coded for analysis. Descriptive statistics were initially computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants, including their educational backgrounds, professional experiences, and institutional types. The next phase of analysis involved chi-square tests, conducted using SPSS statistical software, to examine whether there were significant associations in experience and educational backgrounds across four distinct groups: NCAA Division I, NCAA Division II, NCAA Division III, and NAIA athletic directors related to each research question. Chi-square tests were chosen to determine the relationships between categorical variables and Cramer's V test were performed to measure effect size. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all tests.

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants reviewed the informed consent before completing the survey, the study did not collect identifying information to protect participant confidentiality. Participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time if they desired. Results are discussed in the section below.

Results

Overall, participants were also asked if they felt prepared for the position of athletic director. No significant association related to the participant feeling prepared for the athletic director role between divisions. Results related to each research question are included in this section.

For RQ1, the researchers completed chi-square statistical tests related to work histories that included the participant serving as an associate athletic director, assistant athletic director, head coach, or an assistant coach prior to taking on the role of an athletic director. The chi-square analysis identified significant associations for participants who held associate AD positions prior to taking on the AD role ($\chi^2 (3, N = 134) = 13.43, p < .001$), Cramer's $V = .317$ indicating a large effect size (Cohen, 1988). The chi-square analysis also identified significant associations for participants

who held an assistant AD positions prior to taking on the AD role ($\chi^2(3, N = 134) = 7.83, p = .05$), Cramer's $V = .166$ indicating a medium effect size. The chi-square analysis identified significant associations for participants that held coach positions prior to taking on the AD role ($\chi^2(3, N = 134) = 24.68, p < .001$), Cramer's $V = .429$ indicating a large effect size. The chi-square analysis did not reveal significant associations in career history related to having a previous coordinator position, having a previous assistant coach position, or having a position outside of athletics prior to serving as an AD. Tables 3, 4, and 5 below include significant findings related to each of these positions. To further analyze the data, researchers conducted a one-way ANOVA to reveal any significant differences identified in the number of years an AD worked prior to becoming an AD in each of the divisions. The researchers did not find any statistically significant differences related to the number of years the participant worked prior to being an AD at the different levels, $F(3,152) = 1.06, p = .37$. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences in age when became AD and division level. The researchers did not find any statistically significant differences related to the age of the respondent when the individual became an AD in each division, $F(3,129) = 1.15, p = .33$.

Table 3

Percent of Participants Who Held an Associate AD Role Prior to Becoming AD

Division	Percent of Participants who Held an Associate AD Role Prior to Becoming an AD	Percent of Participants who Did Not Have an Associate AD Role Prior to Becoming an AD
NCAA DI	79.17%	20.83%
NCAA DII	50.00%	50.00%
NCAA DIII	56.14%	43.86%
NAIA	31.43%	68.57%

Table 4

Percent of Participants Who Held an Assistant AD Role Prior to Becoming AD

Division	Percent of Participants who Held an Assistant AD Role Prior to Becoming an AD	Percent of Participants who Did Not Have an Assistant AD Role Prior to Becoming an AD
NCAA DI	79.17%	20.83%
NCAA DII	66.67%	33.33%
NCAA DIII	61.40%	38.60%
NAIA	55.56%	44.44%

Table 5*Percent of Participants Who Held a Head Coaching Role Prior to Becoming AD*

Division	Percent of Participants who Held a Head Coaching Role Prior to Becoming an AD	Percent of Participants who Did Not Have a Head Coaching Role Prior to Becoming an AD
NCAA DI	12.50%	87.50%
NCAA DII	44.44%	55.55%
NCAA DIII	56.14%	43.86%
NAIA	77.14%	22.86%

Additionally, related to RQ1, chi-square tests indicated previous internship experience reported by participants was different across the groups of ADs ($\chi^2 (3, N = 134) = 10.84, p = .013$), Cramer's $V = .281$ indicating a medium effect size. However, chi-square analysis did not reveal statistical associations related to the area in which the participant had the internship experience or the participant having a graduate assistant position prior to the AD role. Table 6 below includes the percent of participants that held an internship by division.

Table 6*Percent of Participants Who Had an Internship Role Prior to Becoming AD*

Division	Percent of Participants who Held an Internship Prior to Becoming an AD	Percent of Participants who Did Not Have an Internship Prior to Becoming an AD
NCAA DI	75%	25%
NCAA DII	61%	39%
NCAA DIII	49%	51%
NAIA	33%	67%

Related to RQ2, the results did not find any statistically significant associations between the AD's undergraduate degree and the division (Table 7). Similar findings were also suggested between the AD's master's degree major and the division (Table 8). A chi-square analysis did reveal significant associations in the highest degree held and the division ($\chi^2 (3, N = 134) = 21.73, p = .04$), with a medium effect size (Cramer's $V = .213$). Additionally, the chi-square analysis revealed a significant association across courses recommended for those interested in becoming an AD ($\chi^2 (39, N = 57) = 57.97, p = .036$). The calculated Cramer's $V = .582$ indicating a large effect size. Tables 9 and 10 report the highest degree held by participant by division and recommended courses reported by division respectively.

Table 7*Percent of Participant Undergraduate Degree Majors by Each Division*

Major	Division I	Division II	Division III	NAIA
Business	24.2%	22.7%	12.7%	16.7%
Science/Math	6.1%	4.5%	3.2%	7.1%
Education	9.1%	0.0%	9.5%	11.9%
Health/Physical Ed	12.1%	27.3%	15.9%	26.2%
Health Promotion	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%
Coaching	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%
Athletic Training	0.0%	9.1%	1.6%	2.4%
Kinesiology	0.0%	0.0%	3.2%	7.1%
Social Studies/ Humanities	18.2%	18.2%	22.2%	11.9%
Government & Legal Studies	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%
English	3.0%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%
Communication	15.2%	4.5%	12.7%	11.9%
Christian Ministries	0.0%	4.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Recreation/Sport Management	12.1%	9.1%	4.8%	0.0%
General/ IDS	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	2.4%

Table 8*Percent of Participant Master's Degree Majors by Each Division*

Major	Division I	Division II	Division III	NAIA
Business	28.6%	5.3%	8.8%	23.7%
Sport Administration	32.1%	36.8%	35.1%	31.6%
Athletic Training	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	0.0%
Coaching	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	0.0%
Physical Ed	7.1%	15.8%	7.0%	5.3%
Kinesiology	0.0%	10.5%	10.5%	10.5%
Christian Ministries	0.0%	5.3%	0.0%	2.6%
Education	25.0%	21.1%	22.8%	21.1%
Counseling	3.6%	0.0%	1.8%	5.3%
Science/Math	0.0%	5.3%	1.8%	0.0%
Criminal Justice	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	0.0%
Communication	3.6%	0.0%	1.8%	0.0%
English	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	0.0%

Table 9*Percent of Participants Who Held Each Degree*

Division	Bachelor	Master	JD	PhD/EdD
NCAA DI	9.09%	57.58%	12.12%	21.21%
NCAA DII	13.64%	77.25%	0%	9.09%
NCAA DIII	7.93%	80.95%	0%	9.52%
NAIA	7.14%	78.75%	0%	11.90%

Table 10
Undergraduate Courses Recommended by Participants

Division	Most Recommended Course	Second Most Recommended Course	Third Most Recommended Course
NCAA DI	Finance 36.4%	Sport Law 27.3%	Accounting 9.1%
NCAA DII	Administration 40.7%	Sport Law 25.5%	Marketing 25%
NCAA DIII	Sport Law 40.7%	Finance 22.2%	Administration 7.4%
NAIA	Sport Law 33.3%	Finance 19.3%	Administration 12.3%

For RQ3, no significant associations were found across divisions related to participating in professional development by athletic directors. Professional development opportunities participants completed included leadership programs, mentorship programs, and coursework. In total 88.9% ($n = 120$) of participants indicate they participate in some type of professional development opportunity. Additionally, there was no significant associations revealed between divisions related to the frequency of professional development opportunities reported by athletic directors. Of the participants who indicated they participated in professional development opportunities, 98% ($n = 105$) of participants indicated they participate in professional development at least once a year.

For RQ4, while the majority of the respondents ($n = 101, 74.8\%$) indicated they had a mentor, no significant associations were identified between divisions related to the AD having a mentor. Additionally, there was no significant association to the impact of the mentor between divisions. Participants indicated using their mentor for advice and guidance ($n = 26, 16.3\%$), as a sounding board ($n = 14, 8.8\%$), and for practical help ($n = 13, 8.1\%$). Finally, related to mentors, there was no significant association related to type of mentors for athletic directors in each division. Mentor types included informal mentors, previous AD as a mentor, and the participant's supervisor as a mentor.

The next section will include a discussion of these results and implications for faculty preparing students for the AD role and students looking to plan their career paths toward serving in an athletic director role.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and education of athletic directors (ADs) across NCAA Division I, NCAA Division II, NCAA Division

III, and NAIA institutions and identify any differences between divisions. This study builds on the work of Fitzgerald et al. (1994) and Lumpkin et al. (2015) by identifying key differences and providing deeper insights into the factors that shape athletic director career paths and how they may vary by division.

Work Experience

One of the study findings is the statistically significant association in work experiences across divisions. The results from RQ1 indicate ADs at Division I institutions are more likely to have held roles as assistant or associate athletic directors whereas ADs in Division II, Division III, and NAIA institutions are more likely to have backgrounds in coaching. These findings align with the research by Lumpkin et al. (2015), which highlighted the growing trend in Division I institutions for ADs to have expertise in administration rather than coaching. In contrast, Division II and III, and NAIA ADs appear to be more likely to have coaching experience, suggesting that these divisions place a greater emphasis on developing relationships with student-athletes and fostering team dynamics. This differentiation in career pathways reinforces the notion that the role of an AD is tailored to the unique needs of each division's athletic program (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Lumpkin et al., 2015).

Educational Backgrounds

Similar to Elliott and Webster (2020), the results suggest sport administration was the most common degree choice, at least at the master's level for ADs. The study also revealed additional differences in educational backgrounds across divisions. In reference to RQ2, the results suggest Division I ADs were more likely to hold advanced degrees, with a portion possessing doctorates. In contrast, ADs in Division II, Division III, and NAIA were more likely to hold master's degrees. Additionally, Lumpkin et al. (2015) and Elliott and Webster (2020), found there was a prevalence of advanced degrees among ADs. These findings align with Bernhard (2016) who found that many graduate students pursue sport management degrees as a necessary credential for advancement in intercollegiate athletics.

When reviewing the results on educational background, the results suggest some similarities and differences to previous research. The results from the current study suggest the ADs at the different divisions varied on the classes they believe were important to prepare students to work in the field. These differences in recommended academic preparation come back to the division differences in the AD role. Sport finance was recommended at all levels except Division II as an important class. However, Sellers et al. (2023) found students indicated sport finance was less enjoyable and more challenging, indicating a disconnect between student and AD perceptions. Additionally, while sport marketing and introduction to sport industry were classes found by students to be helpful (Deluca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016), these classes were not recommended as the top three except sport marketing with Division II ADs. These findings suggest differences in perceptions between ADs and students. One reason for this difference is the foundation aspect is already established in the ADs while the students are just getting that foundation created. Both the student partici-

pants and ADs value the importance of legal aspects of sport management (Deluca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016).

The advanced educational differences may be indicative of the varying skill sets and knowledge required at each level (Lumpkin et al., 2015). This finding highlights the need for academic programs to market and structure themselves not just as degree-granting institutions, but as career accelerators for those looking to serve in the athletic director role. These distinct career routes may point to the need for flexible academic programs that offer both administrative, leadership training, and coaching-related development, depending on a student's intended career trajectory. As suggested by DeSensi et al. (1990), a single curricular model may not adequately meet the diverse needs of sport management graduates; instead, sport management programs should consider offering specialized tracks or electives aligned with different NCAA division.

Internships

Internships were a key component of the pathway for many athletic directors in this study. However, significant variations in internship experiences were observed across divisions. While the study revealed a statistically significant association among divisions and internship experiences, it was reported by the respondents that these opportunities play a crucial role in preparing individuals for leadership roles within athletic administration. To further support the role of internships, Bravo et al. (2012) found related work experience as a lacking attribute in job candidates for entry-level athletic administration roles. The results from this study suggest ADs at all levels recommend internships and hand-on experiences as means to prepare students. Faculty must therefore be intentional in preparing students for roles in athletic administration. For example, if the student plans to pursue an AD position at a DI member institution, faculty should work to ensure the student has skills that can lead to an assistant or associate AD position. Conversely, if a student plans to pursue an AD position at a NCAA DII, NCAA DIII, or NAIA institution, faculty may have the student take more classes related to coaching and earning coaching certificates as opposed to going through an internship route.

As faculty work to include internships in the sport management curriculum, faculty should ensure a quality experience for the student that ensures the student is able to work on skills to help reach their goals, not just the goals of the organization. Publications have challenged the idea that all internships are inherently educational and should be required in the sport management curriculum (Brandon-Li et al., 2016; Brown, 2025; Odio & Menaker, 2023). The results from this study suggest current ADs feel they are valuable.

Professional Development and Mentorship

RQ3 and RQ4 explored the role of professional development and mentorship in preparing ADs for their roles. Interestingly, the study found no significant differences across divisions regarding participation in professional development activities or mentorship opportunities. The lack of significant differences in professional de-

velopment may suggest that, while professional development is critical, it may be similarly available across divisions, albeit in varying formats or frequencies. For example, the NCAA offers three professional development opportunities to student-athletes – the Student-Athlete Leadership Forum, Career in Sport Forum, and the NCAA Postgraduate Internship Program (See National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.). Additionally, the NCAA website offers many resources for those interested in pursuing an AD role.

The results in this study regarding mentorship are also noteworthy. The lack of significant associations between mentorship and division may indicate mentorship is not a universally implemented or structured component of AD career preparation. This aligns with the findings of DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016), who emphasized the importance of internships and mentorship in preparing students for careers in athletic administration, yet also noted the inconsistency of these opportunities across institutions. Faculty may want to focus more on ensuring students have access to formalized mentorship opportunities that align with the specific needs and goals of their desired division.

As the findings from this study and previous literature (e.g., DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Welch et al., 2021) demonstrate, internships and mentorship are vital components for aspiring athletic directors. It is important for faculty and mentors to recognize the differences in internship opportunities across divisions and to help students strategically select experiences that align with their career aspirations. Tailoring these opportunities to the unique needs of each division will not only help students develop the skills required for their desired role but also enhance their ability to succeed as future athletic directors.

Implications for Students and Faculty

This study provides valuable insights for both students aspiring to become athletic directors and faculty members who are guiding them. For students, the findings suggest those aiming for Division I AD roles should prioritize gaining administrative and leadership experience. In contrast, those pursuing Division II or III and NAIA AD positions may benefit more from gaining coaching experience and developing strong relationships with athletes and teams.

For faculty, the results emphasize the importance of offering a curriculum that reflects the varied career paths and educational requirements across divisions. For example, programs designed for aspiring Division I ADs should include courses focused on business management, fundraising, and finance, while those for Division II and III and NAIA ADs should emphasize coaching, leadership, and team development. Additionally, the study suggests faculty should consider implementing more structured internship and mentorship programs to provide students with the hands-on experience and professional networks necessary for career advancement.

As faculty prepare students for future roles as ADs, it is crucial to acknowledge the evolving landscape of intercollegiate athletics. The financial strain brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic — particularly the sharp decline in revenue from lost ticket

sales (Williams & Mathis, 2021) — highlighted the need for ADs to possess strong financial insight. Future leaders must be prepared to manage constrained budgets and make strategic resource allocation decisions, even when those choices involve difficult measures such as staff reductions or the elimination of athletic programs to maintain departmental sustainability. Additionally, with emerging developments such as Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policies and potential revenue-sharing models, the role of the AD is becoming increasingly complex. Particularly at the NCAA Division I level, a solid business background will be essential, along with the ability to build and lead teams equipped to navigate these changes while supporting both student-athletes and the broader athletic department.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The relatively low response rate (14.2%) may limit the generalizability of the findings, particularly given the diversity of institutions included in the sample. Future research could explore these career pathways with larger, more representative samples, as well as investigate how factors such as gender, race, and institutional resources influence career trajectories in athletic administration. Additionally, further exploration of how mentorship and professional development programs are structured across divisions could yield valuable information for improving career preparation in this field.

Conclusion

Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the diverse career paths, educational backgrounds, and professional development opportunities available to athletic directors across NCAA and NAIA divisions. By highlighting the distinctions between divisions, the study provides important guidance for students and faculty, helping them to better navigate the varied routes to becoming an athletic director. This study contributes to an important and growing dialogue about how to best prepare future athletic administrators. Given the diversity of pathways into athletic director roles across divisions, sport management programs may want to consider curricular flexibility to ensure students are getting required skills and education to match career goals. Programs that offer tailored experiences aligned with career goals — whether administrative or coaching-focused — will better equip graduates to meet the complex and varied demands of leadership in intercollegiate athletics.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Literature Review

Black Student-Athlete Experiences

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

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

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

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

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

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

Current DI College Sports Challenges

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

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

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

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

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

Existing Frameworks

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

Student Engagement in Educationally Purposeful Activities

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

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

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

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

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

Organizational Theory

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

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

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

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

Holistic Models for Student-Athlete Success

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Method

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

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

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

Participants

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1
Participant Data – Black Student-Athletes

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

Devon	28	Football	Finance	Investments/ acquisitions analyst	FBS
Jada	25	W. Bkb	Business and entrepreneur- ship	Senior account coordinator	P4
Keisha	35	W. Bkb	Social sciences	Organizational development & equity strategist	Non-P4
Kendra	27	W. Bkb	Health and rehabilitation sciences	Healthcare con- sultant	Non-P4
Kendrick	28	Football	Sociology	Higher education administrator	FBS
Leonard	39	Football	History	College football coach	FBS
Marquis	36	Football	Economics	Operations	FCS
Reggie	25	Football	Psychology	Corporate para- legal	FCS
Sierra	25	W. Bkb	Liberal studies	Professional athlete	Non-P4
Tasha	26	W. Bkb	Geology	EPA contractor	P4
Trey	26	Football	Economics and communication	Management consultant	FBS
Tyrone	32	Football	Exercise sci- ence	Doctoral student	FBS
Zachary	28	Football	Communica- tion	Technical spe- cialist	FBS
Zara	31	W. Bkb	Sociology	Professional athlete	P4
Zoe	33	W. Bkb	Labor employ- ment relations and communi- cations	HR business partner	P4

Table 2
Participant Data - Coaches

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

Data Collection

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

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

Data Analysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

Positionality

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

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

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

Trustworthiness

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

Findings

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

Goals Influence HIP Participation

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

Athletes' Perceptions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coaches’ Perceptions

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

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

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

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

HIPs Occur Outside of Athletics

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

Athletes' Perceptions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coaches’ Perceptions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Messaging Reflects Institutional Values

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

Athletes’ Perceptions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coaches' Perceptions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 1

Mission Statement Word Cloud



Discussion

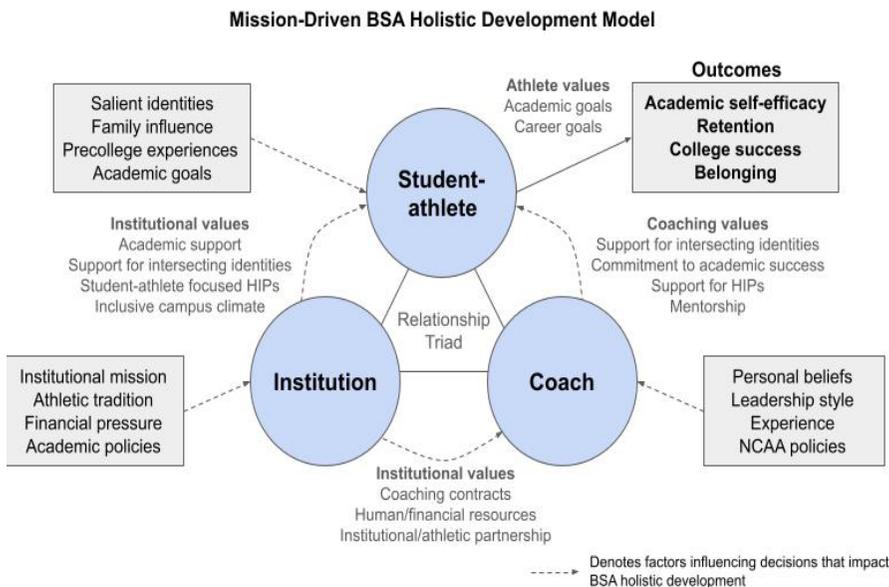
This research makes a significant contribution to the literature for several reasons. First, the findings offer diverse perspectives on holistic development through

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

Theoretical Implications

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

Figure 2
Mission-Driven BSA Holistic Development Model



Institutional Values

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coaching Values

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Athlete Values

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

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

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

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

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

Practical Implications

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

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

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

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

Limitations

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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Driven To Lead: Gendered Differences in Leadership Competencies Among NCAA Athletes

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Intercollegiate athletics offers a valuable environment for college athletes' leadership development, yet gender disparities remain in leadership roles. While women's participation in college sports has grown significantly since the passing of Title IX, women still hold only 25% of NCAA leadership positions (e.g. athletic directors, commissioners and representatives of the NCAA). Using Leadership Identity Developmental Model (LID) this study explored leadership competencies among NCAA men and women athletes, focusing on key differences and their implications. A total of 232 athletes (61.7% women, 38.3% men) from all divisions completed surveys using the Leadership Learning Agility Scale (LLAS) and the Student Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS). Results showed women athletes scored significantly higher in six of nine leadership competencies than their men counterparts. These findings underscore the need for gender-specific leadership programming designed to build confidence and prepare women athletes to pursue and succeed in future leadership roles within and beyond the athletic context. Tailored initiatives can help athletic departments promote more inclusive leadership development. Future research should examine the long-term and use qualitative research methods to explore the impacts of such targeted efforts.

Keywords: leadership development, gender, college athletes, leadership competencies

Intercollegiate athletics offers a unique opportunity for athletes to pursue their sport and education simultaneously. Since 1972, Title IX has paved the way for women to gain access to the same educational opportunities as their men counterparts (Staurowsky et al., 2022). Title IX is an educational amendment that prohibits discrimination based on sex in any education programs and federally funded activities (U.S.D.E., n.d). Recent expansions of Title IX now also prohibit discrimination based on sex, offering protections for women and trans individuals (U.S.D.E., n.d). In 1972, there were 29,977 women competing in college sports (Staurowsky et al., 2022). By 2022, that number had grown to 215,486 (Staurowsky et al., 2022). However, this growth in participation has not translated into equivalent gains in leadership representation (Evans & Pfister, 2021). Although exact data on changes in intercollegiate athletics since Title IX is limited, the number of women serving as athletic director of an NCAA institution increased from 211 in 2012 to 276 in 2024 (NCAA, 2024). According to NCAA data, women currently hold approximately 25% of head coaching and athletic director roles, and about 30% of conference commissioner positions (NCAA, 2022). Additionally, according to the most recent TIDES report from 2021-2022, women athletic directors in Division I represented only 15%, and 25% at the Division II and III levels combined (TIDES, 2022). Moreover, women holding leadership positions at the NCAA national office is around 42% (TIDES, 2022).

The introduction of Title IX and its implementation in higher education institutions was integral for supporting women's access to participation in sport. Despite the progress made in access to participation and representation among athletes in sport, a gap still remains in representation at the leadership level within college sports. Moving forward, developing strong leaders can support improved hiring of women in leadership roles to provide a critical support for equity and representation needed in the persistently male-dominated field of sport (Staurowsky, 2022).

Participation in sports, particularly over longer periods of times, has been found to improve the development of leadership skills, increasing the likelihood of women being represented in formal leadership roles (Sharro et al., 2024). Although efforts have been made within collegiate athletics to promote women in leadership roles, persistent disparities raise critical questions regarding the effectiveness of leadership development for female college athletes, both within sport contexts and in broader societal setting. Specifically, women represent almost 47% of the overall U.S. workforce, but only 29% of total chief executives are women (Catalyst, 2025). Therefore, examining the leadership competencies developed through participation in college athletics, can help assess how effectively women college athletes are being prepared for roles beyond athletics. This study provides insight into whether women athletes are developing the leadership competencies and skills needed to help close the gender gap in leadership across various fields.

Participation in college athletics has been shown to enhance leadership development and support athletes' transition into life beyond sport (Coffin et al., 2021, Gelllock et al., 2019; Hoffman 2020; Hoffman et al., 2013; Lewis, 2023; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Yet, leadership development is not a one-size-fits-all process. It is shaped by a combination of personal desire, social environment, and access to opportunities (Astin, 2014). While many athletes gain leadership competencies through their time

on a team, not all are equally prepared or confident in applying those skills outside sport (Komives et al., 2006). Women athletes in particular often demonstrate strong potential but lower self-efficacy in leadership roles (Debebe et al., 2016; Weight et al., 2020), and many do not feel fully supported in co-educational leadership development settings (Debebe, 2011; Ely et al., 2011). Having a supportive structure and environment can make a positive impact on self-efficacy and its correlation to the successful performance (Weight et al., 2020). Past research has found women tend to thrive in leadership environments where they can share experiences and develop without the pressures of gender comparisons (Smith & Hardin, 2018).

Intercollegiate athletic participation supports college athletes in developing their leadership skills through relationships with coaches, interaction with peers, and experimental learning opportunities (Hoffman et al., 2013). In addition to what is learned organically through sport, participation in structured leadership programming has shown a positive impact on athletes' personal and career readiness (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). While some athletic departments offer formal leadership development opportunities for college athletes, others lack the resources to do so (Jolly et al., 2023). As a result, leadership competencies may develop unevenly, leading to athletes to feel not fully equipped to apply these skills beyond sport (Dugan & Komives, 2007). This highlights the need for development opportunities that reflect the diverse leadership journeys of college athletes, offering programming that is inclusive, accessible, and tailored to different populations.

Although leadership development in women has been explored (e.g., Bilimoria & Liang, 2012; Debebe et al., 2016), less is known about how gender influences the leadership experiences and competencies of college athletes specifically. This gap is particularly notable given the structured, high-pressure, and often gendered context of NCAA athletics (NCAA, 2022). While women now comprise nearly half of all NCAA athletes, their representation in leadership across college sport and other professional sectors remains disproportionately low (Catalyst, 2025; NCAA, 2022). Understanding how leadership competencies differ across genders in this context is essential not only for addressing disparities within intercollegiate athletics, but also for informing broader efforts to cultivate equitable leadership pipelines across various industries and organizational settings.

Studies have shown women benefit most from leadership programming that considers their unique experiences and provides space for self-reflection, confidence-building, and skill application (Bilimoria & Liang, 2012; Debebe, 2011). When programs are tailored to women and offered in gender-specific formats (e.g. women only training (WOT)), participants report increased self-awareness, stronger belief in their leadership abilities, and greater willingness to act on the skills they've developed (Debebe, 2021). Additionally, literature suggests men are often socialized to demonstrate more assertive and dominant leadership behaviors, while women are more likely to engage in relational and collaborative leadership, sometimes adapting their approach to avoid being labeled as aggressive (Debebe, 2011; Yukl, 2012). These findings underscore the importance of creating leadership development opportunities that allow women to grow authentically, free from the pressures of conforming to masculine norms.

Given the growing number of both women and men college athletes across NCAA divisions, it is essential to understand how leadership competencies are formed and expressed by each group. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the leadership competencies of women and men college athletes and identify the differences, if any exist. The findings aim to support coaches and athletic administrators in developing leadership initiatives that are not only holistic but also responsive to the needs of all college athletes.

Literature Review

Leadership Identity Development Model

Since the early 2000s, leadership research has focused on expanding research on leadership and leadership development (Gardner et al., 2020). Specifically, research has focused on college students' social identity and leadership development (Day et al., 2013; Jones & Abes, 2013; Lord & Hall, 2005). Psychological, sociological, and human ecology are the most critical components that affect identity development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Erikson, 1968). Since leadership is socially constructed (Grint, 2005), leadership and human development are highly intertwined, emphasizing the need to focus on learning and development theory (Owen, 2021). Therefore, this study utilized the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model to explain how gender, athletic participation, and social development affect the leadership development of women college athletes. The LID model posits itself between the life experiences of college students and their social identity (Komives et al., 2005, 2006). Specifically, the LID is relevant for understanding college athletes' leadership development, focusing on the role of social context (i.e., being a part of the team) and the experiences college athletes face while developing into a leader. Being a part of a sports team offers athletes a unique opportunity to engage with and develop their understanding of leadership, aligning with the LID model. College athletes often navigate team dynamics as part of an ongoing process of learning and internalizing leadership roles (Komives et al., 2006).

College athletes experience a developmental journey that involves taking on leadership roles across their teams, academic settings, and social circles (Weight et al., 2020). The LID model accounts for this progression, from initial awareness of leadership to taking on roles such as team captain. Stepping into these roles provides athletes with opportunities to grow as leaders (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). The model also highlights the influence of social context, making it particularly useful for examining how gendered expectations in sport influence leadership development. For instance, women may face barriers to leadership early in their athletic careers, that can delay or alter how they come to see themselves as leaders (Debebe, 2011; Komives et al., 2006).

Komives et al. (2006) LID model includes six stages that influence leadership development: 1) awareness, 2) exploration/engagement, 3) leader identified, 4) leadership differentiated, 5) generativity, and 6) integration/synthesis. See Table 1 for a comprehensive description.

Table 1
Leadership Identity Developmental Model (LID)

Stages of the Leadership Identity Development Model		
Dependent on view of self and others		
Stages		Description
Stage One	<i>Awareness</i>	The initial recognition that there are leaders external to oneself, such as a nation's president, a religious figure, a parent, or a teacher, typically occurs in early childhood.
Stage Two	<i>Exploration/Engagement</i>	A phase of active participation in group activities and experiences, such as being part of a sports team, religious group, or scouts, typically occurs throughout childhood. This period is crucial for learning how to interact and engage with others.
Stage Three	<i>Leader Identified</i>	When an individual perceives leadership as the actions taken by the appointed leader of a group, this reflects an understanding of the hierarchical nature of relationships within groups. Students typically develop this perspective during high school and early college. This viewpoint is the prevailing narrative about leadership in the United States.

Key Transition

The transition from viewing leadership as centered on a single person and specific roles (e.g., leaders do leadership) to seeing it as an interdependent and collaborative process among people is often referred to as a key transition. What prompts this shift? It can occur when an individual undertakes a task too complex for one person to handle alone, realizing the need to depend on others to achieve goals. For instance, while handling an entire group presentation solo might be feasible in some cases, organizing a weeklong series of homecoming events typically requires collaboration. Learning about leadership, such as studying leadership theories and becoming familiar with relevant terms and concepts, can also help individuals progress to more advanced stages.

Independent on view of self and with others		
Stage Four	<i>Leadership Differentiated</i>	The development of one's perspective to recognize leadership as non-positional and as a shared process within a group.
Stage Five	<i>Generativity</i>	An individual becomes dedicated to fostering leadership in others and develops a passion for issues or group goals they wish to impact.
Stage Six	<i>Integration/Synthesis</i>	A stage reached by relatively few individuals involves recognizing one's ability to lead in various contexts and embracing their identity as a leader without needing a formal position. At this stage, leadership identity becomes an essential part of one's self.

Note. Adapted from Komives et al. (2016) and Owen (2021)

The model emphasizes that leadership development is a gradual process shaped by personal experiences and social context. When applied to college athletes, the model helps explain how they evolve into leaders both in and out of their sport. This growth involves self-awareness, confidence (efficacy), goal setting, and understanding how external influences such as teams, organizations, and peer groups influence leadership development.

College athletes rely on their beliefs, self-efficacy, and personal capacities to learn how to lead (Dugan & Komives, 2007). With adequate social and structural support, they begin to see themselves as capable leaders. While progression through the early stages is often influenced by external factors, the transition beyond stage three becomes more internal and self-directed, though still rooted in relational awareness (Owen, 2021). Athletes commonly move through these stages both on and off the field. They may first see themselves as followers before choosing to grow into leadership roles and take on greater responsibility (Komives et al., 2006; Owen, 2021). Coaches and athletic administrators often play a key role in shaping athletes' leadership understanding and development (Cotterill et al., 2022). By modeling supportive, inclusive, and effective leadership behaviors, they can help athletes build self-efficacy and confidence. Additionally, structured leadership programming that is consistently supported and reinforced by athletic departments can further enhance athletes' leadership growth.

Below is a breakdown of each stage in the LID model and how it applies to leadership development in college athletes. The first stage, awareness, involves recognizing leadership in others, often coaches or team captains. The second stage, exploration/engagement, marks the beginning of active participation, such as leading small team tasks or initiating discussions. This phase is where foundational leadership skills begin to take shape. In the third stage, leader identified, athletes begin to associate leadership with specific roles and responsibilities, becoming more intentional in their development. In stage four of the LID model, leadership differentiation, college athletes often begin to take initiative by resolving conflicts or offering solutions, even without holding formal leadership titles (e.g., team captain). In stage five, they mentor younger teammates, share personal experiences, or lead by example. By stage six, athletes may fully embody leadership, demonstrating confidence and influence without needing an official leadership role.

While this progression outlines a potential path of development, not all college athletes will reach the final stage. Many rely on the support of coaches, teammates, and structured environments. Leadership programming can play a critical role in helping athletes advance through these stages. The LID model's emphasis on social context and gender is likely a significant factor in how athletes experience leadership development. Women in sport, for example, may face structural barriers or internalized beliefs that slow their progression toward integrated leadership identity (Debebe, 2011; Komives et al., 2006). As a result, the LID model provides a valuable framework for examining how gender influences leadership development in athletic settings.

College Athletes Leadership Development

Leadership development is integrated into participation in intercollegiate athletics, as college athletes communicate with others on the team, their coaches, and peers across other sports and build rapport (Hoffman et al., 2013). However, a lot of the ability to develop as an effective leader is connected to the personal experiences and background of the athlete (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Lord and Hall (2005) emphasized the ability of an athlete to develop as a leader is linked to their traits and ability to act on them. Dugan (2017) found college students can be very effective leaders. However, they often do not have high efficacy for leadership, and they are less likely to act on their leadership skills (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Participation in intercollegiate athletics benefits those athletes and helps them to come out of their “shells” to become better leaders (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). The team setting serves as a fertile ground for informal leadership development, where athletes learn to manage relationships, respond to challenges, and support teammates. However, the structure of these teams, including gendered expectations of captains or role models, can influence how leadership behaviors are expressed and perceived (Bandura & Kavussanu, 2018; Blanton et al., 2019).

Despite the informal leadership growth that can occur within team environments, the transition from athlete to post-collegiate leader is often difficult. Many college athletes struggle to carry forward the skills gained through sport because of challenges with identity development after graduation (Stokowski et al., 2019). Still, participation in college athletics provides important experience that can promote leadership, such as learning to work through differences and unite around shared goals (Loughead & Hardy, 2005). Athletes in formal leadership roles (e.g., team captains, seniors) often gain a developmental edge, as these positions offer consistent, visible opportunities to lead (Rubin & Nwosu, 2022). However, without intentional support or programming, these experiences may not translate into long-term leadership growth. For example, assigned leadership can also create tension within the team, as it gives individuals the power to influence teammates in negative ways (Feltz et al., 2011). Cotterill et al. (2022) suggest less structured leadership models within teams can improve player satisfaction and team performance. This highlights the potential of leadership development efforts that help college athletes intentionally build on their sport-based skills and prepare for life beyond college athletics. While programming is available within the athletic departments to assist college athletes in their leadership development, the budget and resources available for each school are different, limiting some athletes (Lewis, 2023). Additionally, the time constraints placed on college athletes to balance athletics, academics, and social life limit them from dedicating additional time to their personal development and preparation for their future careers (Stokowski et al., 2019). This makes early and integrated leadership programming particularly important. When athletes receive leadership development across their collegiate experience, it can support their progression through identity stages and improve post-graduation outcomes (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Leadership programming previously implemented by various institutions includes leadership academies (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021), the NCAA Challeng-

ing Athletes' Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS)/Life Skills program (2014), the NCAA Leadership Forum (established in 1997 and hosted annually), Growing Leaders partnership program with athletic departments, and other initiatives developed in-house by individual universities (e.g., University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, Georgia Institute of Technology, University of Central Florida; Brougham et al., 2023). Furthermore, institutional differences in funding, staffing, and departmental priorities often result in unequal access to leadership development opportunities across NCAA divisions (Jolly et al., 2023). This variability means many athletes, especially women, may not receive the structured leadership support needed to complement their on-field experiences (Jolly et al., 2024; Weight et al., 2020).

Gender Differences in Leadership Development

A growing body of literature has focused on leadership development programming and gender (Acker, 2006; Debebe et al., 2016; Ely & Padavic, 2007, Harris & Brison, 2024). Research has shown college-aged women and men develop differently, often having different approaches to socialization and holding distinct beliefs and expectations about leadership (Acker, 2006; Debebe et al., 2016). These differences suggest leadership development should be evaluated not only by general traits but through observable competencies (e.g., initiative taking, feedback-seeking, support behaviors), which reflect how athletes lead in practice. Dugan & Komives (2007) found women have a higher capacity for leadership but lower efficacy (or belief) that they can be effective leaders. For example, Fuller et al. (2018) found women college athletes view themselves as leaders who are driven by a desire to make positive change in their community or society, while also emphasizing the importance of self-reflection. This emphasizes the need to develop programming specifically for women to teach them how to utilize their leadership skills and do it with confidence (Owen, 2021).

Despite the wide variance in leadership programming currently available, Debebe et al. (2016) found women are not entirely comfortable sharing their lived experiences in mixed-sex programming, avoiding topics that affect their leadership development as women. Tudor and Ridpath (2019) found gender significantly affects motivation towards academics and sports while in college, specifically women are more motivated towards academics, while men are highly motivated toward their athletic achievements. The type of sport those respective college athletes participate in could impact their motivation toward academics/athletics. For example, if a male athlete participates in football or basketball, he is more likely to have higher aspirations to turn professional rather than think about other professional careers post-graduation (Ridpath, 2007; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Gender, athletic identity, and sport affect athletes' ability to transition beyond the field/court and prepare for their career. Research suggests implementing women's specific leadership programming makes women more comfortable and allows them to be fully open about women's experiences, feel more relaxed, and lead to positive leadership development within the organization (Debebe et al., 2016). Smith & Hardin (2018) found many athletes struggle with the transition out of sport; however,

having somebody relatable (e.g., a former women college athlete or women athletic administrator) can make the process more positive and supportive. Therefore, an ability to explore the possibilities of having examples in front of women athletes, specifically with high leadership competencies, may allow women college athletes to apply the leadership skills learned through sport to their lives. This connection is especially important, as previous research has shown that without role models or tailored support, women may underutilize or undervalue the leadership skills they have gained during their athletic careers (Smith & Hardin, 2018). Creating intentional pathways for leadership application beyond sport may enhance long-term confidence and post-sport identity formation. The purpose of this study was to explore the distinct leadership competencies of women and men college athletes and identify where the difference lies. While existing studies have examined leadership development in college athletes and gender more broadly, few have compared men and women athletes' leadership competencies using validated constructs in the context of NCAA athletics. This study addresses that gap by examining where significant differences may exist and how these insights can inform more inclusive leadership programming. Two research questions guided this study:

- RQ1. What critical leadership competencies are exhibited by women and men NCAA college athletes?
- RQ2. Is there a significant difference in leadership competencies between women and men college athletes?

Method

Participants

Current NCAA college athletes ($n = 232$) across all three divisions with variety of plans for post-graduation (or expiration of eligibility) completed the survey. More than half of the participants identified as a woman (61.7%, $n = 150$). Majority of the participants self-identified as white (80.7%, $n = 196$), 9.1% identified as Black or African American. Other races including Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and "other" were less than 10%. More than half of the participants were Division II college athletes (60.1%, $n = 148$), 25.1% were Division I athletes ($n = 61$), and only 14% were Division III athletes ($n = 34$). Participants' plans for after graduation or completion of eligibility included playing their sport professionally, 13.8% ($n = 32$), and an almost equal representation of going to graduate school (36.2%, $n = 84$) or finding a job in their major field (39.7%, $n = 92$). Less than 5% identified they planned to find a job outside of their major, other, or not sure yet about their future plans.

Research Design

A quantitative, non-experimental research design was used to collect the study's data. Data collection utilized a survey approach as it allowed for an easy and quick data collection method with extensive data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The sur-

vey was conducted using Qualtrics online survey platform because it enabled the researchers to reach potential participants across the United States and college athletes at various institutions. Qualtrics software allows for simplicity of use for the participants, is inexpensive, and comprehensive way to collect the data (Douglas et al., 2023).

Procedures

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received, researchers recruited current NCAA college athletes using purposeful and snowball sampling to participate in the survey (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purposive sampling allowed researchers to select participants based on the specific criteria chosen for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The criteria included: current NCAA collegiate athletes across all member institutions (Division I, Division II, Division III). The primary investigator (PI) reached out to all NCAA member institutions. Emails were sent to the athletic administrators (e.g. Assistant Athletic Director, Senior Woman Administrator, or Student-Athlete Development Specialist) that included the purpose of the study and the link to the survey, to be shared with their respective college athletes. The athletic administrator either accepted or declined to participate in the research study. Once accepted, they distributed the survey on the researcher's behalf by simply forwarding the email with the purpose of the study, detailed explanation of the study, and a survey link.

To achieve the desired number of participants, snowball sampling was also utilized. Snowball sampling allowed the recruitment of a more significant number of college athletes. Researchers used their personal connections, sharing criteria of the study and inviting individuals who fit the inclusion criteria to participate in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The investigators also asked college athletes to reach out to their friends and college athletes at other institutions.

Research Instrument

The research instrument included demographic questions as well as the Leadership Learning Agility Scale (LLAS; Bouland-van Dam et al., 2022) and the Student Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS; Kimura et al., 2022). The demographic questions included thirteen primary questions such as gender, race, NCAA division, sport, and classification in school.

Bouland-van Dam et al. (2022) created the Leadership Learning Agility Scale (LLAS), which assesses learning agility through factors like achievement motivation, extraversion, and conscientiousness. The scale is comprised of 18 items and three dimensions (i.e., developing leadership, seeking feedback, and systematic development) and is measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The LLAS has demonstrated reliability with Cronbach's alpha values between 0.81 and 0.89. Originally designed for workplace use, the scale was adapted for college athletes. Although the LLAS was originally developed for professional workplace settings, its core constructs, including leadership capacity and seeking feedback, are highly relevant to the context of college athletics and lead-

ership. College athletes are continually required to adapt to new challenges, work as part of a team, focus on teamwork dynamics, receive feedback from coaches and teammates, and engage in ongoing personal development (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021; Weight et al., 2020). These experiences align closely with the LLAS constructs of developing leadership, seeking feedback, and developing systematically (Bouland-van Dam et al., 2022). To fit the college athlete population, the wording of the scale was adjusted to reflect sport-specific language without altering the underlying constructs. For instance, the item “I put effort in getting better in influencing others to reach our project goals” was revised to “I put effort in getting better in influencing others to reach our team goals.” The adjusted scale has been previously used in the exploration of leadership competencies of international and domestic college athletes, making it valid to use with the current population (Jolly et al., 2023).

Kimura et al. (2022) developed the Student Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS), which evaluates students’ leadership behaviors. This scale includes 30 items grouped into six leadership constructs: taking initiative and modeling the way, challenging the process, sharing goals, managing goals and tasks, task-oriented support, and people-oriented support. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The SLBS has shown reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from 0.74 to 0.84. Similar to the LLAS, the SLBS was also modified to meet the needs of college athletes. Therefore, the survey focused on the nine main leadership factors: 1) developing leadership, 2) seeking feedback, 3) developing systematically, 4) taking initiative and modeling the way, 5) challenging the process, 6) sharing goals, 7) managing goals and tasks, 8) task-oriented support, 9) people-oriented support.

Results

This study aimed to identify the distinct leadership competencies of women and men college athletes and identify if and where difference exist. Collecting and analyzing descriptive statistics and running a one-way MANOVA allowed us to answer the research questions. By utilizing the descriptive statistics collected from the NCAA college athlete participants ($n = 232$), the data identified the number of women and men participants, their race, division of participation, and plans after graduation (Table 2).

The first RQ focused on the critical leadership competencies of women and men college athletes. The findings of the study included a significant difference between men’s and women’s leadership competencies. To answer the research question, frequencies and a one-way MANOVA were used. Before conducting a one-way MANOVA analysis, the internal reliability of the survey responses related to leadership factors was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha (α). The internal reliability of the 48 survey items (leadership constructs) was found to be excellent, with an overall α of .97. Specifically, Leadership Learning Agility Scale (LLAS) Factor 1: developing leadership had an α of .91, and Factor 2: seeking feedback had an α of .93, both indicating excellent reliability levels. The LLAS Factor 3 and all the Student Leadership

Table 2*Descriptive Frequencies and Percentages by Gender, Race, NCAA Division, and Graduation Plans*

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Men	93	38.3%
Women	150	61.7%
Race		
White	196	80.7%
Black or African American	22	9.1%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.4%
Asian	5	2.1%
Other	17	7.0%
NCAA Classification		
Division I	61	25.1%
Division II	148	60.9%
Division III	34	14.0%
Plans After Graduation (Completion of Eligibility)		
Playing my sport professionally	32	13.8%
Graduate school	84	36.2%
Finding a job in my major field	92	39.7%
Finding a job in another field	11	4.7%
Not sure yet	10	4.3%
Other	3	1.3%

Behavior Scale (SLBS) Factors, also demonstrated good internal reliability, all with α values above .80.

A one-way MANOVA was utilized to determine the critical leadership constructs exhibited by the college athletes and find if there was a difference between women and men athletes. The results revealed that six out of nine factors were significantly different between women and men athletes. The factors that were found to be significantly different were: 1) developing leadership, which emphasizes that women college athletes are more likely to engage in leadership development (Larsson et al., 2016); 2) seeking feedback factors explained that women are more likely to look for feedback from others and consider it (De Meuse, 2017); 3) developing systematically showed that women are more likely to engage in the development programming on their own (Nijs et al., 2014); 4) taking initiative and modeling the way showed that women are more likely to step into leadership roles and taking charge (Kimura et al., 2022); 5) task-oriented support, women were more likely to focus on the task at hand until they archive the setup result (Kimura et al., 2022); lastly, 6) people-oriented support indicated women college athletes are more focused on developing relationships with people surrounding them and work towards a team goal (Kimura et al., 2022). The rest of the factors: challenging the process, sharing goals, and managing goals and tasks were not significantly different between the women and men athletes.

A one-way MANOVA aided in answering the second RQ and seeing if there is a difference in leadership constructs of men and women college athletes. Welch's one-way MANOVA was used to answer RQ2 due to the robustness against the unbalanced sample size of women ($n = 150$) and men ($n = 93$) in this study. More specifically, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were assessed using Levene's test, violation of homogeneity of variances was observed, therefore Welch's MANOVA was used as an alternative to traditional MANOVA. The results of Welch's test for each separate factor and the descriptive means are demonstrated in Table 3, respectively. Factors 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, and 9 found a statistically significant difference in mean scores. Starting with factor 1: developing leadership $F(1, 213) = 11.67, p < .001$ between women ($M = 4.29, SD = 0.60$) and men ($M = 3.97, SD = 0.96$). There is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of factor 2: seeking feedback $F(1, 179) = 18.69, p < .001$, between women and men. Women ($M = 4.54, SD = 0.57$) scored significantly higher than men ($M = 4.13, SD = 0.94$). Factor 3: developing systematically was significantly different, $F(1, 213) = 11.67, p < .001$, women ($M = 4.20, SD = 0.68$) and men ($M = 3.87, SD = 0.91$). Factor 4: taking initiative and modeling the way significantly differed between the groups, $F(1, 166) = 6.73, p = .010$. Women ($M = 4.33, SD = 0.57$) scored significantly higher than men ($M = 4.09, SD = 0.84$). Factor 8: task-oriented support was significantly higher in women than men, $F(1, 166) = 5.48, p = .021$, with women ($M = 4.41, SD = 0.59$) and men ($M = 4.18, SD = 0.86$). Lastly, factor 9: people-oriented support was statistically significant, $F(1, 162) = 8.45, p = .004$, women ($M = 4.49, SD = 0.55$) scoring higher than men ($M = 4.23, SD = 0.83$). The rest of the factors were not significantly different.

Table 3.
Summary of One-Way MANOVA Welch's Test

	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Women			Men		
				<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Leadership Learning Agility Scale (LLAS)									
Factor 1: developing leadership	184	11.45	<.001*	196	4.29	.60	126	3.97	.96
Factor 2: seeking feedback	179	18.69	<.001*	195	4.54	.57	124	4.13	.94
Factor 3: developing systematically	213	11.67	<.001*	196	4.20	.68	126	3.87	.91
Student Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS)									
Factor 4: taking initiative and modeling the way	166	6.73	.010*	164	4.33	.57	106	4.09	.84
Factor 5: challenging the process	171	.385	.536	164	4.26	.59	106	4.22	.84
Factor 6: sharing goals	185	2.26	.134	164	4.26	.68	105	4.11	.84
Factor 7: managing goals and tasks	198	.883	.349	164	4.10	.71	105	4.01	.83
Factor 8: task-oriented support	166	5.45	.021*	163	4.41	.59	105	4.18	.86
Factor 9: people-oriented support	162	8.45	.004*	163	4.50	.55	105	4.23	.83

Note. *F* = F-ratio, *df* = degrees of freedom, *p* = significance level, *n* = number, *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation.

Discussion

The findings revealed significant differences between men and women leadership competencies in six out of nine factors: developing leadership, seeking feedback, developing systematically, taking initiative and modeling the way, task-oriented support, and people-oriented support. These results support a growing body of literature indicating college athletes acquire leadership competencies through participation in sport (Hoffman et al., 2013; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021), but they also extend

prior research by offering empirical evidence that women are demonstrating a wider range of behavioral leadership skills than traditionally assumed.

The findings align with previous research on leadership and gender differences, suggesting men and women college athletes differ in their leadership development (Debebe et al., 2016). These differences could be attributed to varying experiences within their athletic careers and differing perspectives on leadership. Gender and athletic participation significantly influence the leadership development of college athletes (Komives et al., 2006). Starting with awareness, exploration, and identification of leadership stages, college athletes are often culturally conditioned to view leaders as predominantly men due to the association of leadership with traditionally masculine qualities (Ely et al., 2011). Moreover, the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, such as head coaches and athletic administrators within intercollegiate athletics, may impact how women approach leadership overall (Ely et al., 2011; Komives et al., 2016; TIDES, 2022). This underrepresentation highlights the persistent gender disparities in sport leadership and raises important questions about whether current collegiate athletic experiences are effectively preparing women for advancement into these roles, or into leadership positions beyond sports. While efforts to promote women in leadership are ongoing, the findings of this study point to a continued need for more focused and intentional development opportunities.

Representation and following a leader who sets an example play a critical role in leadership development, especially during the early stages of the LID model, when athletes are forming their initial awareness and engagement with leadership. Seeing individuals in leadership roles who share similar attributes can strongly influence how women athletes begin to view themselves as potential leaders. Visibility of women in leadership positions has potential to boost confidence and self-efficacy among women athletes (Smith & Hardin, 2018). Increasing this representation can have lasting benefits, encouraging more women to pursue leadership roles and equipping them with the confidence needed to step into these positions.

Additionally, findings align with earlier work that highlights women's strengths in collaborative and relational leadership (Debebe et al., 2016; Ely et al., 2011), yet they also challenge persistent assumptions in leadership literature that men tend to dominate in task-oriented or assertive behaviors (Yukl, 2012). Contrary to this view, women college athletes in this study scored higher than men in competencies tied to both interpersonal and structured leadership, suggesting women may be exhibiting a more holistic leadership profile. These results advance the literature by shifting the focus from trait-based or self-perception models to behavioral competencies that reflect leadership in practice. As a result, women are often more intentional in seeking growth opportunities, pursuing feedback, and developing both task-oriented and relational skills to build a well-rounded leadership profile. This intentional focus helps them prepare more fully for leadership roles that demand both strategic execution and strong interpersonal connection.

While previous leadership research in sport has often focused on coaches, athletic directors, or professional athletes (e.g., Feltz et al., 2011; Gellock et al., 2019; Jowett et al., 2024), this study centers on the leadership competencies of current col-

lege athletes. This is especially important given the developmental nature of college sport and the expectations that athletes will transition into post-sport careers with applicable leadership skills. Women athletes' higher scores across multiple competencies suggest they are actively developing behaviors aligned with later stages of leadership identity development (Komives et al., 2006). This stands in contrast to previous findings indicating women in sport often lack leadership confidence or receive insufficient support (Debebe, 2011).

On the other hand, no significant differences were observed between men and women in challenging the process, sharing goals, and managing goals and tasks. This lack of difference suggests gender does not play a significant role in these areas, as goal setting and task management are often structured at the team level in collegiate sports. Participation in college athletics allows athletes to be part of something larger than themselves, fostering personal relationships and working toward collective goals while setting aside individual differences (Jolly et al., 2024). Both men and women appear similarly driven by their athletic identity rather than their gender (Stokowski et al., 2019).

Another contribution of this study is the reinforcement of the need for contextual and demographically sensitive leadership programming. While some institutions have robust programming in place (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021), many lack the resources to support tailored developmental efforts (Jolly et al., 2023). This study's findings affirm a one-size-fits-all approach may be inadequate. Leadership training for athletes should consider gender, sport type, team culture, and the developmental stage of the athlete (Cotterill et al., 2022).

Women athletes may benefit most from leadership programs created specifically for them, where they can share experiences and build leadership identity without the pressure of social comparison (Damon et al., 2024; Debebe, 2011; Owen, 2021). Their tendency to seek feedback often reflects a desire for growth and guidance, which supports ongoing skill development (De Meuse, 2017). In male-dominated spaces like college athletics, seeking feedback provides women with valuable clarity, helps them refine their behavior, and builds the self-confidence needed to navigate and succeed in leadership roles (De Meuse, 2017). Mentorship also plays a key role, particularly when mentors share similar identities, contributing positively to leadership outcomes (Smith & Hardin, 2018). Women are more likely to seek feedback frequently, show greater openness to evaluation, and act on suggested changes (Damon et al., 2024). In this study, women athletes demonstrated a strong preference to balance task focus with relationship-building, both of which can enhance leadership effectiveness.

They also scored higher than men in developing systematically, showing a greater tendency to engage in structured programming aimed at improving their skills and reaching personal goals (Lord & Hall, 2005). Previous research has found women to be more focused on community-impact, leading by example, and self-reflective practices which could be leveraged in creating structured programming (Fuller et al., 2018). Women were also more likely to take initiative and model leadership behaviors, which aligns with previous research linking women to transformational and col-

laborative leadership styles (Hsu et al., 2022). Their stronger academic motivation, often connected to long-term personal development and career preparation, further supports these patterns (Tudor & Ridpath, 2019).

Beyond individual behaviors, this study highlights how leadership is influenced by social context and interaction. Women athletes frequently reported leading by example, seeking feedback, and supporting teammates, behaviors that reflect leadership as a relational and experience-based process. These findings support the need for leadership development approaches that recognize the influence of social dynamics rather than focusing solely on individual traits (Crozier et al., 2017). Women athletes' leadership development is often shaped early by their exposure, or lack thereof, to women in leadership roles (Smith & Hardin, 2018). Seeing leaders who share similar traits (e.g., gender, race) helps athletes form a stronger connection and belief that leadership roles are attainable. This process reflects the social construction of leadership, emphasizing how leadership understanding develops through observation and social context rather than solely through individual traits.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the socially constructed nature of leadership (Ferkins et al., 2018). Findings suggest leadership is socially constructed among athletes, particularly through behavioral modeling and experiential learning. Women athletes' tendencies to seek feedback, initiate growth opportunities, and support teammates indicate an advanced awareness of leadership as a relational process, a finding that aligns with calls for more socially constructed, observer-centric approaches to leadership development (Billsberry et al., 2018; Whales et al., 2022). This may point to a shift in how leadership is recognized and practiced among the next generation of sport professionals.

Finally, this research has practical implications for athletic departments and sport administrators. By identifying measurable behavioral competencies for gender-based differences, institutions can design leadership initiatives that enhance existing strengths and address potential gaps. Resources might be best invested in peer-led mentoring programs, feedback-rich environments, and reflective spaces that empower athletes to lead authentically, both on and off the field. While some institutions offer leadership programming, a major limitation remains the lack of consistent resources to support structured, gender-responsive initiatives. National programs (i.e., NCAA Women's Leadership Symposium, Women Leaders in Sport) provide valuable mentorship, skill development, and networking opportunities tailored to women in athletics, but their reach is limited due to eligibility requirements and accessibility challenges (WLS, 2024).

To improve implementation, existing NCAA resources could be leveraged to create more accessible, sustainable leadership pathways. For example, findings from this study could inform the integration of structured, gender-specific leadership programming into Student-Athlete Advisory Committees (SAAC), which are already housed within athletic departments. Additionally, conference-level initiatives could help standardize and expand leadership development efforts across institutions, offering shared resources and consistent programming regardless of division or location.

Beyond NCAA or conference-led efforts, athletic departments could launch in-house women's leadership programs that go beyond SAAC. For instance, a Power 4 university in the Southeast has developed EMPOWER Women's Leadership Academy program offers a unique model focused on professionalism, self-leadership, and community engagement for women college athletes (Stokowski et al., 2025). The central focus of the program is career readiness of women college athletes, as it exposes them to guest speakers, who have paved the way for themselves in the male-dominated fields, and how to effectively transition to various career post-collegiate career (Stokowski et al., 2025). This type of program enhances leadership capacity and contributes to personal growth of women college athletes, while also preparing them for life beyond sport.

The NCAA, conferences and outside organizations could also consider offering grant funding or incentives for universities that implement leadership programming designed around the specific competencies identified in this and other studies. Finally, collaboration among scholars, coaches, and college athletes could help ensure these programs remain research-informed, stakeholder-driven, and adaptable to evolving needs and best practices.

The findings of this study highlight significant gender differences in leadership development among college athletes. While the leadership competencies identified in this study offer valuable insights, they alone may not be enough to close the gender gap in sport or professional leadership roles. As a result, institutions may need to adopt more intentional, comprehensive leadership development models that are specifically tailored to the experiences and aspirations of women college athletes. However, further research is warranted to explore these differences in greater depth. For example, future studies should examine how life experiences, gender, and the specific challenges faced by women athletes shape leadership development.

Creating leadership programming tailored to the unique needs of women and men, including emotional support structures, leadership role modeling, and confidence-building strategies, could enhance long-term leadership development outcomes. Establishing mentorship environments where women athletes can receive guidance from leaders with similar traits and experiences may further enhance their leadership identity (Smith & Hardin, 2018). Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to track the evolution of leadership competencies from the collegiate athletic experiences into post-sport careers. Additionally, future research could investigate how sport type (team vs. individual sports, revenue vs. non-revenue sports) or NCAA division impacts leadership development trajectories. Comparative qualitative studies, such as interviews or focus groups with former athletes, could offer deeper insights into how gendered experiences influence leadership identity formation over time. Finally, such efforts could improve women representation in athletic administration and coaching within intercollegiate athletics.

Limitations and Conclusions

Like many studies, this research has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. It should be noted that conducting research through

an online survey can result in a smaller sample size (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although this study met its target number of participants, sample size remains a potential limitation. Another limitation is the potential for response bias. Since the survey included statements about leadership, participants responded based on their personal beliefs and perceptions. As a result, self-reported bias may have influenced the findings, with participants possibly overestimating or underestimating their own leadership competencies (Komives et al., 2016).

Due to the quantitative design of the study, the results did not provide in-depth insight into the differences between demonstrated leadership behaviors and athletes' perceptions of their leadership competencies. Future research could explore how gender influences the development of these competencies and preparation for life after sports. It may also be valuable to examine variable such as year in school and type of sport (e.g. revenue vs. non-revenue, team sport vs. individual), as these factors could impact leadership development. According to the LID model, athletes may reach later stages of leadership over time, suggesting earlier exposure or longer involvement in team environments may shape how they understand and exhibit leadership.

This study examined leadership development among college athletes, with a focus on both women and men. The findings contribute to the growing literature on college athletes' leadership, offering practical insights for future programming. While existing research continues to expand in this area, relatively little has focused specifically on women college athletes. The results of this study highlight the need for leadership programs tailored to women, creating space for them to share experiences, build confidence, and connect with role models who reflect their identities (Smith & Hardin, 2018).

Targeted programming can help prepare women athletes for leadership roles both within sports and beyond. Focusing on gender-specific needs and strengthening the leadership traits identified in this study can improve outcomes for women athletes. Leadership opportunities not only build skills but also boost confidence and self-esteem, which are crucial for life after sport.

Although some institutions offer leadership development programs for athletes, most are broad and not tailored to specific populations (Jolly et al., 2024; Lewis, 2023). These findings support the need for gender-specific programming. Athletic departments and coaches should consider mentorship programs that pair women athletes with women administrators, creating opportunities for learning, networking, and gaining insights into leadership pathways within collegiate athletics.

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“You Never Saw the Light at the End of the Tunnel”: Examining the Developmental Impacts of the Redshirt Freshman Year

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The redshirt freshman year is often used by athletics programs to build incoming athletes’ physical skills without compromising a year of eligibility. While one line of thought suggests this year allows athletes to adjust to campus life and pursue classroom interests, another describes the redshirt freshman year as a challenge, as one goes from being a key player in high school to benched their first year of college. Despite this being a crucial time for athletes’ development, little is understood about the redshirt experience and its social and psychological effects on athletes. This study investigated athletes’ identity development through a theoretical coupling of Schlossberg’s (1981) Transition Theory and Erikson’s (1950) Stages of Psychosocial Development. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 Division II football athletes who redshirted their freshman year. Findings noted four consistent themes: (1) athletes’ perceptions of their uniqueness and distinction in high school, (2) determination through the redshirt freshman year, (3) subsequent team isolation, and (4) little desire for team intimacy. Implications of this study include the importance of transparency during the redshirt freshman year and intentionally integrating athletes into team communities.

Keywords: athlete development, redshirt freshman year, transition

The redshirt year is used by college coaches and athletes—often first years—to enhance an athlete’s sport skills and academic acclimation while not compromising a year of athletic eligibility (Walker, 2024). Per National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) policies, college athletes generally have five years to complete four years of sport eligibility (Gibson & Tally, 2019; NCAA Division II Manual, 2023-2024). However, issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and injuries extend many athletes’ eligibility to include additional years of participation opportunities (NCAA Division II Manual, 2023-2024). Barring these exceptions, athletes can use one redshirt year.



Redshirting is only available to athletes in NCAA Divisions I and II. Institutions in Divisions I and II offer athletic scholarships and the goal of redshirting is to preserve athletic eligibility of athletes. To ensure transparency, coaches often initiate the redshirt discussion with athletes during recruitment or as the athlete transitions into their first year of college (Gibson & Tally, 2019; Walker, 2024). Some key advantages of the redshirt freshman year for athletes include the ability to adjust to a new campus and life without hometown family and friends, pursue emerging classroom interests, and obtain an advanced degree during their final year of eligibility. However, current literature also describes the redshirt freshman year as a challenge, as an athlete often transitions from being a high school star to riding the bench for an entire season (Matteo, 2023; Walker, 2024). Indeed, such difficulties have social and psychological ramifications for redshirt freshmen athletes (Medley, 2018). Transitions from star to redshirt might be particularly difficult for athletes in the high-profile sports of men's basketball and football given their tendency to overdevelop athletic roles and identities (Brewer et al., 1993; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Still, athletes in these high-profile sports are the most likely to utilize the redshirt freshman year as they transition from high school to college competition (Ingram & Huffman, 2017; Walker, 2024).

The Redshirt Freshman Experience

The current research on redshirt college athletes is predominantly limited to dissertations, indicating a gap in refereed scholarship on this unique yet important area of study. Still, the limited scholarship in this area has produced mixed findings. Medley (2018) interviewed 12 Division II basketball redshirt freshmen on their experiences with the redshirt freshman year in relation to their holistic development. Findings suggested this year was a difficult transition for this sample of athletes, with symptoms of identity confusion and feelings of being overlooked and frustrated with the lack of playing time. However, participants noted under support systems from the coach and athletic department, they ultimately grew from their redshirt year (Medley, 2018).

Using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), created by Brewer et al. (1993), Oldham (2022) compared redshirts' athletic identity to non-redshirt's athletic identity. Using survey responses from Division I athletes ($N = 398$), and controlling for gender, race, ethnicity, and age, results indicated no differences in one's athletic identity and self-esteem between redshirt athletes and non-redshirt athletes. It is important to note Oldham (2022) utilized medical redshirts and freshmen redshirts to compose the sample, which may have an influence on study results, due to potential varied experiences between injured and healthy players.

The findings above demonstrate a mixture of advantages and disadvantages of the transitional process of the redshirt freshman year. Additionally, most of this research centers the experiences of athletes in the (formerly) Power Five Conferences—the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, and Southeastern Conference (SEC) (Ingram & Huffman, 2017). Power Five institutions comprise less than 7% of the entire NCAA. With this in mind, NCAA demographics show there were 8,241 Power Five football athletes in 2022, while there were 20,163

non-Power Five and Division II football athletes that same year (NCAA, 2022). So, failing to consider the experiences of athletes outside of the Power Five—and even outside Division I—leaves much to be explored and understood about these athletes' opportunities, particularly considering their experiences with the redshirt freshman year.

While the NCAA, coaches, and other sport stakeholders espouse physical and academic benefits of the redshirt freshman year (Walker, 2024), there is limited research bolstering these claims. Similarly, there is limited scholarly exploration of athletes' redshirt experiences, especially with their identity changes as they transition from high school star to redshirt freshman and out of their redshirt freshman year to full participation. Thus, additional research is necessary to provide a more complete picture of the redshirt freshman experience, especially concerning identity development (Gayles & Baker, 2015; Matteo, 2023).

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity describes the level at which an individual identifies with their athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993; Oldham, 2022). This athletic identity is influenced not only by an athlete's level of competition (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006), but also by the time they spend participating in sport (Côté et al., 2007) and their interest in sport (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006). While the focus of athletic identity literature often centers Division I athletes (level of competition; Beamon, 2012; Steele et al., 2020), athletic identity development and over-identification as an athlete can and does influence athletes across the NCAA (Côté et al., 2007; Foster & Huml, 2017; Harry & Weight, 2021). Higher levels of athletic identity may lead to identity foreclosure, which, in the sport context, involves one's "commitment to the athlete role in the absence of exploration of occupational or ideological alternatives" (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017, p. 118). An athlete with a foreclosed identity will prioritize their athletic identity over identities in their academic and social spheres.

Brewer and Petitpas (2017) noted identity foreclosure is strengthened from outside influences, including those described as key parts of Schlossberg's (1981) transition environment. Such outside influences strengthening identity can come from individuals in the internal support systems—family members, coaches, teammates, and others on campus—who only or predominantly give positive feedback and praise for athletic success compared to academic success (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Similarly, the structure of college athletics, including institutional support or lack of support, available resources, and culture and values, may also play a role in signaling the importance of athletic identity over the development of other identities (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Steele et al., 2020).

Other important factors involved in athlete identity emerge concerning race and sport, with perhaps the strongest athletic identities emerging amongst Black men in the highly commercialized sports of football and men's basketball (Beamon, 2012; Harrison et al., 2011; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). For example, Beamon (2012) conducted 20 ethnographic interviews with former Division I Black football and men's basketball players by examining their experiences with identity foreclosure. Former athletes in the sample noted support systems and institutional culture per-

petuated notions that they were just athletes. Similarly, even with some participants being decades removed from sport, the majority still strongly identified with their athletic role (Beamon, 2012). While identity foreclosure may be especially problematic for Black men in football and men's basketball, research notes this phenomenon is a prevalent experience for most college athletes (Houle et al., 2010; Lally, 2007; Lally & Kerr, 2005).

Managing the potential for identity foreclosure becomes increasingly difficult for college athletes during times of transition, such as moving from high school to college or college to post-competition life (Harry & Weight, 2021; Stokowski et al., 2019). During transitions, athletes are faced with managing various, often conflicting, roles and must work to address identity conflict and diffusion (Erikson, 1950). During a transition, identity foreclosure and focusing on one role, like athletics, may seem easier in the moment (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). With this in mind, similar findings may emerge during athletes' transitional period of the redshirt freshman year.

Theoretical Framework

The foundation of this study is a theoretical coupling of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory and Erikson's (1950) Stage Model for Psychosocial Development. Nancy Schlossberg established Transition Theory (1981), a framework for understanding the process individuals navigate when they experience life transitions. According to Schlossberg (1981), a transition is an event or nonevent prompting an individual to change their assumptions about themselves and/or the world around them and shift their behaviors. Importantly, transitions are a process, rather than a singular moment in time (e.g., one day you are a redshirt athlete, the next you are not; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). Considering the transition itself, Schlossberg (1981) offered five key aspects in the transition: the transition itself, perceptions of the transition, individual characteristics, transition environment, and adaptation. Taken together, these components determine an individual's success and/or struggles during transitions.

Perceptions of the transition encompass an individual's view on the process and could involve role gains/losses, transition sources, and stress from the process. Previous research notes one of the biggest factors for athletes in their perceptions of transition processes is their role change—gain or loss—and its connection to athletic identity (Harry & Weight, 2021; Lally, 2007; Stokowski et al., 2019; Weight et al., 2020).

Connected to perceptions of transitions are one's individual characteristics. Schlossberg (1981) posited there are eight individual characteristics that influence transitions: Sex, race, age, health, class, psychosocial competence, value orientations, and previous experiences with transitions. Additionally, she highlighted the significance of the transition environment. This includes the physical setting, internal support systems, and institutional supports. When it comes to college athletics, internal supports include relationships with significant others, coaches, teammates,

family, and friends outside of sports. Institutional supports center around programming and resources provided by the athletic department and personnel (e.g., Harry & Weight, 2021).

The final component of Transition Theory is the adaptation to the transition, or how one moves through a life change to reconfigure their thoughts and actions. The transition is no longer integrated in a way that is stressful or distracting (Schlossberg, 1981). Adaptation is determined by the balance of one's resources and differences pre/post-transition between the aforementioned components: perceptions, individual characteristics, and the environment.

Schlossberg's (1981) framework is perhaps the most commonly used theory to examine the experiences of college athletes transitioning out of sport (Harry & Weight, 2021; Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023). And while this work is seminal in the athlete development field, more attention should be given to other transitional experiences within collegiate sport, such as the transition into college athletics. In addition, Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory is rarely combined with other developmental lenses to explore athlete experiences (Patton et al., 2016). So, in it with Erikson's (1950) model for Psychosocial Development, we offer an extension to the field's understanding of athlete development and transitions, particularly when it comes to redshirt football athletes.

Erik Erikson was the first clinical psychologist to define the identity development journey from adolescence through adulthood, emphasizing social interactions, relationships, and context in this process (Patton et al., 2016). Each developmental stage is defined by a conflict or crisis—a point in which an individual must grow or change—to transition into the next stage. Similarly, a life transition also prompts the conflict and/or crisis that Erikson (1950) described in his Psychosocial Development model. If no psychosocial growth takes place, the individual will stay at that stage socially due to a lack of certain skills needed in self-development (Erikson, 1950).

Stages one through four include childhood, entrance into adolescence, and emerging adulthood. Stage Five is the crux of one's identity development (Patton et al., 2016). Finally, stages six through eight comprise adulthood. Given the ages of the general college athlete population and our sample we focused on Stages Five (Identity versus Identity Diffusion) and Six (Intimacy versus Isolation). Table 1 briefly summarizes the first four stages before athletes reach college and incorporates a sport-related example in each.

Within the sport context, athletes typically finish high school having mastered different skills, like athleticism, and have a sense of competency in their sport (Erikson, 1950; Patton et al., 2016). With these skills in hand, many athletes will arrive at college during Stage Five: Identity versus Identity Diffusion (ages 12-18; Erikson, 1950). Stage Five marks an important era in the development of the self with Patton and colleagues (2016) claiming "it signals the transition between childhood and adulthood and a push to define oneself" (p. 289). At this point, individuals are dealing with their identity and their ego.

Table 1*Stages 1-4 of Psychosocial Development Adapted from Erikson (1950)*

Stage	Explanation	Sport Example
1. Trust vs. Mistrust (Birth-18 months)	Trust in an adult for dependency	An individual learning how to float in a pool
2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (18 months-3 years)	Developing independence and decision-making skills	An individual choosing what sports they want to play
3. Initiative vs. Guilt (3-5 years)	Asserting power and control over environment	Initiating leadership in a team setting
4. Industry vs. Inferiority (6-11 years)	Beginning to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities	Earning a first-place finish in a track race and bringing the medal to school the next day

Identity “provides a sense of continuity within the self and in interaction with others” (Rageliene, 2016, p. 97), as well as distinction between the self and others (uniqueness). Furthermore, individuals are navigating how they see themselves and how others perceive them, which further aligns with Schlossberg’s (1981) discussion of individual characteristics in the transition. Ego is one’s perception of their identity or sense of self. As an individual moves through and masters each of Erikson’s stages and resolves conflicts within those stages, this ego strengthens (Patton et al., 2016). However, there is a struggle to develop and define a core sense of self, Erikson (1950) described this state as identity diffusion. Diffusion is particularly problematic when one does not feel they have created a clear sense of self or purpose (Patton et al., 2016). Additionally, diffusion may cause an individual to over-identify with one role over others due to comfort within one role and fear of other roles. This is not unlike an athlete foreclosing identities outside of sport and focusing solely on cultivating their athlete identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Finally, diffusion and over-identification with certain roles often leads to struggles in transitions that involve significant role changes, such as a high school athlete transitioning to college competitions and an athlete moving from redshirt to non-redshirt (Gayles & Baker, 2015; Matteo, 2023).

So, in Stage Five, youth (e.g., entering college athletes) seek out “real accomplishments” or achievements that have “real meaning in their culture” (Erikson, 1950, p. 90). For high school athletes transitioning to college, this can include winning a state championship or earning a college scholarship. Through these “real accomplishments,” they begin to develop their identity, and possibly ego. For athletes, as their athletic capabilities grow, they gain recognition from others (e.g., family, peers, recruiters, etc.) for their skills and accomplishments. This attention not only develops an athlete’s ego but may also establish an athlete’s identity as a star. Identity

development as a star high school athlete may pose future challenges, specifically if an athlete redshirts their freshman year of college (Medley, 2018). Indeed, an athlete used to starring in game winning plays who transitions to sitting out for an entire college season may suffer from identity and ego struggles (Medley, 2018; Walker, 2024). This hurdle can result in identity diffusion, and possibly role engulfment (Erikson, 1950).

Stage Six, Intimacy versus Isolation (ages 18-40), provides enhanced understanding for examining college athletes' developmental experiences. Erikson (1950) posited after the identity development of Stage Five, one needs to develop intimate relationships with others to avoid distantiation, or isolation. So, for individuals to successfully maneuver Stage Six and establish healthy relationships which helps them cultivate intimacy, they must have a strong sense of their identity/identities (Patton et al., 2016). In the case of college athletes, these identities include those related to their athlete, student, and social roles. Similarly, relationships in this stage often include those from home, like family and friends, and new teammates and other athletes, coaches, non-athletes, and faculty. During their early years and throughout college, athletes are away from family (often for the first time), navigating new social circles (e.g., classmates and teammates), and learning their interests and skills (inside and outside of sports). Therefore, developing meaningful relationships within their athletic circles and ideally across campus (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016), is essential for athletes to transition through this stage.

Importantly, Stage Six marks not only the beginning of adulthood, but also the period in which one often solidifies their permanent identity or "commitment for life" (Erikson, 1950, p. 111). This identity commitment is often connected to one's environment, including the physical space and internal and institutional supports (Schlossberg, 1981). For college athletes, the environment of campus and sport play particularly vital roles influencing commitments and thus identity development. For athletes in Stage Six, an over commitment to one identity at this developmental point, often the athlete identity (Brewer et al., 1993), may mean struggles for the athlete in later psychosocial stages.

In the context of this study, an athlete's successful transition through the redshirt freshman year would include identity development and intimacy building across athletics, academic, and social domains. However, a transition often poses challenges for athletes, including redshirts, as they maneuver through conflict and/or crisis in order to move on—or transition—into the next stage of development. Despite many athletes using a redshirt freshman year (Matteo, 2023; Medley, 2018; Oldman, 2022), little is understood about how the redshirt experience—and the transitions within—supports or hinders athletes' identity development in Stage Five or establishes or limits athletes' intimacy in Stage Six. So, the influence of the redshirt freshman year, a transitional time with potential identity struggles and isolation, should be further explored through psychosocial and transitory lenses. Thus, the redshirt freshman year could result in permanent shifts in athletes' identity and long-term identity development processes (Erikson, 1950; Schlossberg, 1981).

Thus, through the lens of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory and Erikson's (1950) Stages of Psychosocial Development, we examined athletes' identity development as they transitioned from high school to their redshirt freshman year and then transitioned from redshirt freshman year to full sport participation. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do football players' identities develop through the transition from high school to the redshirt freshman year?
2. How do football players' identities develop through the transition from the redshirt freshman year to full eligibility?

Method

Participants and Recruitment

A purposive sampling method was utilized to conduct semi-structured interviews with 11 participants from four Midwest Division II football programs. Purposive sampling relies on researcher judgment when selecting potential participants from a population (Miles et al., 2019; Palinkas et al., 2015). The four institutions were selected due to their Division II classification and localized proximity to each other. Project funding was part of a greater regional focused grant, and thus, dictated region and institution selection. Participants were required to be an active member of the football team and must have utilized their redshirt freshman year during the 2020 or 2021 football season. These criteria ensured participants had both completed their redshirt freshman year while also completing at least one season of eligibility. This would potentially allow time for athletes to have developed a deeper reflection of the redshirt experience and its role in their identity development, given they are through the transition of high school to the redshirt freshman year as well as the transition of redshirt freshman year to full eligibility. Following IRB approval, all potential participants eligible for this study were recruited by email. Two follow-up emails were sent out to gain enough participants to reach saturation ($n = 11$).

Participants redshirted either in the 2020 ($n = 2$) or 2021 ($n = 9$) football seasons with all participants still competing at the time of the interview. One participant, Ethan, transferred following his redshirt season to one of the four institutions represented in this study (See Table 2 for more information). It is important to note these participants were redshirting in and around the COVID-19 pandemic. While participants noted some change to their academic experience (e.g., online classes), but limited shifts in their football experience.

Table 2
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race & Ethnicity	Sub-team	Redshirt Year
Aidan*	White, Non-Hispanic	Linebacker	2020
Ben*	White, Hispanic	Defensive back	2021
Caleb*	White, Non-Hispanic	Offensive Lineman	2020
Drew*	White, Hispanic	Linebacker	2021
Ethan*	White, Non-Hispanic	Offensive Lineman	2021
Frank*	White, Non-Hispanic	Linebacker	2021
George*	White, Non-Hispanic	Linebacker	2021
Harrison	White, Non-Hispanic	Quarterback	2021
Isaac	Black	Wide Receiver	2021
Jack	White, Non-Hispanic	Quarterback	2021
Kai	White, Non-Hispanic	Linebacker	2021

*allowed recording

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview protocol was created to explore participants' retrospective perceptions of the redshirt freshman year and their identity development throughout the process. Semi-structured interviews involve a process in which the interviewer has a set of pre-determined but open-ended questions designed to facilitate open dialogue across redshirt-related topics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2019). To bolster validity of the interview protocol, it was reviewed by a scholar specializing in both interview methods and college athlete development (Miles et al., 2019). Interview questions centered high school experiences, the transition from high school to the redshirt freshman year (e.g., During this year, did your view of yourself as an athlete change? Your value on a team? Your identity as an athlete?), and the transition from redshirt freshman to full football participant (e.g., If/when you did play for your team, how did this impact your identity as a football athlete? Did you experience changes in relationships with your teammates? And/or with your coaches?).

Interviews were conducted via Zoom to accommodate the locations of researchers and participants. Importantly, only one researcher was involved in the data collection to limit participants' distraction and built rapport due to the potentially sensitive nature of topics like development and transitions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This researcher is a former athlete and made this known to participants to develop a sense of rapport (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews averaged 45 minutes in length with six participants consenting to being recorded/transcribed. In the other five interviews, the researcher took detailed notes on participants' responses (Miles et al., 2019). At the conclusion of each interview, all notes were compiled with the transcription document, if present. These transcription documents were initially generated via the zoom app, then edited for accuracy by the researchers.

Data Analysis

Both researchers were involved in the data analysis. In reading through the transcripts and interview notes, researchers performed analytic memoing, fostering deeper reflections in the analysis process (Miles et al., 2019). Through this process, each researcher read and re-read each transcript to familiarize themselves with the data and develop in-depth memos (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). From there, the research team met regularly to create the codebook from Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory and Erikson's (1950) Stages of Psychosocial Development, thus utilizing a deductive coding strategy. Deductive coding helps harmonize studies with multiple theories and further ties theories with research questions and methods (Miles et al., 2019; Saldaña, 2013). Given the unique coupling of Schlossberg's and Erikson's theories, utilizing deductive coding was appropriate for this study.

Through this coding process, both evaluation and emotion strategies were employed (Saldaña, 2013). First, evaluation coding was used to analyze the judgments and appraisals made by participants regarding experiences (1) transitioning from high school to their redshirt freshman year, (b) the redshirt year itself, and (c) transitioning from redshirting to full participation. Evaluation coding describes a process/practice, like redshirting, and helps assess the quality of this process/practice (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, this method assisted in exploring how the redshirt freshman year influenced athletes' identities over the three periods. Evaluation coding also assists in elucidating recommendations to inform improvements for the process/practice under investigation (Saldaña, 2013).

Second, emotion coding was used to advance understanding of the values and attitudes athletes expressed about their redshirt freshman year and related experiences. Saldaña (2013) stated that emotion coding "tap[s] into the inner cognitive systems of participants" (p. 5). By capturing their feelings—such as frustration, motivation, anxiety, or growth—emotion coding provided deeper insight into how athletes internalized and made sense of this transitional period. Such examination into these inner thoughts of athletes is key to deeply understanding their identity and ego development or diffusion and experiences with intimacy or isolation (Erikson, 1950; Patton et al., 2016).

From the strategies above, researchers were able to produce thick, rich descriptions of the data, bolstering credibility (Saldaña, 2013). In addition, themes were created, uncovering recurring patterns from participants' narratives about their redshirt freshman experiences. The theming process involved multiple cycles of analysis, where initial codes were refined and synthesized into overarching themes that best captured the athletes' collective experiences. The research team met regularly to ensure analyses were congruent. When there was a disagreement within the coding and theming process, the research team discussed until an agreement was made (Saldaña, 2013). By iteratively comparing data across participants, the researchers ensured themes were grounded in the lived experiences of the athletes rather than imposed by external assumptions (Miles et al., 2019; Saldaña, 2013). Ultimately, participants described the redshirt freshman year as challenging, but ultimately a worthwhile experience. These themes are expanded upon below in the Findings and Discussion with implications to follow.

Findings and Discussion

Four themes describe the participants' experiences before, during, and after the redshirt freshman year as it relates to their identity development: (1) uniqueness and distinction during high school, (2) determination through the redshirt freshman year, (3) team isolation, and (4) little desire for team intimacy. The following subsections describe the aforementioned themes in detail and aim to describe the sequential process of participants' experiences. The themes are further connected to Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory and Erikson's (1950) Psychosocial Development Model.

Uniqueness and Distinction During High School

Overall, participants described their high school football experiences as overwhelmingly positive. All athletes competed for their high school teams, many of which were in small towns where attending football games on Friday nights was the main activity. Frank expressed how significant it was to play for his high school team:

I guess being in a small town... it's a big deal. Every Friday that's what everybody's doing. The town, the traditions. I wouldn't say our school was like football only, per se. But I'd say predominantly if people were gonna go to a sporting event, it was gonna be football. And we're traditionally a pretty good high school. So yeah, it was always a pretty big deal.

Other players noted how this energetic atmosphere created by the local and school communities made them passionate about the sport. For example, Harrison noted Fridays were his favorite day of the week, feeling a "high" off the energy of home games. He stated this atmosphere not only allowed him to build strong connections with his high school teammates, but also fostered his love for football. So, the supportive environment from football created team and community intimacy for participants (Erikson, 1950). In fact, no athlete interviewed expressed feelings of isolation during high school as a result of their football experience. It is likely intimacy was also established as participants had cultivated or were starting to cultivate strong athletic identity salience, with such identity salience necessary before intimacy (Erikson, 1950).

Within this context, players began understanding themselves as unique, talented, and distinct from other athletes and students in their high school. Feelings of intimacy and support from their communities developed their strong connection to football. In line with previous scholarship (Gayles & Baker, 2015), these feelings of being unique, talented, and distinct from other athletes and non-athletes bolstered their athletic identity. A few participants referred to themselves as a "star football player" which conferred their status. Ben explained how status was related to the social hierarchy at his school:

Everyone was at football games on Fridays. Everyone came out and supported. We were also pretty good. So that also helped; people always support winning teams. I'll say, socially, obviously there's somewhat of a social hierarchy. I don't like using it, but it is what it is kind of. So being an

athlete and being a good football player and someone who's good at a lot of sports... I guess you could say, [I was] popular. So yeah, absolutely I love the experience of high school.

Through Ben's and other athletes' similar narratives, recognition from interactions with others bolstered athletes' perceptions of themselves as athletes, and thus, matched their athletic identity cultivation. This also aligns with Erikson's (1950) model and the significance of others in informing youths' identities and egos (Patton et al., 2016).

With this status and athletic identity, nine of the eleven participants reflected they did not need to give much attention to other parts of high school, like academics or social activities, to maintain their stature. This is summed up by Isaac's statement: "I was a star football player, so I never needed to do much work in school. I always found a way to finesse my way around things." Isaac's statement aligns with other scholarship on the significance of athletic identity for high school athletes (Gayles & Baker, 2015) and football players (Beamon, 2012; Brewer et al., 1993), specifically.

From their high school experiences and interactions, athletes may have already begun to solidify their sense of purpose—and thus identity and ego—as an athlete compared to other identities, such as their student roles. Thus, participants emerged as the "star" of their high schools and transitioned to pursue their dreams of competing in college.

Determination Through the Redshirt Freshman Year

Participants spoke in depth about the challenges of the redshirt season. All participants knew prior to their transition—going into summer training camp or the fall season—they would be redshirting; however, this knowledge did not change the fact that the redshirt freshman season was difficult. For example, Caleb described the physical intensity of the redshirt workouts, noting they were the "most brutal workouts" he experienced. He continued:

When you first get to college, you know no one... They're from all over, and you're with these dudes every morning at 5 a.m. doing the most horrific workouts you've ever thought of. People are dying. There are bodies all over the floor. There's throw up on the ground, on the sleds. You're going through it with a bunch of guys you've never met before.

In conjunction with advancing through the mental and physical grind of the workouts, participants' described goals of gaining weight and improving technical skills that would enhance their performance in the seasons to come. Indeed, Schlossberg (1981) described the significance of physical health, extended here to include physical growth, as key to successful transitions, such as transitioning beyond the redshirt year.

George noted while the non-redshirts were instructed to just maintain weight and muscle during the season, the redshirt freshmen were specifically trained to gain weight and muscle. George stated: "gaining weight, even if you're sore, is the main priority. All of the technical stuff comes after." He further reflected nothing would stand in his way of his ultimate goal of competing the following year. Thus, physical

goals were internally motivated by desires to get on the field the next season. However, physical goals were also externally motivated by coach and staff who emphasized making progress in this area, an important detail considering the transition environment of the redshirt athletes (Schlossberg, 1981). These internal (e.g., personal fitness goals) and external motivators (e.g., directions from coaches), in addition to the amount of time athletes dedicated to their craft, helped solidify participants' athletic identities compared to student and social identities (Côté et al., 2007; Erikson, 1950; Patton et al., 2016). Furthermore, utilizing internal/external motivations and understanding them are important as individuals cope and adapt to transitions (Schlossberg, 1981).

Importantly, the redshirt freshman season was also a mental challenge for players, connecting mental health to psychosocial competence in Schlossberg's (1981) model. When discussing watching his team play while on the bench, Drew said, "It took a toll on me mentally for the first couple of games. It just felt like you were practicing just to practice. You never saw the light at the end of the tunnel." Jack explained that even during practice, the good days consisted of participating in five total plays. Ethan added to these statements:

Most coaching staff bring in kids and put them on the redshirt year. They put 'em through the wringer just to see if they're mentally tough enough to stay in the program for the whole four years, because football is hard. So, I just feel like they're tougher on the freshmen and the redshirts just because they're pushing them. And they want to see what they can do. They want to see how mentally tough they are.

Ethan's perception about why the redshirt freshman year is particularly challenging aligns with other athletes' perceptions of the redshirt and coaching mentality from previous scholarship (Harry & Weight, 2021; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Matteo, 2023). Additionally, Aidan described the changes he felt as a player during this transition:

We don't do a lot of things full speed, such as tackling in our practices. So, coming from high school when you're playing every Friday, you're live tackling everything...and then you don't do that for a year...you start to think like, 'oh, do I even remember how to do this?' It's not the same as a game environment at all...I think it's detrimental not only to your mental state, but also how you see yourself.

These perceptions explained by Drew, Jack, Ethan, and Aidan align with previous scholarship noting athletes' mental health struggles with transitions (Gayles & Baker, 2015; Matteo, 2023).

Still, athletes displayed determination during their redshirt freshman year. Despite not taking the field on Saturdays, participants such as Issac and Kai, told themselves they still possessed athletic talent. This mentality not only aligns with Schlossberg's (1981) perceptions of the transition, but also with the positive self- and world-attitudes she described as significant forces for positive transitions. Internal reassurance allowed participants to stay motivated and determined to work through the redshirt season and transition out the other side. This athletic confidence is also

important for maintaining athletic identity salience (Brewer et al., 1993; Harrison et al., 2011; Weight et al., 2020; Oldham, 2022). Further, the participants acknowledged that transitioning to compete in college, even as a redshirt, was an accomplishment. Ben stated:

I struggled a lot throughout that fall. Coming in, I had already been second guessing myself. Am I good enough to be here? That type of deal. And coming in and being on the bottom of the totem pole, from the start, I think, affects one as an athlete, especially in terms of confidence, because at least me personally, I've always been a good athlete, like I've always been the best, or one of the best. And on every team, baseball, football or wrestling. It was new for me to be on the bottom of the depth chart... It affected my confidence as an athlete quite a bit. But I mean I got a lot better; that's what that redshirt season is for.

Participants began increasingly focusing on themselves, specifically their athletic abilities. Due to the rarity of transitioning through the redshirt freshman year, participants felt more assured in their physical and mental abilities in football contexts. For multiple participants, including Harrison, Issac, and Jack, this experience heightened their athletic identity and led to a hyper-focus on football and competing the following season, which seemed to limit other identity-forming activities in academic and social spheres. Overall, athletes in the sample described using determination to overcome physical and mental obstacles of the redshirt freshman year, proving to themselves and others that they were athletically gifted and deserving of their roster spot. This determination strengthened their athletic identity and ego, likely contributing to subsequent team isolation.

Team Isolation

While the participants described how the redshirt freshman season brought them together with others in similar situations, they simultaneously described how it isolated them from non-redshirt freshmen and other athletes on the team. According to transition literature (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981), experiences of isolation during a transition period are common. This is also particularly prevalent for college athletes (Gayles & Baker, 2015; Harry & Weight, 2021).

First, athletes described how the challenge of the redshirt freshman year “bonded” the redshirt athletes together. Ben offered, “We just bonded a lot over how difficult it was because it’s a transitional period. It’s difficult for all of us and its long season.” Caleb revealed an akin statement noting how the “humbling” nature of the redshirt freshman year brought him closer to his peers: “when you come into college. You’re the best player in your school, or one of the best. Then you come here and you’re just like everybody else.” Thus, humbling amongst a group—rather than alone—made the redshirt freshmen tight, as Caleb added, “You eventually start becoming friends, and then probably a little bit more than friends.”

The isolation experienced by the athletes in this transition phase was structural and environmental (Schlossberg, 1981). For example, during the redshirt freshman year, participants such as Isaac and Jack, noted that they usually worked out as a

redshirt group separate from the other freshmen and athletes on the team. Coupled with not practicing, competing, or traveling with the team, this segregation isolated and otherized the participants.

Furthermore, Harrison and Kai described limited access to coaches as they were focusing on the athletes who could compete on Saturdays, not the redshirt freshman. This isolated the participants and limited relationship building during the transition to the redshirt freshman year and throughout that year. With limited exposure to non-redshirts and coaches, participants noted feeling more connected with their redshirt teammates, bonded by this isolation and redshirt identity (Erikson, 1950). Drew reflected:

I think the connection between us redshirts was stronger. Obviously, because we are staying back here on the weekends, not travelling. And then we would talk to each other and stuff like that. So, obviously every single class has a connection because they are the same class. But I think being redshirts too, it's a little different.

Thus, this isolation experienced by the redshirt freshmen was not just structural and environmental—by the design of the redshirt freshman year, but also interpersonal—from relationships or lack thereof between non-redshirts and redshirts (Erikson, 1950). Schlossberg (2005) noted, “knowing that others are experiencing transitions like one’s own provides a kind of emotional support” (p. 178). So, relationships and their provided supports are key to both intimacy and successful transitions (Erikson, 1950; Schlossberg, 1981), including for college athletes (Weight et al., 2020). The participants’ experiences with isolation during the redshirt freshman year contributed to their limited wants for greater team intimacy after their redshirt freshman year. Instead, the focus became on their performance and work ethic, items that were in their control, as mentioned in the second theme. Throughout the redshirt freshman year and beyond, participants’ sense of athletic identity solidified, specifically through periods of isolation (Erikson, 1950).

Little Desire for Team Intimacy

The culminating theme of the interviews centered around participants’ lack of desire for team intimacy post-redshirting. Athletes repeatedly referenced that not all redshirts make it through the freshman year and transition into their eligibility years. With this understanding, the divide between redshirt freshmen and the rest of the team widened. Ben reflected:

Throughout that redshirt fall, you’re not as close with those [upperclassmen] guys yet, because a lot of people quit. A lot of people get weeded out. So, now that I’m on the other side of it, looking at them I’m like, ‘I’m not gonna get super close to you guys if you’re gonna to quit.’ It’s more of a once you get through the redshirt fall now you’ve earned respect. You’ve made it through the trenches. Like, you’re serious about being here. You’re serious about our program... Now I’m glad that you’re along for the ride to help us win.

Interestingly, despite Ben’s determination to make it through the redshirt freshman

year and understanding the difficulties, he and other participants did not necessarily want to support or form relationships with the redshirt athletes once they transitioned to the “other side.” In this way, Ben did not share the totality of who he was as an athlete, or his other identities, hindering his intimacy with others, but also potentially intimacy across the team (Erikson, 1950). Schlossberg (1981) emphasized the importance of intimacy during times of transition. Further, just as he had to “prove himself,” in this transition period, Ben wanted others to do the same, maintaining the environment and culture of isolation. This further limited team intimacy.

Unfortunately, this mentality often negatively impacted participants’ relationships with other players, especially athletically. While some athletes described teammates as “friends,” they still described this relationship loosely, using verbiage like “we’re cool” and “I like them.” Drew described the “business” of his relationship with teammates as follows:

I’m gonna talk to them [teammates]. But I’m not gonna give away how I’m doing, what I’m doing. I’m gonna keep riding it out. . . . So yeah, competing for the same spots, once we’re out on the field, it’s all business. I’m gonna beat out whoever I can, however I can.

For most participants, football eventually evolved into a “job” in which they focused on their performance and competition with teammates. Thus, while they had a strong athletic identity, other social identities (e.g., teammate) did not emerge from participants’ narratives.

Ben did not want to form intimate relationships with teammates who would not persevere through the challenges of the redshirt year, while Drew did not want to create relationships in which he might “give away” his athletic secrets, which could decrease his chances of taking the field. Drew displayed a scarcity mindset, likely informed by his redshirt experience in which playing—even practicing—was scarce. Thus, the concept of having to continuously prove yourself and earn/keep your spot that was constantly in the back of athletes’ minds during the redshirt freshman year, remained omnipresent as they transitioned through to football seasons post-redshirt (Patton et al., 2016). This environment reaffirmed and solidified ego and athletic identity for the participants (Erikson, 1950; Schlossberg, 1981), lessening desires for team intimacy.

The perspectives of Ben and Drew, along with the perspectives of other athletes, demonstrate a pragmatic understanding of the team dynamic, potentially stemming from the pragmatic ways in which they were treated as redshirt freshmen (e.g., coaches and staff giving more attention to key players taking the field on Saturdays and less attention to redshirts who could not have an immediate impact). In line with the previous quotes, the isolation and resulting missing team intimacy created a cyclical pattern in which participants continued to focus more on their own athletic development and less on team development, perpetuating less intimacy within their teams. For example, participants discussed more individual goals and recognition compared to team goals. Drew stated, “I’ve gotten in multiple games, which is exciting. I’ve done well on special teams. I’m hoping to be an All-conference guy for special teams this year, which is a big step.” In a similar sentiment, Caleb explained

that his goals go beyond playing time, "Now, instead of just trying to earn a starting spot, there's motivation toward accolades and being the best in the country."

Another example illustrating little desire for team intimacy comes from Ethan, who, after realizing he was not going to make the field after his redshirt freshman year, decided to transfer. He explained:

We had a fifth-year senior that had a COVID year, so a sixth year. He was starting in my position. When he decided to come back for the sixth year that's when I said, 'I don't want to wait. I want to go to a different institution, get on the field instead of waiting two years to play.'

Thus, while a potentially bonding experience for those "in the trenches" as Ben expressed, the redshirt freshman year ultimately led athletes to describe a less intimate team environment and culture, fueled by personal athletic goals and desires.

Implications

Below we discuss theoretical and practical implications for the fields of sport management and athlete development.

Theoretical Implications

There are a handful of theoretical implications from this study. First, limited sport scholarship has employed psychosocial development lenses, like Erikson's (1950), to understand college athletes' experiences (Patton et al., 2016). Indeed, much of the literature regarding athletes' transitions, experiences, and development has used other theories such as Astin's (1984) Input-Environment-Outcome framework, Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) Conceptual Model for Student-Athlete Success, Raedeke and Smith's (2001) athlete burnout, among others. These theories are appropriate; however, more theoretical plurality in the athlete development and wellbeing sphere can offer more nuanced and in-depth understandings on athletes' time in college. In fact, the field of sport management intersects with a host of other disciplines, including psychology and sociology, and thus, employing a psychosocial perspective, like Erikson's (1950), is not only viable, but also works to achieve theoretical extension.

Second, Erikson's (1950) theory, paired with Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, is particularly appropriate for understanding the redshirt experience. As noted in our findings and previous scholarship (Matteo, 2023; Medley, 2018), redshirt freshman athletes face challenges during and after the redshirt transition. Athletes not only questioned their role as an athlete, but also their future in sports (e.g., Aidan and Caleb). So, while the redshirt freshman year is often promoted as a transitional time of acclimatization and avenue for athletes to explore areas outside of sports, the theoretical coupling of Transition Theory and Psychosocial Development helped us elucidate that there is perhaps minimal identity exploration and strong athletic identities for redshirt athletes. This theoretical perspective and subsequent findings also support prior literature on non-redshirt athletes' identities (Matteo, 2023; Oldham,

2022) and bolster the idea that athletic identity does not only impact athletes in the most visible conferences and teams, but in reality, impacts most college athletes.

We also found athletes struggled with their ego, an area underexamined in previous literature on athlete development and identity (Brewer et al., 1993; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). More in-depth examination of the ego may be lacking because limited previous scholarship has used psychosocial lenses, and Erikson's (1950) model specifically. One's ego, or perception of their identity, is especially critical as solidifying ego helps lay the foundation for interactions and intimacy building in Erikson's (1950) Stage Six (Patton et al., 2016). The ego is also important for intimacy and subsequent support in times of transition (Schlossberg, 1981, 2005). Indeed, one reason redshirt athletes in our study may have encountered issues cultivating intimacy could be because they struggled to define their egos, which could also be a symptom of athletic identity and role engulfment (Erikson, 1950).

Additionally, Erikson's (1950) Stage Six is critical for athletes as they establish relationships in the hopes of building intimacy with others, especially teammates and coaches. In line with much of the previous athlete development literature, our sample of athletes expressed limited intimacy with individuals outside of the athletics community. However, perhaps most interestingly, the athletes also expressed that they sometimes floundered in creating relationships with non-redshirt teammates and even coaches. Ben described how upperclassmen did not want to get to know him well until after he completed the redshirt freshman year in case he did not transition through. This lack of intimacy led to a missing sense of belonging for a handful of the participants. While athletes did develop and maintain a sense of athletic identity, allowing them to move from Stage Five to Stage Six, it is likely that the overemphasis on athletic identity led athletes to flounder in building more intimate relationships across their teams and with coaches.

While sense of belonging/lack of belonging has been somewhat examined in the athlete experience literature (Gayles et al., 2018), this notion has not been framed from an intimacy versus isolation perspective and has considered this phenomenon more from an environmental or cultural lens, rather than developmental perspective. Importantly, Erikson's (1950) model and its coupling with Schlossberg's (1981) framework, offers ways for scholars to consider both environment/culture and human development when it comes to redshirt and non-redshirt athletes' experiences and transitions (Patton et al., 2016).

Practical Implications

Athletes in this sample noted that while challenging, they generally considered the redshirt experience worthwhile. However, given participants' transition struggles, heightened athletic identities, and experiences with isolation from teammates and others across campuses, we conclude that the redshirt freshman year is under-accomplishing the goal of academic and social acclimation and inclusion. However, the findings from this study provide multiple practical implications for practitioners, specifically coaches, to bring the goal of improved athlete development back to the forefront of the freshman redshirt experience. These implications include enhanced

support for identity exploration, such as networking events with team alumni, increased transparency about the redshirt process, and more events and strategies for increased team intimacy.

This study revealed that upon graduating high school, athletes' athletic identities may already be solidified, or at least, already highly developed (Gayles & Baker, 2015). With this in mind, college coaches should offer athletes more opportunities to explore interests beyond sports, including academic and social spheres of college campuses. In fact, some of this exploration could be required by the coaches or mandatory in athlete development programming, such as volunteer activities or study groups mixed with athletes across sports. As the participants in this study noted, coaches are some of the most prominent and influential individuals in athletes' college and transition environments (Harry & Weight, 2021; Weight et al., 2020), and thus their support is key to athletes' greater evolution within and beyond sport. Additionally, identity and interest exploration are beneficial for long-term identity development (Erikson, 1950; Patton et al., 2016), and also development of psychosocial competence and values orientations (Schlossberg, 1981).

Similarly, participants described feelings of isolation from not only other athletes across the athletic department and football program, but also from the greater campus community. Many participants in the sample noted that their schools allowed them to take the majority of their classes online and/or asynchronously. A similar option was offered during their COVID-19 years and also remained a commonplace after. The online and/or asynchronous curriculum was beneficial in their aspirations and desires to focus on football, but it may also have contributed to their athletic identity development or over-development. Additionally, in line with previous research on athlete isolation (Gayles et al., 2018; Weight & Huml, 2016), this siloed environment, and structure hindered their interactions with non-athletes, faculty, and others outside of sports.

Second, it is pertinent coaches communicate with athletes before they arrive on campus that they should be prepared to redshirt and what this process looks like. This informational support is key for athletes, so they are less surprised as they navigate the transition to college. However, as most participants noted, while they were notified in advance they would be redshirting, they did not receive transparency regarding the challenges of the redshirt freshman year. Including redshirt processes into conversations, perhaps with older teammates who have gone through this year, before athletes begin their redshirt freshman year can be another avenue to prepare athletes for their next steps, easing their perception of the transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

Third, and in line with increased transparency—and Transition Theory—are increased internal and institutional support for redshirt athletes. Transparency works in step with intimacy. Participants noted feelings of isolation during their redshirt freshman year, specifically with relationships with coaches and non-redshirt teammates. Greater interaction across these groups may help redshirt athletes begin to feel a part of the team and culture, more quickly. In turn, this could lead to stronger belonging and desires for team intimacy. In fact, Aidan noted after his redshirt year, coaches

implemented Scout Bowl Thursdays, where redshirts played a full scrimmage and received feedback from other teammates and coaches. During the last 30 minutes of Thursday practices, the redshirts would have the field to themselves to scrimmage while their non-redshirt teammates and staff cheered from the sidelines. Aidan felt this was a great way to foster team intimacy beyond the redshirts as the Scout Bowl involved the entire football program. Implementing these implications serves as a starting point for coaches and college sport practitioners to center athletes' development during the transitional redshirt freshman year.

While this study's practical implications are centered on the role of coaches, we acknowledge the broader host of resources and services generally provided by athletic departments—including athlete enhancement, wellness, and academic support staff—that are critical to athlete development (Gayles et al., 2018; Kiefer et al., 2021). These units are well-positioned to offer proactive programming, identity development workshops, and academic integration initiatives. However, it is important to note that the athletes in our sample rarely identified or reflected on those roles. Instead, they consistently described coaches as the most influential figures in their redshirt experience. Given this, we argue that coaches can serve as gatekeepers to many of the department's developmental opportunities (Harry & Weight, 2021; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Whether explicitly or implicitly, coaches shape the culture, routines, and priorities that athletes are expected to follow—including how they engage or do not engage with non-sport development offerings.

Thus, while other professionals may have the expertise to support athletes in exploring academic and social identities, it is often the coach's endorsement, encouragement, or lack thereof that determines whether athletes feel empowered to participate in such initiatives. For example, coaches set the tone for whether athletes attend optional developmental events, seek out non-sport mentorship, or embrace interdisciplinary learning. So, coaches do not have to create or lead all identity development programming, but they do have the capacity—and arguably the responsibility—to integrate, support, and normalize engagement with those existing campus and department resources. Future collaborations between coaching staffs and athlete development professionals should be encouraged to bridge this gap. Such partnerships could lead to more intentional and developmentally sound support for redshirt athletes.

Limitations And Future Research

While this study discusses important considerations on the psychosocial and transition experience that is the redshirt process, it is not without limitations. First, this study investigated the experiences of Division II redshirt freshmen football athletes who made it through this year. This is a unique and small sample, and thus, expanding this work to other athlete subgroups (e.g., divisions, sports, athletes who did not make it through the redshirt freshman year, etc.) is warranted. Even within Division II football, future research on the redshirt experience is necessary, specifically with those from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds. In addition,

participants' redshirt freshman year took place during COVID-19 and thus, redshirt experiences could differ in subsequent years.

Another limitation and area for future exploration is an increased discussion about the academic and social advantages and disadvantages of the redshirt freshman year and beyond. Little was mentioned by the athletes about academics or social life outside of sports and football. While this provided us with athletes' true perceptions of the redshirt year being more athletically focused and their athletic identity development, future studies with redshirt athletes should center these topics to explore how different strategies and supports during the redshirt freshman year can actually accomplish the goals of holistic athlete development (Matteo, 2023; Medley, 2018).

Our findings also hinted the potential of athlete role engulfment for the participants (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Erikson, 1950). Future studies should consider this phenomenon and seek greater detail to distinguish when an athlete transitions from having a strong athletic identity to full athlete role engulfment, specifically during the redshirt freshman year. Lastly, more consideration should be given to understanding the innerworkings of team level of intimacy, specifically within redshirt and non-redshirt athletes, as well as key factors that bolster or hinder team culture development.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the experience of Division II redshirt freshman football players through the novel theoretical combination of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory and Erikson's (1950) Stages of Psychosocial Development. Findings suggested athletes come into the redshirt freshman year with feelings of both uniqueness and distinction cultivated during high school. These perceptions fueled their determination in the redshirt year and beyond as they wanted to prove their athletic prowess to themselves and others. However, throughout the redshirt freshman year and after, athletes expressed feelings of isolation as they lacked an on-field presence and opportunities for meaningful interactions with non-redshirts. Isolation then led participants to desire individual successes over team intimacy. Implications offer not only theoretical advancements for the field in understanding the unique transition and developmental opportunity that is the redshirt year, but also practical improvements to cultivate true holistic athlete development in the redshirt process.

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Examining Athletic Academic Advisors' Experiences: A College Athlete Mental Health Approach

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Mental health is a critical and timely topic within college athletics. As such, athletic departments have created initiatives to enhance the experience of athletes. However, research indicates college athletes often feel uncomfortable seeking mental health support and, in turn, look for alternative outlets. This study examines the role of National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I athletic academic advisors with college athlete mental health, seeking to understand how they use their role to enhance college athlete mental health and the training they receive to do so. Using Ecological Systems Theory, we identify college athlete academic advisors rely heavily on microsystem relationships to enhance the well-being of college athletes. As such, these individuals make decisions that directly impact their lives, like working weekends, to ensure the success of college athletes. Additional findings indicate college athlete academic advisors are often underprepared for their role, and lack support from their departments, further isolating them in their journey to enhance the well-being of college athletes. We suggest athletic departments invest in the professional development of athletic academic advisors, including providing mental health training and partnering with on-campus resources to better support these professionals.

Keywords: mental health, college athletes, athletic academic advisor, advising

Mental health has long held a negative stigma in sports, leading to a lack of public discourse and support for athletes (Bauman, 2016). This all changed when Kevin Love and other professional athletes publicly shared their struggles with mental health, shifting some of the narrative and stigma in sport to be more open and understanding about mental health challenges. However, the past decade has been increasingly troublesome for fans of college sport, with the suicides of college



athletes such as University of Pennsylvania track athlete Madison Holleran (2014), Washington State University football player Tyler Hilinski (2016), Binghamton University lacrosse player Robert Martin (2022), and Stanford University soccer player Katie Meyer (2022), to name a few. These athlete deaths have brought a larger and critical media presence to the issue surrounding athlete well-being and mental health (Walton et al., 2024).

To address the issue of mental health in sport, there has been an increase in research to identify factors that could be inhibiting (or enhancing) mental health, specifically for college athletes (Breslin et al., 2017; Küttel & Larsen, 2020). Much of this research has focused on individual-level factors such as social media use and help-seeking behaviors (Daltry et al., 2018; Drew & Matthews, 2019; Watson, 2005), with some work being conducted on coaches and their knowledge and attitudes toward player mental health (Breslin et al., 2017; Ferguson et al., 2019). Accompanying this research is an increase in investment by athletic departments toward athlete mental health, led by the recently formed National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Mental Health Advisory Group (NCAA, 2022). However, while the NCAA has established best practices and recommendations for athletic departments, many departments lack the financial resources to hire new staff focused on college athlete mental health. Acknowledging this gap for many athletic departments, this study sets forth to better understand the role of athletic academic advisors as mental health support for college athletes.

Research indicates college athletes often feel uncomfortable seeking mental health support due to concerns about negative perceptions from coaches and administrators, leading to potential loss of playing time or athletic scholarship (Cosh et al., 2024; Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). As a byproduct of these concerns, athletes are unlikely to reach out to coaching staff to voice their challenges and, therefore, look for alternative outlets (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). An important group of professionals outside of the realm of athletic decision-making includes the athletic academic advisor. Athletic academic advisors meet with college athletes on a regular basis to provide academic and life skill guidance, forming strong relationships with athletes beyond their sport (Thompson, 2013). Investigating the role of academic advisor, Thompson (2013) found college athletes were often willing to share private matters (i.e., academic, professional, and personal) with athletic academic advisors. These professionals are a potential outlet for athletes to share experiences of mental health struggles or challenges. This study seeks to better examine the relationship between academic advisors and college athletes' mental health. Furthermore, this paper seeks to understand the preparedness of individuals in the role of academic advisor to handle and support mental health issues.

Literature Review

In the following section we explore the current research on college student and college athlete mental health. As such, we discuss the support systems available to

the college athlete population, their help-seeking behaviors, holistic care, and the battle of stigma within sport.

College Student Mental Health

Understanding college student mental health has become increasingly important for campus officials (Watkins et al., 2012) as research has linked depression and anxiety with lower GPAs, increased alcohol use, and withdrawal from college (Arria et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2009b; McMichael & Hetzel, 1975). The importance of understanding mental health issues in the college student population is reflected in the increase in usage of mental health resources on college campuses. Gallagher (2015) noted college counseling center directors across the U.S. reported an 8% increase in patients with severe psychological problems from the year prior. The prevalence of college students facing mental health issues is widespread, with research suggesting about one-third of undergraduates present with symptoms of depression and anxiety (Oswalt et al., 2020). More recently, studies have suggested this number might even be higher, with around 60% presenting with symptoms (Abrams, 2022). While research exploring the utilization of on-campus resources by college students remains scarce, work in this area does raise concerns about usage. One study showed that among college students reporting moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression, only 39.67 and 39.53%, respectively, used on-campus resources (Lee et al., 2021).

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in mental health issues among college students. The sudden changes to normalized schedules and the shelter-at-home policies significantly impacted the college student population. This led the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), and Children's Hospital Association (CHA) to declare a national emergency for adolescent mental health (AAP, 2021). While there are resources on campus for college students (e.g., counseling centers), the college athlete population has extended resources regarding their mental health challenges.

College Athlete Mental Health

While college students face high levels of mental health issues, college athletes potentially face significantly more stressors during their college experience. Recent research on college athlete mental health indicates they suffer from mental illness at a similar rate to their college student counterparts (Edwards et al., 2019). However, college athletes were 1.5 to 2 times more likely to report mental health concerns compared to pre-COVID levels (NCAA, 2022).

Mental health research in college athletics covers a wide variety of mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and suicide. NCAA (2023) research identified that 29% of women sport participants felt overwhelming anxiety "constantly" or "most every day" and 17% of Division I men and 33% of Division I women felt mentally exhausted. McDonald et al. (2020) examined eating behaviors of athletes competing within the NCAA to understand differences in those competing in "lean" and "non-lean" sports. While prior research has emphasized the dangers of

eating disorders for athletes in lean sports (i.e., distance running, gymnastics), their findings highlighted that athletes competing in “non-lean” sports can also be affected by eating disorder symptomatology. Research exploring the mental health of NCAA college athletes has identified that over a 20-year period of 1,102 deaths, 128 were reported as suicide. Whelan et al. (2024) explored the 20-year period breaking it into two decades. The first decade reported suicide as a cause of 7.6% of deaths, with this number more than doubling to 15.3% in the second decade (Whelan et al., 2024). Further, Hensley-Clancy (2022) also noted there has been a recent increase in the number of suicides by NCAA college athletes. Understanding this increase in NCAA athlete suicides requires understanding factors that could negatively impact college athlete mental health, as well as examine the use of support services through better understanding help-seeking behaviors.

One way scholars have examined college athletes’ mental health is through exploring their social media usage. For example, Brougham (2021) examined the impacts of social media on the mental health of college athletes, finding that in general there were little impacts from social media use on the mental health of college athletes. Qualitative responses in the study suggested athletes used social media as a tool for procrastination and escape. Similarly, David et al. (2018) completed a 75-minute focus group with athletes who discussed advantages and disadvantages of Twitter use, sharing it could be used for advocacy, team cohesion, and support, but that at times could result in receipt of critical tweets which they felt could impact performance. Further, Barry et al. (2022) found overall screen time was not associated with well-being, but use of social media during daily activities was related to lower self-esteem, and higher stress, anxiety, and depression.

Other research examining factors impacting college athlete mental health include rigorous time demands. Specifically, college athletes are often required to engage in additional programming outside the 20-hour sport-specific time limit imposed by the NCAA. This can include volunteer practices and lifts, civic engagement, study hall, and other athlete development workshops (e.g., resume development, mock interviews) (Brougham et al., 2023). However, it must be noted that some of this programming has been developed as a mechanism to help prepare athletes for future professional success and relieve stressors (Turick et al., 2021). Researchers confirmed the importance of this programming, suggesting that due to the schedules of college athletes and their focus on sport, college athletes often fail to explore other facets of their identity, resulting in a traumatic transition to life after sport (Tyranee et al., 2013; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

To enhance athlete experiences within college athletics, the recently formed NCAA working group on athlete mental health adopted policies that require college athletic departments to have mental health professionals (MHP) readily available for college athletes, whether that be in the athletic department or on-campus (NCAA, 2024). While this is a strong step toward addressing potential mental health issues, the stigma surrounding seeking help and actual scope of resources available to college athletes still allows for many barriers to support. While not directly tied to mental health support, college athletes have additional support within their athletic

department including athletic trainers, academic support, athlete development professionals, strength coaches, and nutritional staff.

Mental Health Stigma

Challenges remain for campus officials with encouraging students to utilize their support systems. Research indicates both public and personal barriers impact individuals' help-seeking behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2009a; Wood, 2024). For example, Wood (2024) found that while around 70% of college students struggled with their mental health, only 37% of the population sought support. Perceived public stigma is an individual's perceptions of other people's negative stereotypes and prejudice about mental illness (Corrigan, 2004), whereas personal stigma refers to an individual's own stigmatizing attitudes around mental health (Griffiths et al., 2004). Research has indicated gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status were significantly and negatively associated with help-seeking behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2009a).

Similar to the general population, college athletes also struggle with mental health stigma. However, these challenges can be exacerbated in sport with athletes trying to avoid looking weak (Kim & Tamminen, 2025; Lopez & Levy, 2013). While some scholars have argued that educating college athletes will help overcome stigma, others have identified college athletes already have above average mental health literacy (Beasley & Hoffman, 2023), highlighting how college athletes are aware of mental health signs, symptoms, and services, but are fearful of seeking help. As Beasley et al. (2021a) found in their examination of mental health professionals (MHPs) in college athletics, the MHPs expressed concern from athletes about seeking help, even if they knew it could benefit them. Knowing this, it is likely that college athletes engage in vulnerable conversations in locations viewed as non-threatening to their athlete identities, like with athletic academic advisors who help athletes explore their identity beyond sport.

Holistic Approach to College Athlete Mental Health

College athletes have greater access to care within their athletic departments, with access to athletic trainers, doctors, and in some cases in-house mental health professionals (Gross et al., 2020). As such, these individuals can work together to create integrated care plans. Following an integrated care plan, athletic trainers, doctors, and mental health professionals can work together to develop treatment plans and goals for an athlete (Sudano et al., 2017). Pecukonis et al. (2008) stated that interprofessional care teams must work together to ensure complementary services. In the context of college athletes, all individuals interacting with athletes have a duty to promote a culture of inclusivity surrounding mental health.

It is important to note the differences in support for college athletes. As mentioned prior, college athletic departments have been slow-moving in specific positions associated with trained clinicians on mental health support, but some exist. For example, support systems with a clinical background may include psychologists, therapists, and social workers (Jones et al., 2022; Meanaker et al., 2023). While these clinical support positions might hold various backgrounds (e.g., performance

based vs. mental health), they still act as trained professionals to work with athletes (Beasley et al., 2021b). Athletic departments also have various levels of non-clinical support, which would include, academic advisors, athletic trainers, coaches, and faculty. While these individuals are not specifically trained in handling challenging conversations, they often have the ability to create strong relationships with athletes that may foster an inviting environment for discussing athlete mental health.

While the integration of this programming could improve the holistic care of athletes by ensuring all medical professionals are working toward a common goal, each institution has a different policy for information that is reported to administration and the head coach and as such, college athletes may continue to perceive sharing information with these individuals as a threat to their playing time or scholarship (Sudano et al., 2017). As Saxe et al. (2022) suggested, a collaborative approach to athlete mental health includes all facets of the athlete's experience, including strong relationships with coaches and MHPs. Another group that has continual interaction with student-athletes and has not been explored from the lens of their experiences with college athlete mental health is athletic academic advisors.

Athletic Academic Advisors

As mentioned previously, college athletes have greater access to support services within their department, extending to athletic academic advisors. To ensure compliance with the NCAA, Division I athletic departments typically have in-house athletic academic advisors (Rubin, 2017). While not mental health professionals, these individuals assist college athletes with the development of their identity beyond sport (Watkins et al., 2022), often engaging in sensitive and difficult conversations with college athletes because of their trusting relationship with students (Thompson et al., 2012). This suggests athletic academic advisors are vital resources to college athletes in their college experience, potentially their first "go to" person outside of their on-field performance with issues and challenges. Professionals, including athletic academic advisors who support college athletes, provide holistic development, including psychosocial and cognitive well-being (Navarro et al., 2020). Through developing strong relationships with athletes, athletic academic advisors provide a safe space in which athletes may share about mental health issues, whether the advisor is trained in this area or not.

College athletes face a lot of pressure to perform athletically at this highest level. However, athletic academic advisors face pressures too, including maintaining eligibility for their students, and justifying the nature of their work as revenue sharing as a result of the *House vs. NCAA* case is causing athletic departments to make cuts to both roster spots on teams and to support staff (Marcello, 2025; Postin, 2025). In their study of 38 professionals in the field on burnout, Rubin and Moreno-Pardo (2018) found athletic academic advisors struggled with work overload, lack of recognition, and health issues. Though they are key in a college athlete's support system, these professionals experience stress along with physical and mental health challenges as a result of their jobs (Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018). Thus, it is important to better understand the role of these individuals. The purpose of this paper is

not to evaluate athletic academic advisors' knowledge of mental health; rather, it is to examine the experiences and perceptions of athletic academic advisors at the NCAA Division I level regarding their interactions with college athlete mental health to understand how they use their role in relation to college athlete mental health. Doing so shows where college athletic departments are struggling to meet the needs of college athletes regarding mental health, and highlights which collaborative inter-department pathways need to be strengthened to alleviate athletic academic advisors and support college athletes.

The Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (EST), developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding athlete well-being by examining the multiple environmental systems that influence an individual's development. This theory posits that well-being is shaped by interactions across five nested systems: the micro-system (immediate influences such as coaches, teammates, and family), the meso-system (interactions between these entities, such as coach-parent relationships), the exo-system (indirect influences like sports organizations and media), the macro-system (cultural values and societal norms surrounding sports), and the chrono-system (how these influences change over time). Studies emphasize how well-being is not solely an individual concern but rather a function of broader socio-environmental interactions (Holt & Tamminen, 2016).

The recent research utilizing EST has demonstrated the importance of fostering supportive environments at multiple levels to enhance athlete well-being. For example, Harwood et al. (2020) found athletes with strong meso-system support—where communication between parents, coaches, and teammates is positive—report lower stress levels and higher motivation. Similarly, studies indicate burnout and reduced psychological resilience are a byproduct of negative macro-system influences, such as toxic performance culture or stigmatization of mental health issues (Stambulova et al., 2021).

In the context of college athletics, there have been multiple studies that have examined the five systems to better understand the current mental health crisis and how to better create systems of support for athletes. Past studies have found significance in the meso-level as the most important for integration of holistic athlete mental health care (Beasley et al., 2021a; Kloetzer & Beasley, 2025; Saxe et al., 2022). For example, Beasley et al. (2021) examined the experiences of MHPs in college athletics, with findings suggesting the meso-level system was the key driver in mental health care. With the unique dynamic of college sports, these MHPs suggested the most important aspect of their roles was referrals from coaches, showing that the micro-level systems were important, but the interaction between key micro level stakeholders (coaches & athletic administrators) with MHPs was vital to a culture of mental health support (meso-level system). From the athlete's perspective, Saxe et al. (2022) found similar results, with the most important aspect of supporting a culture of mental health beginning with the head coach. However, meso-level sys-

tems were most important to a team culture of support, as head coaches are often not trained specifically in the nuances of mental health support. These authors called for collaborative support across groups, suggesting collaboration (meso-level) across athletic departments is the best way to support the mental health of college athletes. These findings underscore the need for holistic support systems that recognize the interconnected nature of individual and environmental factors in shaping an athlete's well-being.

In the context of this study, we examined the micro- and meso-system from the lens of the athletic academic advisor. For example, this role meets directly with athletes (micro) and also serves as a connection between the athletes, coaches, and other support staff (meso). As the collaboration process has been shown to be important in holistic athlete support, academic advisor roles hold a unique position in the athletic department inter-workings. Athletic academic advisors interact and create strong relationships with college athletes throughout the year (micro), while they also interact with coaches and other athletic staff (meso), as such, they hold an important role in the collaborative holistic care of student-athlete mental health. Through the lens of EST, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do Division I athletic academic advisors use their role to enhance college athlete mental health?

RQ2: What educational training, preparation, and support do Division I athletic academic advisors receive to be successful in their roles?

Method

This study was developed through a social constructivist paradigm, where knowledge and understanding are developed by an individual's interactions (Amineh & Asl, 2015). In the context of positioning the researchers of this paper in the greater context of intercollegiate athletics, all researchers have worked in this space, with two of the three having held specific roles in athletic academic advising at various institutions. Below is the positionality of each researcher. Positionality statements are a tool promoting reflexivity from authors, an important tool given the interpretive nature of this research study (Milner, 2007).

Author #1 is a woman and a former NCAA Division I college athlete at a Division I Power 4 institution, with past experience working in athletic academic advising at a mid-major institution. She earned a sport management master's degree while serving as an advisor. Her research focuses on organizational policy and enhancing athlete well-being. Author #2 is a man and a former Division I mid-major and Division III college athlete, with past experiences as a director of baseball operations at the Division I level and coach in Division III. His master's degree was in sport administration while coaching. His research focuses on providing more equitable and inclusive experiences in high school and college athletics, more specifically examining leadership experiences and college athlete experiences. Author #3 is a woman with experience working as an athletic academic advisor and athlete development

coordinator at both Power 4 and mid-major institutions. She earned a master's in sport management before working as an athletic academic advisor. Her research focuses on college athletes and the professionals who support them. Each author possesses a PhD, with focuses in Sport Management, Educational Leadership, and Higher Education respectively.

Prior to completing interviews, we obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, then used purposive sampling to identify participants for the study. Specifically, the goal of this study was to understand the perceptions of athletic academic advisors at the NCAA Division I level through an interpretive qualitative inquiry; therefore, we wanted to ensure we had participants that represented Division I Power 4, mid-major, and non-football schools. Interpretive qualitative inquiry allowed us to explore and understand participants' interpretations of their experiences within the athletic department and with college athletes (Smith & Smith, 2008). We did so by conducting 10 semi-structured interviews with participants. After seven interviews the participants presented initial findings and had identified several similarities in the responses of participants, the inclusion of three more subjects allowed the researchers to be confident that saturation in the study had been achieved, an appropriate number of participants according to Fugard and Potts (2015) when using reflexive thematic analysis.

A semi-structured interview method was chosen for this study as it allows for follow-up questions or probing outside of the original questions developed (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This flexibility allowed us to better understand the experiences of athletic academic advisors within Division I athletic departments. The semi-structured interview method also allowed us to revise the interview guides early on to ensure we could gather as much information from participants as possible (Bhalla et al., 2023). Through interpretive qualitative inquiry, conducting semi-structured interviews allowed us to better unpack participant answers to our questions depending on their interpretations of what was asked. Interviews were conducted via Zoom. After the two researchers completing interviews had each conducted one, they met to discuss thoughts on the interview guide, opting only for minor changes. Interview questions for the study included background questions such as "describe any educational training that you have completed that helps you to be successful within your job." and situational questions such as "recently there has been a push toward college athlete mental health. Can you describe what resources are available for college athletes in your department and do you feel these resources are adequate?" A full interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Participants

To participate in this study, individuals had to currently be working as an athletic academic advisor in an athletic department at the NCAA Division I level and at least 18 years of age. A total of 10 individuals participated in this study, nine of whom were women. Table 1 indicates the role, level of institution, sex, and master's education field. To promote personification of the participants, they were each assigned

a pseudonym. While research is split on the random assignment of pseudonyms, we chose this as participants consented to this study under the agreement of anonymity (Lahman et al., 2023).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant	Role	Sex	Education	Institution Type	Previous College Athlete
Lauren	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Mid-Major	Yes
Kevin	Athletic academic advisor	M	Sport	Mid-Major	Yes
Georgia	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Power 4	No
Mary	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Power 4	Yes
Elizabeth	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Power 4	No
Rebecca	Athletic academic advisor	F	Education	Power 4	Yes
Sarah	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Mid-Major	No
Carissa	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Power 4	Yes
Madison	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Mid-Major	No
Lucy	Athletic academic advisor/compliance	F	Sport	Mid-Major	Yes

Analysis

Audio files were saved directly to password protected personal devices from Zoom, in line with the IRB protocol. The audio files were then transcribed verbatim and formatted by the first author, who was conducting the analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun et al. (2023) was used to analyze the data. To begin, five transcripts were reviewed and coded by both interview conducting authors prior to a scholarly presentation. During this process, we were able to ensure that we had similar experiences and findings with our interviews and felt confident that one author could code the remainder of the interviews. Following the conference, the remainder of interviews were conducted, and the transcripts were coded by one author. The interviews were coded initially by the two authors who conceptualized the study to ensure the interview guide was appropriately designed to answer our research questions. As reflexive thematic analysis is interpretive in nature, the goal is

not to achieve quantitative measures like intercoder reliability (Byrne, 2021), and as such, once the authors were confident in the data collection from the interview guide, shifting to one coder was appropriate.

Reflexive thematic analysis was the most appropriate choice for this study as each researcher had significant experience with intercollegiate athletics and knowledge of academic advising. As such, the researchers were able to inform their interpretation of the data based on their theoretical assumptions and their prior experiences (Byrne, 2021). The specific process followed by the researchers involved: an initial step of coding where specific statements were copied into an excel file (Braun et al., 2023). Next, the codes were placed into groups of similar statements that generated initial themes. Themes were then adjusted to ensure they accurately represented the coded data, at this stage some themes were adjusted or removed (Braun et al., 2023). The authors then met to discuss the codes, some of which were refined for publication. For example, one participant stated, "Do they know where to find you? Are you easy to find? Are you available now?" This quote was copied verbatim as an In Vivo code into an Excel spreadsheet, coded with the word connections, and then shifted to other quotes specifically focused on availability. Availability is a sub-theme of Importance of Building Connections.

Trustworthiness

The section below outlines the four criteria of trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), highlighting how we applied each of these to our study.

Credibility

Through our time in the field, or working adjacent to the academic advising discipline, we developed strong knowledge of the challenges faced by these individuals allowing us to develop an informed research study. By engaging in reflexivity, we have been able to ensure we acknowledge any biases and preconceptions throughout the development and analysis process, offering credibility to our findings.

Transferability

The research context within this study is NCAA Division I. However, there are large discrepancies in the resources within Division I institutions. To combat this challenge, we were purposeful in our sampling, ensuring participants appropriately represented the different levels of resources within these athletic departments. As such, we used this information to guide our findings section, to better highlight to the reader the different contexts.

Dependability

Our methodology section covers the research process used to gather and understand the data shared below, including documenting the author involvement and reflexive activities such as a conference presentation, used to refine our final findings.

Confirmability

Within the methodology section we highlight research team meetings and involvement in the data collection and analysis processes. Within these meetings we were able to review our understanding of the data and discuss the implications of the findings. By having two researchers code the data we were able to confirm our understanding of the results was similar, and using the third author, an expert in the academic advising discipline, as a resource for contextualizing the results ensured we were appropriately applying the research findings.

Findings

The purpose of this study was two-pronged. First, we sought to identify the participant's experiences with handling college athletes' mental health. To do so, we explored how they use their role to enhance college student mental health. Our first set of findings falls under *Athlete Support Professionals and College Athlete Mental Health*. Within this section we cover themes of navigating athlete interactions and importance of building connections, with the sub-themes of fostering relationships, authentic conversations, and availability. The second goal of this study was to better understand the preparedness of athletic academic advisors to handle their role with college athlete mental health, more specifically, their educational background, access to ongoing education, and their perceptions of the role prior to starting and now that they have worked in the industry. We titled this section *Academic Advisors and Perceptions of the Role*. Within this section, we cover themes of lack of preparedness for the role, with sub-themes of balancing building connection and role responsibilities and work-life balance and comes with time with subthemes of learning on the fly and professional development and seeking support.

Athlete Support Professionals and College Athlete Mental Health

The following section shares how college athlete academic advisors use their roles to enhance the mental health of college athletes. Results showed how they navigate challenges with the information shared by athletes and recognize the critical role of building relationships with the athletes supported by the subthemes of authentic conversations, fostering relationships, and availability.

Navigating Athlete Interactions

Athletic academic advisors have an athlete-facing role, meaning these individuals have frequent interactions with college athletes. As such, navigating these interactions is critical to completing their role to the best of their abilities. Participants in the study were quick to acknowledge that building relationships with athletes is different from person to person in the length of time it takes and the information they are trusted with. Georgia shared,

I should have known, but maybe I wasn't sure I was going to be just thrown into student-athletes that are just so open and honest and will have a conversation in front of me. Where I'm pretty much a stranger starting off to them.

However, while Lucy agreed some athletes open up quickly, it can also take others much longer as reflected in her statement, "Men tend to hold back because of, you know, emotions and stigma around [their mental health]." When athletes do eventually open up, the conversations can consist of several different issues. Georgia expanded on her previous statement saying,

I don't think I was prepared for all the questions that I have gotten on all kinds of topics. But once I was in the role a little bit I was like, well I'm getting academic questions, I'm getting financial aid questions, I'm not that but if they're comfortable asking me then I can point them in the right direction to you know, get their answer.

Meanwhile, Carissa discussed an athlete who had a severe head injury playing their sport and how this injury impacted their academics. To mitigate the situation, Carissa engaged in conversations with the player about learning services available to them as well as discussed having conversations with the athlete about making sure they are treating their head injury with as much care as they would a physical injury.

Importance of Building Connections

Building connections with athletes was critical for participants in this study. Through a combination of authentic conversations, fostering relationships, and being available to athletes, participants felt they were best able to meet the needs of the athlete and successfully complete their job.

Fostering Relationships. Participants were quick to highlight the importance of developing relationships with their athletes but indicated the way to reach these athletes could change from person to person. For example, Lauren shared,

I have the highest touch point with most of our student-athletes, especially the ones that struggle academically, or are young or transfers. And so, for me it's really getting to know them and sometimes it takes three weeks, and sometimes it takes four months, and so that's different for every student.

This quote by Lauren indicated the journey to athletes feeling comfortable and opening up changes from person to person, possibly because the journey of each athlete is different. Georgia highlighted the sentiment that different people need to be reached in different ways, sharing,

I think a lot of it is the conversations too. I will say there's multiple ways of doing it. Most of our student-athletes may follow me on social media, and I'm okay with that on certain platforms. And I do promote and push out stuff about mental health and the power of it. I think it's one thing that you say it, but like, do they really see that you're meaning it? I'm very cognizant that I'm making sure I'm saying stuff publicly, because then they're like, wait, maybe I can go talk to her, even if they may not have had that conversation yet.

The participants above indicate various ways in which they foster relationships with student-athletes, acknowledging different students will be reached differently. However, Rebecca explained at their institution, it was important for them to use their role to foster relationships between the athletes and mental health professionals rather

than taking on that role themselves. Rebecca said, “First-year seminar is used to connect counselors to the student-athletes and build relationships” and elaborated that in their role they still “take the time to learn about each of the student-athletes and what their needs are.” However, when it came to mental health, fostering relationships with the hired professionals in the department could be beneficial for success.

Authentic Conversations. To build connections, participants emphasized the importance of having authentic conversations. For participants, authentic conversations occurred when they actively listened to the concerns of the athletes and helped them feel heard. They could show the athlete this sentiment by sharing their voices to upper administration:

I think one of our main roles, and it goes back to like what people don’t necessarily see on the outside of what an academic services or athlete development role within an athletic department is, is being there to truly and wholeheartedly support the student-athletes that we are working with. Some days that is making sure that their opinions and their thoughts/ideas are being heard by the people who have the kind of access that people in my position do and so my biggest hope is that there’s always an academic staff person and student-athlete development staff person that has a seat at those senior level administrator meetings and at the meetings with the head coaches, and that we’re present enough and courageous enough to be able to voice the concerns that we have or the ideas that we’ve heard on behalf of our student-athletes, so that their four- or five-year careers here are everything that they’ve wanted to be and that they’re able to accomplish everything they wanted. (Kevin)

The idea of supporting the athletes’ voice is shared by Lauren who stated, “But you hope with those developed relationships you are really advocating [so] that the student who’s sitting across from me at my desk has a voice.” These quotes highlight the role of advocacy that individuals in these positions take on due to the conversations they can have with college athletes.

Availability. Participants discussed being available for athletes when they needed their support. By being available, they found participants were more likely to contact them regarding issues they were having. Participants highlighted availability through late night conversations and weekend work:

I do check-in with my students. I FaceTime them, I call them. It’s one of those things where you’re developing that relationship and you want them to know that you care about them. And so sometimes that may look like getting a facetime or call at 9 PM because they’re struggling and want to talk about something. (Mary)

While Mary indicated she was available for calls late at night, Rebecca shared she will come in to work on the weekends to ensure athletes are able to get their work done.

I care about this position, and I want the best for everybody. So, does that mean me coming in the weekends and getting things done? For sure. Yeah, there’s Saturdays and Sundays, I don’t know, I give up my times on those

days. Come in and like work on things. But again, I know it's gonna help out in the long run. (Rebecca)

While both of these approaches differ in the availability they are offering the athletes, the goal remains the same, to provide them with the best chance of success in the long run.

Academic Advisors and Perceptions of the Role

Participants shared how their role is much larger than advising college athletes on their academics or preparing them for life after sport. The following section highlights a lack of preparedness for the activities of the position and their development in the position over time.

Lack of Preparedness for the Role

During the interviews, we explored participants' perceptions of their roles prior to entering the field and then what they have found their job to entail. Through this process we identified two key themes which were balancing building connections and role responsibilities, and work-life balance.

Balancing Building Connection and Role Responsibilities. Participants in this study were asked to discuss their initial expectations and their current experiences in the role. When asked about expectations of the job, participants were quick to share tasks such as "communicating students' progress in the classroom" (Kevin), and "making sure athletes were hitting the targets and dealing with coaches" (Lauren). However, when participants were asked about what their job actually entail, one explained,

A lot more interaction with other staff members other than just the coaches.

Daily communication with strength and conditioning and athletic trainers about dealing with student scheduling. (Lauren)

Meanwhile, Elizabeth discussed how she finds themselves in a position where she often need to motivate athletes to complete their work because their primary focus is sport, and they often just go through the motions to remain eligible. She further shared,

I think, prior to actually being in the field, I kind of had the mindset going in that people would value the work that I do. People would value what we're trying to have them accomplish. (Elizabeth)

Participants highlight their perceptions of the role were much more target oriented than relationship building; however, they have found building relationships with athletes and staff are critical to be successful in the role.

Work-life Balance. Previously, we highlighted how academic advisors use availability to connect with athletes and support their mental health. However, this same activity impacts the experiences of academic advisors. Participants indicate they are engaged in their role outside of typical work hours including over the weekend, like Rebecca who said, "Reporting and communicating with students even over the weekend to make sure they had everything completed."

Similarly, Carissa explained one of her duties is to travel with their teams and lead study hall on the road to ensure their athletes remain on top of their academics. Despite being a formalized duty, it extends significantly beyond working a typical work schedule. Lucy was the only participant to explicitly state knowledge of this not being a healthy approach sharing,

Yeah, I'm the kind of person that has not the most healthy approach, but I have an open door policy and I also have an open phone policy. I guess now like with that, there's stipulations. But I tell my students, "Need me? I'm always here."

While participants did not explicitly use the term work-life balance, significant amounts of research on college athletics indicates that employees are leaving the field due to the long, demanding hours. While the participants may not yet be at the point of burnout, their openness to working these hours (i.e., non-traditional hours, weekend work) indicate it is a likely outcome.

Comes with Time

For many of the participants, longevity in the role helped with their comfortability and ability to complete the job well. They were able to learn the necessary functional skills for their jobs, as well as become more confident in their positions. Through time in the role, these individuals were able to access external networks and participate in professional development activities which were found to be helpful for their careers.

Learning on the Fly. As evident by the findings above, athletic academic advisors are often unaware of the duties of their role when entering the field. In combination with this, these professionals also found themselves building deep relationships with the college athletes beyond their sport. Therefore, understanding the backgrounds of these individuals allows insight into their preparedness to deal with these factors. Our interview guide explicitly asked about the educational journey participants had taken revealing each participant in the study had completed a masters' degree, most commonly in sport studies with one participant completing their master's degree in education. Importantly, participants did not indicate their educational background had an impact on their ability to perform their role, rather often discussed how their time as graduate assistants or interns helped to prepare them for their career. For example, one participant illustrated how they were able to learn on the job during their internship year, learning directly from other individuals who had been in the field:

I really kind of started from the ground up. I think my internship really helped me a lot. I worked with [Professional at Division I Institution], who prior to that worked at [Power 4 institution]. So, she brought a lot of her programming from [Power 4 institution] to [Division I mid-major institution]. And my initial start date of at [Division I mid-major institution] was her first year so we were learning and operating together on that. [The internship] was just a great learning experience working alongside her, really getting to know this space and college athletics, and just like working at

different universities, too, and learning how they operate with their different systems, protocols, expectations, I think, really helps, too. (Rebecca)

Another participant highlighted using their graduate program to explore different roles within the athletic department, and settling on the academic advising position they moved into full-time post-graduation:

[During] my grad program I ended up becoming an assistant academic counselor, not only working with our men's basketball student-athletes, but a couple of other different teams, and that's where I found another passion, being able to mentor people to understand the value of an education and being able to pour into the lots of young athletes. I went the academics route because when you think about what is required of a student-athlete a lot of times, the academic piece is the requirement of being able to compete, and not much emphasis is put on the development side...But that's kinda my path to this role, just being able to fill in the gaps and being able to be a support system for student-athletes. (Mary)

Learning on the job is a big deal for those entering the athletic academic advising space. While participants all had a master's degree education level, the content of their programs was not cited as preparing them for success in the role.

Professional Development and Seeking Support. Given that advising is not a key topic learned about in sport study programs, we sought to understand how athletic academic advisors learn skills to ensure competence in the role. Therefore, we specifically asked about continuing education opportunities. All participants shared they have engaged with National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) webinars, NCAA conferences, or Women's Leaders in Sport conferences. However, the participants also shared how department support for these opportunities can be restricted. For example, Elizabeth shared, "The department sends half of the staff to the N4A conference one year and the other half of the staff the following year."

Meanwhile, Lauren and Kevin openly discussed how COVID increased their ability to attend these continuing education opportunities as the formats were shifted online. Participants emphasize the importance of these professional development opportunities in gaining leadership positions and keeping up with changing rules. Further, Madison explained she attend the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) – College Student Educators International, an organization they learned of when serving as a primary-role academic advisor prior to entering the athletics world where they are able to learn about current trends among college students, helpful for staying ahead of the curve with the athletes.

Discussion

The mental health of college athletes is a crucial topic that deserves deeper understanding. The purpose of this paper was to examine the role of the athletic academic advisor on college athlete mental health through the EST framework. From

our research, we identify there are a lack of meso-level interactions which could potentially negatively impact the overall culture of mental health in college athletics. First, we examined athletic academic advisors and their perceptions of handling mental health issues within their role with college athletes, including how they use their role to enhance college athlete mental health. The findings related to this question suggested athletes were willing to engage in honest and forthright conversations with these athlete support professionals, a positive finding as past research finds athletes are less likely to seek support surrounding mental health due to potential stigma (Chow et al., 2020; Wahto et al., 2016). Further, the participants suggested to gain the trust of athletes to share their experiences, they had to cultivate strong relationships with their college athletes.

Micro-level findings from our study emphasized participants focus on fostering relationships and authentic conversations to build a trustworthy environment for athletes to lean on the support staff. According to EST, micro-level relationships and interactions are critical to developing a supporting culture around mental health (Beasley et al., 2021b; Saxe et al. 2022). The athletic academic advisors emphasized the unique role they play in engaging with athletes differently from other athletic staff, such as coaches and athletic trainers. They also highlighted the importance of fostering a space where athletes feel comfortable having conversations beyond their sport. This is especially important as past research suggests athletes struggle to find outlets outside of sports, and stressors are enhanced in the competitive environment of college sports (Brewer et al., 2022). The relationship building was emphasized in various ways by participants, as different approaches were needed for different athletes. A key motivator for the participants to develop these relationships was to enhance the athlete's voice and comfortability. Recently, there has been a push in the athlete well-being literature to promote athlete voice and outside identities within their sporting experience and amongst their organizations (Brougham, 2024; Brougham & McLeod, 2023), especially considering organizational behavior literature suggests a connection between employee voice and improved well-being.

The participants in this study suggested building connections and fostering relationships ensures athletes feel valued as humans in the athletic department. Participants indicated they prioritized their relationships by going above and beyond for the athletes. Specifically, individuals talked about working outside of traditional working hours, including late night phone calls, office visits on weekends, and going on team travel trips. While this does pose challenges for academic advisors in their work-life balance, they highlighted the importance of being always available, which leads to more authentic and open dialogue with athletes, potentially helping break down the stigma of sharing mental health struggles. As Newman et al. (2015) suggested, once one feels comfortable and supported in various relationships (especially with MHP), they can start to discuss mental health struggles more openly. Interestingly, this finding also highlights the direct impact athletes can have on academic advisors. While we share academic advisors have a direct impact on athletes at the micro-system level, it is likely this is at least somewhat mutually beneficial given the additional hours without pay that academic advisors invest in their athletes.

While relationships between college athletes and the participants in the study are important, these individuals are not MHP, despite being seen by college athletes as trusting people to share challenges with, in confidence. In terms of using their role within the meso-system of EST, only one participant in the study talked about using their role to foster relationships with other resources within the department, specifically using meetings to introduce athletes to the department's mental health resources. This individual worked at a large Power 4 institution with a significant budget and investment in mental health resources. This might suggest a silo effect for athletic academic advisors as they struggled to build quality partnerships across their department, especially those focused on mental health resources. This is a troublesome finding, as they are vital to the "pulse" of the athlete population. Further research should examine the impact of "breaking trust" from the academic advisor. For example, an academic advisor has a duty of care to college athletes to connect them with proper MHP resources when an athlete expresses troublesome mental health rhetoric, which might create negative perceptions from college athletes of who they can trust, based on the continued stigma around seeking mental health support. This may challenge the positional framing of the academic advisor as a support system to athletes.

The role of academic advisor becomes interesting when put in the context EST, as "trust" and collaboration (meso-level system), might be a challenging balance. For example, past works suggest that referrals are the best way for MHPs to properly serve college athletes (Beasley et al., 2021a). With the continued stigma associated with seeking mental health resources (especially in athletic departments without a culture of support), college athletes might view meso-level systems (relationship between athletic academic advisor and MHP) as breaking the trust of their relationships. Thus, challenging the role of meso-level systems in college athletics. It has been shown that the meso-level systems are vital to supporting college athletes (Saxe et al., 2022); however, how this collaboration is executed in the context of athletic academic advisors will need to be explored further to examine how the meso-level system relationship between athletic academic advisor and athlete might be damaged.

The second goal of this study was to better understand the preparedness of individuals for the roles of athletic academic advisor in college athletics by understanding their educational background, access to ongoing education, and perceptions of the role both prior to starting and after they have worked in the industry. The results from this study suggest a disconnect between expectations and reality for participants, with the role being much more human-facing than anticipated (Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018). For the participants, success in this role came from learning on the job. They expressed a lack of concerted effort from athletic departments in their orientation phase and transition, potentially leading to some of the disconnects. This is especially true when resources pertaining to mental health concerns from athletes.

If this is a student-facing role in athletic departments, leadership must emphasize the importance of handling athletes' mental health more in the interview process and provide resources to ensure the staff are well educated and prepared to do so.

This speaks to the meso-level system and how athletic departments are collaborating across systems to provide the utmost support for athletes. With the growing number of MHPs being hired directly into athletic departments, the only way to create a culture of inclusivity surrounding mental health is for micro-level actors to buy into this culture, a good example of a starting point, is the academic advisor role.

Participants also explained how continuing education was important to be successful in the role. Individuals achieved this through joining webinars and attending conferences from various other organizations/entities. During this process they were able to learn about topics specifically related to mental health, minority groups, and other timely topics such as completing their role through a pandemic. The opportunity to engage in continuing education was made easier for participants during the pandemic as they were able to join free webinars, rather than travel to conferences, which athletic departments only sometimes supported. As participants have suggested a lack of knowledge about the role prior to entering the career field, being able to engage in continuing education programming is critical to enhancing the mental health of college athletes. Despite this, the support from athletic departments appeared to be lacking.

While the level of care from these individuals is apparent, these behaviors raise several concerns, including work-life balance. Research has indicated employees within intercollegiate athletics have poor work-life balance, and therefore high levels of burnout (Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018; Taylor et al., 2019). These behaviors continue despite no relationship being found between work hours and program success for coaches and administrators (Huml et al., 2024). This seems especially true for the athletic academic advisor. These roles have morphed into more than just academic and career support, with the relationship between these professionals and college athletes becoming more ingrained in mentorship and guidance (Thompson, 2013). While this level of support for athletes is critical, we argue this falls outside the scope of the role, as currently outlined in the role responsibilities, evident by the lack of understanding by participants on what is actually required to be successful in the role.

Overall, the findings of this research suggest that while athletic academic advisors are aware of meso-systems within the athletic department, they rely on micro-systems as outlined by EST. It is possible that due to the expectations placed on athletic academic advisors, they feel the most effective way to ensure success is to focus on their independent relationships with the athletes especially given they are well positioned in the athletic department to have conversations surrounding the burden of college athlete mental health issues. However, findings also suggested these individuals lack the proper training to handle these conversations and while they learn on the job and engage in various professional development opportunities, they face a challenging balancing act. This finding sheds light on college athletic departments failing to address the meso-system and collaboration that is needed for a culture of mental health support. They have to hold athletes accountable in their academic endeavors, career development, and skill-building, while also trying to develop and maintain quality relationships. This study sheds light on the challenging position our current system puts on athlete support professionals. Furthermore, the

findings of this study suggest a shift in the training these individuals receive when entering the career could have positive impacts on their success both professionally and personally.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study indicate a significant area for athletic departments to invest in. The roles of athletic academic advisors are critical to the growth experiences of college athletes and fostering their mental health. Despite this, these individuals often enter the role with little knowledge of the field and face a lack of support from the athletic department. Immediate changes for athletic departments can include better onboarding processes that educate individuals on the role, expectations, and policies in place to be successful in the role. It should also include a more robust collaboration (meso-level) process between multiple groups in athletics. Most specifically, athletic academic advisors and MHPs. As Beasley et al. (2021a) found, MHPs in college athletics struggle for referrals, with the athletic academic advisor self-identified role to foster positive relationships with athletes, they represent a quality group to collaborate with MHPs for more referrals.

Athletic academic advisors engage with ongoing education to be able to better complete their role; however, they found this much easier during the pandemic, suggesting a gap for sport organizations focused on this space to create engaging online programming for these individuals. Individuals indicated ongoing education had limited support from the athletic department and was often sought out in their own time and therefore, athletic departments should incentivize and provide time and compensation for completion of this programming.

While beyond the scope of this study, it is important to outline the impact of the House settlement on athletic department's structure. Since the official adoption of the House settlement on July 1, 2025, there have been increases in layoffs amongst college athletics staff (Shelton, 2025). A challenge for athlete development staff is the lack of evidence for return on investment (ROI) with their jobs, making this critical to this study as these positions can be quickly reduced. Athletic academic advisors are often situated alongside student-athlete development staff in the same unit, leading to a shifting of roles, potentially directing advisors to take on more holistic athlete development responsibilities. The shifting landscape of college athletics will not be understood for many years, but continuing to monitor the well-being of academic athletic advisors should become important for athletic administrators in the new era of college athletics.

Athletic departments can partner with campus counseling centers to offer training to staff. In addition, they can organize and offer trainings like Mental Health First Aid and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST; Gross et al., 2020). Further, Gross et al. (2020) introduced a Mental Health Toolbox to provide a one-page resource which helps practitioners start conversations about mental health with college athletes. Lastly, for athletic departments with in-house MHP, there should be intentional collaboration and the exchange of ideas amongst MHP and the athletic academic and athlete development staff.

Improving collaboration between departments within athletics could improve the mental health of college athletes by ensuring they receive the support they need from individuals trained to provide it. Additionally, by enhancing these measures, athletic departments could reduce the emotional labor placed on college athletics academic advisors who feel responsible for supporting college athletes, including outside of standard working hours. Doing so could help to improve these individuals' work-life balance, and encourage their longevity in the role.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focused on Division I athletic departments across Power 4 and mid-major, and non-football institutions. Doing so allowed us to speak with professionals in athletic departments with a wide range of financial support. However, the experiences of those in NCAA Division I athletic departments is not always representative of NCAA Division II and III, therefore additional research should be conducted at those levels. Additionally, the findings of this research are eye-opening to understand the athletic academic advisor perspectives; however, completing surveys using these findings with a larger number of professionals could provide more quantitative insights that can better enhance the understanding of trends within the role, leading to generalizability of the findings. Given these professionals also have taken on additional duties related to helping athletes with name, image, and likeness (NIL) deals and excessive transcript evaluations for transfer students as a result of the transfer portal, further exploration of their roles and influence on students' well-being is warranted.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of athletic academic advisors in their roles supporting the mental health of college athletes. Our findings illuminate the fact that these athlete support professionals are a valuable asset to college athletes, but more attention should be paid to the training of these individuals, along with the potential long-term burnout effects of the role. Our work contributes to the mental health and college athlete literature by exploring the athletic academic advisors' role in the well-being of college athletes. We find the need to reassess the role of these professionals in the college athletics landscape is far overdue. The hope of this study is to sharpen focus on the shifting needs of college athletes to better support athletic academic advisors in their roles supporting the next generation of college athletes.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Describe your journey into your position within athletics. (RQ2)
 - a. Probe: previous college athlete? Years of experience?
2. Describe any educational training that you have completed that helps you to be successful within your job. (RQ2)
 - a. Probe: undergraduate or master's degree, NACDA training sessions.
3. Describe what you thought would be the main roles of your job prior to starting. (RQ2)
4. Describe what you think the main roles of your job are. (RQ2)
 - a. Probe: Explain the disconnect in your responses.
5. Recently, there has been a push toward college athlete mental health. Can you describe what resources are available for college athletes in your department and do you feel these resources are adequate? (RQ1&2)
6. As a college athlete academic advisor, you interact more often with the college athletes than many other people in the department. Explain how you ensure that you use your position to amplify college athlete wellness. (RQ1)
7. Describe your vision for college athlete mental health and well-being. How does your role in academics or development play into that vision? (RQ1)