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Evaluator or Partner? An examination of the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach in NCAA Division I athletics

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The relationship between the sport supervisor and head coach is a critical dyadic relationship within NCAA Division I athletics. The purpose of this study was to explore how the sport supervisor/head coach relationship is perceived by both NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches utilizing the leader-member exchange theory. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach sport supervisors and head coaches from NCAA Division I institutions were interviewed. Findings affirmed sport supervisors serve as critical mediators in athletic departments and can shape the department's internal climate through their relationships with head coaches. This study found trust to be foundational to high quality relationships between head coaches and sport supervisors. However, sport supervisors and head coaches have different perspectives on what builds a high-quality relationship outside of trust. Head coaches desire sport supervisors who show care and investment in the sport program and head coach and who are intentionally present (emotionally and physically). Sport supervisors desire head coaches to be transparent to build the trust and create a true partnership. This study elucidates critical needs of each party to nurture a successful relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach in NCAA Division I athletics.

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Numerous relationships exist within the context of sport organizations: coach/athlete (Caliskan, 2015; Case, 1998; Cranmer, 2016; Cranmer & Myers, 2015), head coach/assistant coach (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004), administrator/staff relationship (Kent & Chelladurai, 2001), coach/parent (Santos et al., 2024), and board chairs and volunteer board members (Bang, 2011, 2013; Hoye, 2004, 2006). Research suggests the quality of the relationship between two individuals, known as a dyad, can influence multiple factors for the pair including job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational commitment (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Epitropaki & Martin, 2016; Gerstner & Day, 1997). College athletic departments model several of these relationships, but also one that is unique – the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach.

The title of sport supervisor – sometimes referred to as sport administrator – is an added role given to intercollegiate athletic administrators by athletic directors that implies a level of administrative leadership and oversight to an assigned sport team or teams. It is more common for mid- to senior-level athletic administrators to hold this role in addition to the tasks associated with their formal titles and primary roles (e.g., associate athletic director of marketing, assistant athletic director for strategy and innovation, senior associate athletic director for finance and operation). Furthermore, as they are situated within the organizational structure, athletic administrators who serve as sport supervisors also act as conduits connecting the athletic director with the individual sport teams (Green & Hancock, 2023).

Prior research has noted the complexities of the role of the sport supervisor within the organizational structure of intercollegiate athletics (Green & Hancock, 2023) as the role has no formal recognition by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) or consistency from institution to institution. In fact, current and former sport supervisors describe the role as a “sink or swim” experience (LEAD1 Association, 2019). Additionally, sport supervisors have acknowledged they are, in fact, middle managers, serving as key organizational connectors within the athletic department but without the full authority for decision making (Green & Hancock, 2023).

While the role of the sport supervisor is undoubtedly important to coaches and, thus, athletic departments, it is also very loosely defined by the college sport enterprise. Previous research on sport supervisors has aimed to bring clarity to the role by defining the role as one “held by athletic administrators whose function is to be a partner with the head coach by providing support, advocacy, and oversight and evaluation of the program(s) they supervise” (Green & Hancock, 2023, p. 575). The language in this definition suggests the existence of a partnership between the sport supervisor and head coach; however, little is known about the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach or how the relationship affects the dyad (i.e., coach and sport supervisor) and performance. Furthermore, Welty Peachey et al. (2015) noted coaches and athletes have a unique influence on the leadership process; however, they failed to consider another important internal stakeholder, the sport supervisor. This study responds to the call to action from previous research (i.e., Welty

Peachy et al., 2015) to further understand the relationship or partnership between the sport supervisor and the head coach.

While most leadership studies in intercollegiate athletics have focused on athletic directors (Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Hardin et al., 2013; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Welty Peachey & Burton, 2011; Whisenant et al., 2002) and coaches (Kim & Andrew, 2015; Turner & Chelladurai, 2005), middle management roles and relationships like those of a sport supervisor and head coach have yet to be explored. Interestingly, middle managers in other industry sectors, like business and higher education, have been studied extensively. Research in these areas have found middle managers influence multiple functions of organizations including organizational strategy (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Van Rensburg, et al., 2014), knowledge integration and transfer (Costanzo & Tzoumpa, 2008), emotional support (Huy, 2002), and idea generation (Dutton et al., 1997; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992, 1997; Mondt & Martyn, 2023; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). Thus, it is important to look at the relationship of sport supervisors and coaches to (a) understand the relationship, and (b) consider how the quality of the relationship may affect people and organizational functions. As such, this study employed leader-member exchange theory as a framework to explore and understand the relationship between sport supervisors and head coaches.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory provides a framework to understand the relationship, not just the interaction, between the leader/supervisor and the member/follower. LMX research has shown individuals involved in a high-quality dyad have high levels of trust, mutual obligation, and respect; whereas low-quality dyads are absent of trust, mutual obligation, respect, and hinder the follower's experience in the organization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how the relationship between the head coach and sport supervisor is perceived by both NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches. As such, two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do sport supervisors perceive the relationship between themselves and the head coaches they supervise?

RQ2: How do head coaches perceive the relationship between themselves and their assigned sport supervisor?

Literature Review

Leader-member exchange (LMX) suggests that supervisors create differentiated relationships with their followers (Dansereau et al., 1975). LMX also argues the relationship a supervisor builds with a follower affects not just the follower, but also the organization's performance (Dansereau et al.). LMX derived from role theory, which identified the exchange of expectations and behaviors between dyadic members in a role set. For the purposes of this study, the role set is the sport supervisor and head coach. While role theory focuses on the expectations and behaviors of the individuals, LMX is centered around the social exchange, or interactions, of the leader/follower dyad (Graen, Novak, et al., 1982; Graen & Scandura, 1987). To explore

the social exchange of the sport supervisor and head coach, this study examined the process of LMX through the Leadership Making Model (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The Leadership Making Model is a descriptive, practical approach to understanding how supervisors may work with each follower. Where other leadership models take a leader-centric *or* follower-centric perspective, LMX illustrates the process that links the leader and the follower with a focus on the social exchange between the two parties (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). The Leadership Making Model considers the supervisor-subordinate dyad from a partnership perspective. Instead of focusing on how a supervisor builds differentiated relationships, which was the focus of early LMX literature (Dansereau et al., 1975), the Leadership Making Model focuses on the process each supervisor can take to build an effective relationship with each follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Graen and Uhl-Bien believed supervisors should want to develop a high-quality relationship with all subordinates. Thus, supervisors should provide the initial offer of a high-quality relationship to each of their subordinates.

The Leadership Making Model (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) is comprised of three stages: (1) the “stranger” phase, (2) the “acquaintance” phase, and (3) the “mature partnership” phase. In the “stranger” phase, the interactions between the supervisor and the follower are transactional in nature. The focus is on the job and tasks and what the follower needs from the supervisor to be successful. This initial interaction is the first test in building trust, respect, and mutual obligation between the supervisor and the follower. If a level of trust, respect, and obligation is evident in the stranger phase, the relationship can move to the “acquaintance” phase. In this phase, either the supervisor or the follower makes an “offer” to the other member of the dyad for a deeper working relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien). During the “acquaintance” phase, the interactions become less transactional as the interactions begin to focus on both work and personal inquiries. Additionally, the overall number of social interactions increases between the two members (Graen & Uhl-Bien). During this phase, the trust, respect, and obligation between the two members increases as they begin to share more information with one another. The “acquaintance” phase sees the member’s levels of trust increase through the different psychological exchanges occurring in the give-and-take of the relationship (Graen & Scandura, 1987). If said trust is broken, the relationship can stay in the “acquaintance” phase or, resort back to the “stranger” phase until/if the trust is rebuilt. The leader-follower relationship can move to the third and final stage, a “mature partnership” when the members move away from individual role-making to team-making showcased by a high level of trust and influence. Members in this stage of the relationship are true partners. These are highly developed relationships where both members share a high level of mutual respect, trust, and obligation for each other and the relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As noted by Graen and Uhl-Bien, “in partnership relationships, the potential for incremental influence is nearly unlimited, due to the enormous breadth and depth of exchange of work-related social contributions that are possible” (p. 232). Through this process, the supervisor and follower move into a true partnership filled with support, encouragement, honesty, and mutual reciprocal influence (Graen & Uhl-Bien).

The mutual reciprocal influence allows the dyad to rotate the leadership role as the members look to accomplish common goals (Graen & Uhl-Bien). Additionally, the hierarchical nature of the relationship diminishes as the relationship becomes more of a peer-to-peer relationship.

Because the purpose of this study is to examine the perception of the relationship between NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches, the focus is on how sport supervisors and head coaches interact to build their partnership. Still, LMX research suggests there are several factors and outcomes that can impact the quality of the relationship between the supervisor and follower.

Factors affecting LMX

High-quality dyadic relationships are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). However, for the dyad to develop these characteristics, specific factors related to both the supervisor and the follower—as well as the quality of their interaction—must be present (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). For example, early studies in LMX discovered specific factors of high-quality exchange relationships (Graen, 1976; Graen, Liden, et al., 1982; Graen & Schiemann, 1978). In a meta-analysis of antecedents and consequences of LMX, Dulebohn et al. (2012) identified follower and supervisor characteristics, as well as interpersonal relationship characteristics that affect high-quality exchange relationships. The follower characteristics are: (a) competence, (b) agreeableness, (c) conscientiousness, (d) extraversion, (e) neuroticism, (f) openness, (g) positive and negative affectivity, and (i) locus of control. Conversely, the supervisor characteristics identified are: (a) supervisor's expectations of followers, (b) contingent reward behavior, (c) transformational leadership, (d) extraversion and (e) agreeableness. Furthermore, the following seven interpersonal relationship factors were identified: (a) perceived similarity, (b) affect/liking, (c) ingratiation (supervisor reported), (d) ingratiation (follower reported), (e) self-promotion, (f) assertiveness, and (g) leader trust. While the identification of factors affecting LMX have been examined quantitatively, such examination tells us little about the actual human experience; therefore, it is essential to understand the outcomes these factors influence (Table 1).

Outcomes Associated with LMX

LMX posits that, “the quality of the relationship that develops between a leader and a follower is predictive of outcomes at the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis” (Gerstner & Day, 1997, p. 827). Therefore, much of the research on LMX has focused on the relationship between LMX and outcomes (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Epitropaki & Martin, 2016). The outcomes examined in the LMX literature include (a) behavioral (Dulebohn et al., 2012), (b) attitudinal (Epitropaki & Martin, 2016; Gerstner & Day, 1997), (c) role status (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen, Novak, et al., 1982) and (d) perceptual measures (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Continuing to follow the framework provided by the meta-analysis completed by Dulebohn et al. (2012), these outcomes are relevant to understanding the relationship between

the sport supervisor and head coach and the relationship's effect on outcomes, like organizational success. Table 1 provides a summary of the LMX determinants and outcomes found in previous research.

LMX in Sport

LMX has been used as a framework in the context of sport organizations to explain some of the dyadic relationships that exist within the sport environment - coach/athlete (Caliskan, 2015; Case, 1998; Cranmer, 2016; Cranmer & Myers, 2015), head coach/assistant coach (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004), administrator/staff (Kent & Chelladurai, 2001; Mondt & Martyn, 2023), and the relationship between board chairs and volunteer board members (Bang, 2011, 2013; Hoye, 2004, 2006). Research on each of these dyads within the sport context has illuminated the importance of high-quality relationships for members of the dyad and for organizational performance. Coaches who provide emotional support and reciprocal communication strategies build higher quality LMX relationships with their players (Cranmer, 2016; Cranmer & Myers, 2015). While athletes with high-quality LMX relationships with their coach also indicate stronger relationships with their teammates (Cranmer & Myers, 2015). Similarly, a high-quality LMX relationship between the head coach and assistant coach positively affects the job and career satisfaction of the assistant coach (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). Further demonstrating the value of high-quality relationships, high-quality LMX relationships between athletic directors and middle managers (e.g., assistant or associate athletic directors) not only have a positive effect for the middle managers but for their direct reports (Kent & Chelladurai, 2001). Additionally, for intercollegiate athletic employees, a high-quality relationship increases the employee's organizational creativity, which provides the employee with greater access to resources and a freedom to innovate (Mondt & Martyn, 2023). As evidenced from previous studies, high quality relationships within the sport industry have a direct positive effect on members of the dyad and the organization. However, there is a lack of understanding of how high-quality relationships are developed, especially from the perspective of both supervisors and followers. Utilizing a unique and integral dyad within intercollegiate athletics, this study aims to explore how the relationship between the head coach and sport supervisor is perceived by both the sport supervisor and head coach to illuminate findings for an important dyad in the intercollegiate sport industry.

Table 1: *Summary of LMX Determinants and Outcomes*

Dyad Member	Characteristics/Outcomes
Supervisor Characteristics	Supervisor’s expectations of followers Contingent reward behavior Transformational leadership Extraversion Agreeableness
Follower Characteristics	Competence Agreeableness Conscientiousness Extraversion Neuroticism Openness Positive affectivity Negative affectivity Locus of Control
Interpersonal Characteristics	Perceived similarity Affect/Liking Ingratiation (supervisor reported) Ingratiation (follower reported) Self-promotion Assertiveness Leader trust
Outcomes	Behavioral Attitudinal Role status Perceptual measures

Method

As the purpose of this study is to examine the perception of the relationship between NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches from the perspective of both parties, this study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA; Smith & Nizza, 2021) to understand relationships through the lived experiences of the individuals in the dyad (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). As a qualitative methodology, IPA is rooted in the understanding that reality is socially constructed and emphasizes how people make sense of their lives, actions, and environments (Smith & Nizza, 2021). IPA allows the participant to interpret and describe one’s experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2021), while also capturing the highly significant and complex perceptions of the

relationship for each member of the dyad (Glesne, 2016). Furthermore, IPA recognizes experiences are situated within social and cultural contexts, which influence the participant (Smith & Nizza, 2021). In this study, IPA allows for the exploration of the complexity of the sport supervisor role and coaching relationship as it is situated within the intercollegiate athletic department. The research team analyzed the data through a social constructivist epistemology in which knowledge and meaning are formed through social interaction and cultural mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, the sport supervisor–coach relationship is understood as a relational reality co-constructed through shared dialogue, practices, and organizational norms. This aligns with IPA’s emphasis on how individuals make sense of their experiences within their sociocultural context (Smith & Nizza, 2021).

Positionality Statement

Both members of the research team have worked in intercollegiate athletic administration and have seen first-hand the interactions of the coach-sport supervisor relationship. Additionally, one member of the research team has a spouse that is a head coach at the Division I level; as such, this researcher has an intimate understanding of the dynamic that is the coach-sport supervisor relationship. The other research team member serves on the athletics board and offers coaching sessions and professional development workshops for athletic administrators, which also include sport supervisors. The professional and personal experiences and observations of the research team were both impetus for the research.

Participant Sample

The study population consisted of sport supervisors and head coaches at NCAA Division I institutions. IPA emphasizes small, purposive samples to allow for individual meaning making (Smith & Nizza, 2021). Accordingly, the research team used criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in combination with snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019) to identify participants who met the study criteria and to expand the sample through the participants’ and researchers’ professional networks. Criterion sampling ensured that all individuals met specific characteristics relevant to the research purpose (Creswell & Poth, 2018): participants had to be either (a) current sport supervisors—athletic administrators formally designated as supervising one or more NCAA Division I sport programs—or (b) current NCAA Division I head coaches listed as head coaches on their department staff directory.

Data Collection

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval for the study, emails were sent to a random selection of individuals located on departmental websites that met the criteria for the study and to professional contacts of the first author. Follow-up emails were sent two weeks later. A total of 22 participants (11 sport supervisors and 11 head coaches) from various NCAA Division I institutions participated in the study (see Tables 2 and 3).

Sport supervisors and head coaches participated in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to understand the experience from the interviewees' point of view, thus bringing meaning and understanding to their own experiences and as it relates to others (Kvale, 1996). Before beginning the study, a pilot study with a former sport supervisor and a former head coach were conducted. Minor edits were made to the interview protocol based on recommendations by the pilot study participants. The interview questions were developed from the leader-member exchange theory literature and adapted for the role of the sport supervisor and head coach, respectively. Example interview questions for sport supervisors included the following: (a) in one word, describe your relationship with the head coach(es) you supervise (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hoyer, 2006); (b) in your role as a sport supervisor, what are the most helpful behaviors a coach can display to build an effective relationship with you? (Dulebohn et al., 2012); (c) do you consider you and your current head coach to have similar interests, values, and attitudes (Dulebohn et al., 2012)? Interview questions for head coaches sought to understand the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach. Questions included the following: (a) in one or two words, what is your relationship with your sport supervisor based? (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hoyer, 2006); (b) do you consider you and your sport supervisor to have similar interests, values, and attitudes? (Dulebohn et al., 2012); (c) how does your sport supervisor provide feedback to you? (Dulebohn et al.). Each interview was conducted via a video teleconferencing platform or via phone and lasted 40 to 80 minutes. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed.

Data Analysis

The interpretive phenomenological approach allows for the use of existing theory in data analysis, while also offering flexibility for new concepts to emerge (Smith & Nizza, 2021). Thus, the research team utilized both deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding, also known as a prior coding, is the development of codes before data collection typically from previous literature (Miles et al., 2020). In keeping with IPA (Smith & Nizza, 2021), the research team served as active interpreters throughout the coding process, working to understand how sport supervisors and head coaches made sense of their relational experiences. Each researcher independently conducted first-cycle coding to remain close to the participants' words and capture nuances specific to the sport supervisor-coach dyad. As such, the research team used "in vivo" coding through the first cycle coding phase (Saldaña, 2016). The team then met to compare interpretations, interrogate assumptions, and reconcile differences, recognizing that IPA involves a double hermeneutic—the researchers making sense of participants who are themselves making sense of their relationships (Smith & Nizza, 2021). During second-cycle coding, the team collaboratively organized codes into broader categories and themes, using reflexive dialogue to ensure interpretations remained grounded in the lived realities of NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches rather than researchers' prior knowledge of intercollegiate athletics (Saldaña, 2016; Smith & Nizza, 2021).

Themes were identified for each participant group – sport supervisor and head coach – as well as themes that converged across both groups (Smith & Nizza, 2021). Specific self-reported demographic information was collected from each participant (see Tables 2 and 3) to better understand the sample. This data included the participant's formal title, institution, years working in the intercollegiate athletics industry, years in current role, years served as a sport supervisor or head coach, gender, and race.

Trustworthiness

Interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2021). In this study, the experiences and perceptions of the relationships between sport supervisors and head coaches were examined from the perspective of both groups. To enhance credibility, the researchers employed triangulation by corroborating perspectives across and within participant groups, conducting member checks, and engaging in regular research team debriefs (Glesne, 2016). The findings were interpreted through the lens of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory to support both confirmability and dependability. Additionally, transferability was addressed through purposive criterion sampling, the use of rich, thick descriptions, and member checking (Glesne, 2016). As a result, the findings may be transferable to individuals in similar roles who may recognize and relate to the experiences shared in this study.

Table 2: *Sport Supervisor Participants*

Pseudonym	Title	Job	Revenue/ Non-Revenue	Years in Cur- rent Posi- tion	Years as a Sport Super- visor	Years at Current Institu- tion	Years in college sports	Gen- der	Race
Sandy	Senior Associate AD	Strategic Affairs	Non-Revenue	0-2 years	15	12	26	F	W
Peyton	Executive Senior Associate Athletics Director	External Affairs	Non-Revenue	16 - 20 years	9	19	24	M	W
Andrea	Deputy Athletics Director	Internal Affairs	Revenue & Priority	10 - 15 years	14	14	24	F	AA
Virginia	Senior Associate AD	External Affairs - Development	Non-Revenue	3 - 5 years	4 as primary/ 3 as secondary	4	13	F	W
Rexton	Deputy Athletic Director	Internal & External Affairs	Non-Revenue	3 - 5 years	20	3.5	33	M	W
Sarah	Senior Associate Athletic Director	Internal Affairs	Non-Revenue	3 - 5 years	3	3	8	F	B
Linda	Deputy Athletic Director/ SWA	Internal Affairs	Revenue & Non-Revenue	0	12	20.5	20.5	F	W
Sheldon	Chief Financial Officer	Finance	Non-Revenue	3 - 5 years	4	7	9	M	W
Dave	Deputy Director of Athletics and CFO	Finance	Non-Revenue	20+ years	16	25	30	M	W
Paula	Chief of Staff/ Sr. Associate Athletics Director	Internal Affairs	Tier I & 2	10 - 15 years	18	12	20	F	W
Marlon	Deputy Director of Athletics	Finance & External Affairs	Priority	0 - 2 years	14	8 months	14 years	M	B

Table 3: *Head Coach Participants*

Pseudonym	Sport	Gender	Race	Revenue/ Non-Revenue	Years in Current Position	Years with Current Sport Su- pervisor	Sport Super- visor Gender	Sport Super- visor Race
Charlene	Women's Basketball	F	B	Revenue	2	2	F	W
Jeff	Men's Soccer	M	W	Non-Revenue	2	1	M	W
William	Women's Soccer	M	W	Non-Revenue	8	2	F	W
Samantha	Women's Volleyball	F	W	Non-Revenue	5	2	F	W
Heather	Softball	F	W	Non-Revenue (Priority Sport)	10	1	F	W
Matt	Football	M	W	Revenue	1	5 months	M	W
Brad	Men's Soccer	M	W	Non-Revenue	3	5 months	F	W
Duncan	Rifle	M	W	Non-Revenue	16	2	M	W
Lamar	Men's Soccer	M	W	Non-Revenue	4	3	M	W
Sally	Field Hockey	F	W	Non-Revenue	3	3	F	W
Rachel	Women's Basketball	F	B	Revenue	2	2	F	W

Findings

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory provides a valuable framework for examining the relationship between supervisors and followers, particularly in the context of NCAA Division I athletics. The contrasting perspectives of sport supervisors and head coaches on what constitutes a high-quality relationship underscore the complexity and nuance of their professional interactions. From the analysis, 6 distinct themes were constructed (see Table 4). Notably, only one theme – trust – was commonly identified by all participants. Sport supervisors contributed one additional unique theme, while head coaches identified four additional themes—two of which were associated with characteristics of low-quality relationships. A discussion of each theme is presented below in table 4.

Table 4: *Head Coach/Sport Supervisor Relationship Themes*

Type of Relationship (Dyad Perspective)	Theme #1	Theme #2	Theme #3
High Quality Relationships (Coach's Perspective)	Trust	Overall care and investment in the program	Intentional presence
High Quality Relationships (Sport Supervisor's Perspective)	Trust	Transparency	
Low-Quality Relationship (Coach's Perspective)	Lack of Presence	Evaluative Focus	

Trust (Shared)

Trust emerged as a shared theme for both sport supervisors and head coaches. Nine out of the 11 sport supervisors interviewed identified trust when asked about the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach. Ten out of the 11 head coaches indicated trust between themselves and the sport supervisor as imperative for a high-quality relationship.

From the sport supervisor perspective, Virginia noted, "I think my [sport] coach trusts me, because he knows that I really care." Dave described the relationship and the importance of trust by stating,

you have to develop trust... she [head coach] has to trust that I don't have any ulterior motives, she has to trust that I'm going to have the best interests of her staff and the student athletes. She has to trust that if there's something wrong with the program, and there's a problem, I'm going to tell her.

Similarly, Linda expressed how sport supervisors build trust with their coaches by matching their actions with their words. She stated,

showing integrity... coming through on what you say you're going to do. And then if you said you were going to do something and then it can't happen for some reason, or it changes, going in yourself and saying, 'Hey, I wanted to let you know I said this. But now it's this and I apologize if I misled you or I misspoke. I wasn't aware of the circumstances or circumstances change.' I think that's in the onus of building trust.

Linda also acknowledged that it is important for a sport supervisor to be vulnerable with a head coach to build trust in the relationship. She shared, "Letting [coaches] get to know you, being a little vulnerable, you got to open up a little bit." Sport supervisors acknowledged they must show trustworthy behavior (i.e., doing what you say you will do), in addition to head coaches showing trust in the expertise of the sport supervisor.

Similarly, from a head coach's perspective, Brad described the evolution of his relationship. He noted, "It took me a while to build that trust with him." Now Brad feels the trust he and his sport supervisor have built allow for more open conversa-

tion and feedback. Brad expressed, “we both have zero inhibitions when we walk in the room and have a conversation.” Charlene echoed the sentiment of creating safety and transparency to build trust in describing how her and her sport supervisor, each of whom are of different racial backgrounds, were able to build trust in their relationship early on through conversations about social justice:

... she mentioned a few times that she just had never had a person that she can just talk and not feel like, there’s no judgment with us, or just like a complete judgment free zone. You might say something maybe, comes out wrong, but we both have built that relationship where it can come out wrong, and we can still finish the conversation and say why it was wrong.

Or say why you should say it differently, and it’s been a cool relationship.

When sport supervisors are willing to be vulnerable with their head coaches, they can build the trust and develop high-quality relationships that are true partnerships. As Charlene noted, “I didn’t anticipate the type of relationship that [sport supervisor] and I were able to build, you know, honestly, just in terms of like a working relationship, but then also a friendship in a lot of ways.”

Conversely, considering what they desired in a relationship with their sport supervisor, Lamar and Rachel both gave examples of how they wish they had more trust in their relationship with their sport supervisor. Lamar hopes for “the trust that I could say anything and it’s not going to effect the future of my job here.” While Rachel shared, “I’ll just say for my part that lack of trust comes from the understanding of what I feel like I’m up against, and you know, the I think, the benefit of the doubt is not always given to me if that makes sense.”

Sport supervision is an integral component of the coaches’ success and, thus, the success of the athletic department. When trust is present and felt by both parties, the parties experience a sense of support and safety to foster a healthy and effective partnership.

Transparency (Sport Supervisors)

Sport supervisors identified transparency as critical to building a high-quality relationship. Marlon noted that without transparency from his head coaches he cannot adequately advocate or support them. He stated,

So, if our job is to support and protect and be a resource, you’re better off keeping me updated on issues. Because if you don’t, and I’m surprised by something that’s 100% on you, and I can’t go to bat for you. I can’t help you navigate how to handle those situations.

Sarah shared a similar sentiment,

I can advocate for you better if I know what’s going on. I have a lot of meetings where [sports] come up, and I don’t know where your position is on things then you’re at a disadvantage because I’m missing an opportunity to speak up for you...But I think that just being open to the sport supervisor in that way is a helpful behavior and mindset of a head coach in order to build the most effective relationship.

Linda echoed the importance of transparency in building the partnership with the head coach. She stated,

I think one of the pieces is being forthcoming, not creating the divide or a silo of like, “don’t tell the administration,” like let’s keep this in house and handle it. Just being forthcoming and open and honest with what’s going on in the program. That’s really helpful, and then we can be very productive moving forward because I can help those coaches through those situations.

From a sport supervisor perspective, head coaches can build high-quality relationships with their sport supervisors by building trust and being transparent. Additionally, when head coaches are transparent with their sport supervisor, it strengthens the sport supervisor’s trust in their head coach as well; therefore, strengthening the overall relationship.

Overall care and an investment in the program (Head Coaches)

In addition to trust, coaches identified overall care and an investment in the program as another need for a high-quality relationship with their sport supervisor. Charlene exemplified this when she stated, “I think knowing that she cares about me as a person allows me to trust her.” Thus, when sport supervisors think about the overall care, it is not just about the program or the coach, but about the coach as a person. Sally shared a similar sentiment when she describes her relationship with her sport supervisor, “I’m a pretty positive coach and a positive person. And so, I like having that [sport supervisor] that can kind of uplift me when maybe there’s times throughout the season that are really, really tough.”

In discussing how a sport supervisor can demonstrate their investment into the program, David, a head coach, shared the following story:

I think [sport supervisor] is quite proud of ‘his baby,’ his program. As we all are, obviously, but like, I believe his sincerity, like when we lost against [opponent in NCAA tournament], I could tell that it really hurt him. And I think that’s really, I think that’s really important...I think he’s emotionally invested in it now, as well.

Heather recognized that sport supervisors that are emotionally invested help the coach feel like a priority,

Invested meaning so if there’s 35 sports at a school and your supervisor is overseeing 12, that you still feel important to them, you know, that they truly do care about your program and the happenings of your program. You don’t want to feel dismissed in those conversations of like, you know, ‘there’s a football game and sorry, you’re not important today.’

Heather also noted that sport supervisors can show investment through check-ins. She gave the example of asking coaches about recruiting trips or how practices are going, “I think those check-ins can make you feel like they’re [sport supervisor] invested.”

Coaches desire a sport supervisor that will care about them as a person as well as their program. By showing care and an overall investment in the program, sport

supervisors can show their emotional investment in the program and thus, feel like true partners with their head coaches.

Intentional presence (physical and emotional presence) (Head Coaches)

Head coaches want sport supervisors to have an intentional presence with them *and* the program. Intentional presence is a two-prong approach that includes physical presence (i.e., visibility) and emotional presence (i.e., accessibility). Examples of physical presence shared by head coaches includes, being around the program on more than just game days; it includes consistent face-to-face interactions with the coach, coaching staff, and players; and, physical proximity of offices. Emotional presence is described as accessible to the head coach to provide support and be a sounding board.

Charlene described how her sport supervisor is a frequent visitor to practices, “she’s around a lot. I think she comes to practices a few times a week.” Sally expressed the importance of her sport supervisor being physically present as it relates to the student-athletes, “The importance of that support, seeing her at our games or seeing her interact with our players. I think that really shows that she supports our program. I think that’s really important to me.”

In discussing what she would want in a relationship with her sport supervisor, Rachel discussed how she would like her sport supervisor to be physically present stating, “being visible, whether it’s in practices, at maybe events that we’re doing at games and showing that you are completely invested in our team and in what it is that we are doing.”

David highlighted how the physical proximity of his office to his sport supervisor’s office has aided in the quality of their relationship,

So, proximity between our offices is great, he’s 30 steps down the hallway from me. So honestly, that aspect of things, as I said, as our relationship has evolved, has become more and more informal.... So, funnily enough, when I come upstairs into the building, he’s pretty much the first office I see, to get to my office. So, if the door is ajar, and I’ve got five minutes, I’ll put my head and if he’s not too busy, what I think will be a five-minute conversation can sometimes be 20 minutes to half an hour. Similarly, he has no reservations about walking down here, coming into my office sitting down... cross his legs, look very, very comfortable.... And we’ll talk about anything.

Discussing emotional presence, Charlene described the importance of the sport supervisor being accessible to a head coach stating, “I just think the accessibility because that’s where people start to feel a bit either frustrated or lonely. Like, I wanted to reach out and talk when you weren’t there. And so, I think that part is big.” Heather echoed her appreciation for her sport supervisor being accessible stating, “her accessibility is what makes her a great supervisor. I think that how she’s able to respond and be available for us is absolutely something that I value.”

Simply stated, sport supervisors who are present (physically and emotionally) have high quality relationships with their head coaches. Conversely, sport supervisors who are not intentional about being both physically (e.g., traveling with the

team, attending practices occasionally, going to the coach's office) and emotionally present (e.g., accessible), develop low-quality relationship with their head coaches. Thus, when sport supervisors are not present, head coaches may be more likely to perceive the relationship as low quality. For example, both Rachel and Lamar discussed how their respective sport supervisor was not visible and how, ideally, their sport supervisor would be more present both physically and emotionally. Lamar shared his frustration in the lack of visibility of his sport supervisor when describing their weekly check-in meetings. He shared that his sport supervisor doesn't always attend their weekly check-in meetings, "our weekly check-in meetings that sometimes he's on and sometimes he's not." Similarly, he noted the importance of being around saying, "know what we're doing good. Like the buzzword is always culture. What does culture look like? You only know culture if you're in it." Rachel expressed how being physically present can help the coach feel supported and create a sense of emotional support for her. She shared,

I do want you [sport supervisor] to know what's going on, you know what I mean? So, I don't know, I think it should be kind of a meet in the middle. I want you to know what's going on in my sport, so that if something does come up, you're aware of what's going on already. So, you can kind of say, hey, no, I've seen this with my own eyes. Or, you know what I mean, I've been around [coach], I've seen her coach, I know how she approaches things.

Rachel also discussed how she had to advocate for herself due to the lack of presence of her sport supervisor when it came to a student-athlete issue. She shared, "And I think if she would have been around a little bit more, she would have understood a little bit more. Just you know, why the things were happening, my perspective on it, and could have spoken to it a little better."

Evaluative Focus (Head Coaches – Low-Quality Relationship)

In addition to the sport supervisors not being present, Lamar and Rachel both discussed how their relationship with their sport supervisor felt less like a partnership and more like they were being evaluated. Thus, the theme of evaluative focus was derived from head coaches with low-quality relationships. Lamar provided the example, "Well, again, when you don't come around very often, and then all of a sudden you come around when you lose a game, it makes you feel that that's [winning] the only thing that matters." He continued,

not being around, not knowing what we're doing on a daily basis, not seeing the good that we've done, and only coming into the picture when something's maybe not going as well as it should. That leads me to not want to go to him if there's something minimal even that I need to I need help with. Right? I just don't want to do that because it could ignite something bigger and I'm like, this is now my boss. So, I feel like he's my boss.

Lamar shared another example when discussing the role of his sport supervisor in the decision-making process stating, "Back to the comments I made before about being evaluated. For instance, it's like 'Is that a recommendation? Or is that something we

should do?’ And if I don’t do it, am I being evaluated? Because we didn’t do it?” Lamar noted that “as time has progressed, it’s more difficult to call even, just simply because I guess I do feel a little bit of being evaluated.”

Head coaches experience low-quality relationships with their sport supervisors when the sport supervisor is not present. Sport supervisors who do not prioritize being present (visible and accessible), dilute the trust in the relationship with their head coach. Additionally, not being present creates a sense of uncertainty for the head coach when the sport supervisor does come around. While evaluation is undoubtedly an important component to any job, for coaches that experienced a feeling of being constantly evaluated, it eroded the relationship of trust.

Differences/Similarities

The interpretive phenomenological approach allowed the research team to explore how individuals in the coach/sport supervisor relationship interpreted the same relational context, revealing convergence or divergence in meaning-making. Additionally, individuals of each group (coach/sport supervisor) shared similarities and differences in what each group needs to build an effective relationship. Both groups, sport supervisors and head coaches, identified trust as an integral component of the sport supervisor/head coach relationship. In the examples from the head coaches, the role of trust was apparent in the development of the high-quality relationships and the strong desire for trust from those head coaches in low-quality relationships. Trust was, however, the only similarity.

Differences emerge as head coaches feel high-quality relationships are built when sport supervisors have an overall care for the coach and the program as well as show investment in the program. Additionally, coaches feel very strongly about the need for sport supervisors to be intentionally present, both physically and emotionally, to build a high-quality relationship with their head coaches. In contrast, sport supervisors note that it is important for head coaches to be transparent with sport supervisors. Doing so allows the sport supervisor to more properly support and advocate for the program. When the sport supervisor is left in the outside looking in, they are more of an acquaintance than a partner.

Discussion

Sport supervisor is not a formal title of an athletic administrator in NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics, but a role that is uniquely situated as an essential organizational connector critical to helping the coach feel supported, connected, and valued (Green & Hancock, 2023). Thus, the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach is important; therefore, an understanding of how a sport supervisor and head coach build a high-quality relationship is paramount for intercollegiate athletic departments. The findings from this study offer contributions to LMX literature (theoretical implications) and provide actionable behaviors and expectations needed by both parties to form a high-quality relationship (practical implications).

Theoretical Implications

Previous LMX research has identified numerous factors affecting LMX including agreeableness, openness, and competence (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Additionally, trust has been established in previous studies and was confirmed to be integral to the development of a mature partnership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This study expands the LMX literature by identifying new supervisor characteristics identified by followers for high-quality relationships: intentional presence and overall care and investment. The coach's desire to have a supervisor who shows an overall care and investment is similar to the previously found supervisor characteristics of transformational leadership, specifically individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Coaches described high-quality relationships as those in which supervisors demonstrated an overall care and investment to not only the team, but also to the coach. This concept is consistent with the LMX literature that suggests leaders and members in high-quality, mature partnerships share information and resources on a personal level, not just at the work level (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Coaches desire social support and social exchanges from their supervisors, which are elements known to build trust (Blau, 1964; Kang & Stewart, 2006).

Previous research on LMX and physical distance has indicated that LMX positively affects follower performance regardless of distance between the leader and the member (Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999). However, findings between the sport supervisor/coach dyad indicate intentional presence – physically present and emotionally accessible – matters and is desired by followers (i.e., coaches). These findings highlight how coaches desire the relationship to be more relational than hierarchical. Additionally, these new factors highlight the desire by coaches to develop a mature partnership with their sport supervisor; intentional presence is connected to more frequent interactions and increase the overall “breadth and depth of exchange” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 232) described in mature partnerships. Conversely, when coaches perceived sport supervisors as less present, the relationship felt more evaluative. As such, the partnership stagnated in either the “stranger” or “acquaintance” phase. This distinction echoes Dansereau et al.'s (1975) framework, which differentiated between leadership (influence without authority) and supervision (influence through formal authority), underscoring the need for relational rather than hierarchical dynamics.

Practical Implications

In addition to theoretical implications, the findings from this study also provide numerous practical implications for NCAA Division I coaches, sport supervisors, and athletic administrators. First and foremost, athletic department leaders must acknowledge the role of a sport supervisor as important to the success of the athletic department *and* a critical partnership for head coaches (Green & Hancock, 2023). This begins by understanding the role, communicating expectations of the role with both sport supervisors and head coaches (Green & Hancock), providing sport supervisors the time to be present to build trust with their coaches, and offering training

and professional development for athletic administrators who serve as sport supervisors. Furthermore, athletic leadership should be intentional with *who* is selected to serve in the role of sport supervisor. The role is not just a professional necessity for athletic administrators, but a critical organizational connector (Green & Hancock, 2023).

This study confirmed both supervisors and followers indicated trust as an integral component of a high-quality relationship between a sport supervisor and a head coach. The desire for trust indicates each party recognizes the needs of the relationship are greater than their individual needs (Simpson, 2007). Trust is required for the development of a mature partnership and is developed through different interactions and over time (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Research on trust has shown various behaviors by managers as necessary for building trustworthiness, including, behavioral consistency, behavioral integrity, sharing and delegation of control, communication (e.g., accurate, openness), and demonstration of concern (Whitener et al., 1998). Thus, for sport supervisors to build a mature relationship with their head coaches they need time in their workday to be present and opportunities to build trust, which aligns with the findings indicating coach's desires to have their sport supervisor be intentionally present. Supervisors who made efforts to engage in the daily rhythms of teams were perceived as more trustworthy and supportive. Therefore, sport supervisors should be intentional about leaving their offices and deliberately engaging with the program(s) they supervise. In doing so, they show a level of investment and help build trust with the head coaches they supervise. This finding echoes the sentiment of Doherty and Danylchuk (1996) that found head coaches are more satisfied, perceived to be more effective, and are willing to perform extra-role behaviors for leaders that are involved. However, recent studies of intercollegiate athletics employees indicate that rising workloads have contributed to substantial overwork and elevated levels of burnout amongst intercollegiate athletic department employees (Huml et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2019). Moreover, recent data found that NCAA Division I sport supervisors provide oversight to an average of 3.5 teams in addition to their roles and responsibilities associated with their formal titles (Green et al., 2025). This necessitates thoughtful consideration by athletic administrators when assigning sport supervision responsibilities. Recognizing the role of the sport supervisor as an added role (Green & Hancock, 2023) and one that requires intentional presence and time to build a mature relationship with the head coach, athletic leaders need to recognize the required time needed for sport supervision and consider employee's workloads when designating sport supervisors. Oversight of multiple sports, or those with overlapping seasons, may compromise the ability to be fully present—an essential component of relational success. Otherwise, it could be argued that sport supervision is adding to the overwork climate in intercollegiate athletics.

For sport supervisors, transparency is highly important to a successful relationship with the head coach. The sport supervisor/head coach relationship is unique as individual sport programs, in many ways, act as their own organization while still part of a larger organization (the athletic department). Thus, sport supervisors find themselves in a challenging middle management role balancing the needs of the

athletic department with the individual needs of the program(s) they supervise and the head coaches they oversee (Green & Hancock, 2023). Head coaches who fail to share information – the good and the bad – with their sport supervisors create discord in the relationship causing the sport supervisor to feel uninvolved, disjointed, and disconnected from the head coach and the program. Interestingly, when coaches felt disconnected from their respective sport supervisor, they were more likely to feel evaluated and under supervision than in a mature partnership. Thus, coaches could create undesired relationships themselves by not being transparent with their sport supervisor. Sport supervisors need head coaches to be transparent with them so they can feel included and be stronger supporters and advocates for their programs. To build a high-quality relationship, both individuals need to be willing to share information. This illustrates the power and responsibility both parties have in developing a trusting relationship.

Head coaches value supervisors who invest time to learn the nuances of their sport and program, enhancing mutual respect. This aligns with Bang's (2011, 2013) findings that perceived expertise enhances leader credibility. Although coaches did not expect sport supervisors to have technical mastery of their sport, knowledge of current trends and issues served as a proxy for care, reinforcing trust. Notably, this study positions competence and sport knowledge as valued supervisor traits, diverging from previous literature where such characteristics were framed primarily as follower attributes (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Graen & Scandura, 1987).

Finally, the findings reveal a reciprocal model of relationship-building. Trust, respect, and mutual obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) require continuous, intentional engagement from both coaches and sport supervisors. While this study did not focus on the distinct process of how trust is cultivated, head coaches and sport supervisors provide a glimpse into factors contributing to developing trust and, thus, a more mature partnership. For example, head coaches must demonstrate transparency (e.g., sharing good and bad information) while sport supervisors must receive that transparency as an act of trust and respond with partnership and support. This cycle of trust begins with the sport supervisor being present and showing an overall care and investment in the head coach and the program. When either party withdraws—coaches by withholding information, or supervisors by remaining inaccessible—relational quality diminishes, with implications for morale and team and departmental cohesion.

Future Research and Limitations

Future research should explore the structural and relational elements that define this role, including its evaluative authority and expectations, to further guide effective practice in collegiate sport leadership. Additionally, future research could examine shared leadership, focusing on the upward and downward influence on leadership, especially in the context of head coaches. It is also unknown how the athletic department leadership (e.g., athletic director) affects the sport supervisor/coach dyad. LMX research has also examined outcomes, and thus, it is recommend-

ed to examine the performance of sport supervisor/coach dyads to better understand outcomes. Examining individuals within a single dyad would also be recommended.

While this study is limited to NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics, triangulation of the data supports in the transferability and trustworthiness of this study for other professionals in the sport supervisor/coach dyad. It is also understood that every sport supervisor and head coach's relationship is unique and dependent on each party's past experiences, as well as organizational factors that may not be considered.

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Investigating the Protective Factors for Perceived Stress Among NCAA Student-Athletes: An Examination of Social Support, Coping Skills, and Mental Toughness

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Guided by Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping, this study aimed to investigate the individual and combined effects of age, gender, social support, coping skills, and mental toughness on perceived stress among NCAA student-athletes. Participants were 107 college student-athletes aged from 18 and 24 years. The majority of participants were recruited from Division I universities within the American Athletic Conference. Hierarchical multiple regression was employed to assess the incremental variance accounted for by each predictor set. Results showed that higher levels of social support and coping skills were significantly associated with lower levels of perceived stress among college athletes. However, the effect of social support and coping skills on stress dissipated when mental toughness was entered into the model. The final regression model identified mental toughness as the strongest predictor of perceived stress, accounting for 41.7% of the variance in perceived stress scores. The findings suggest that enhancing mental toughness may be an effective strategy for reducing perceived stress among college student-athletes. Furthermore, these results may inform coaches, instructors, athletic departments, and universities in developing targeted and effective intervention programs aimed at improving college student-athletes' mental health.

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Introduction

Literature Review

Perceived stress is the feelings or thoughts individuals' experience regarding their stress levels and their perceived ability to manage such stress (Liu et al., 2021; Varghese et al., 2015). Compared to typical college students, student-athletes face additional stressors such as time management (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005; Young et al., 2022), coping with injuries (Lu et al., 2012; Mayol et al., 2024), and the pressure to succeed in their sport (Lu et al., 2012; Young et al., 2022). More specifically, student-athletes experience three unique sources of perceived stress. The first source stems from their athletic commitments, as college student-athletes are expected to represent their institutions in sports competitions throughout their academic careers while balancing demanding training schedules, team practices, and academic responsibilities (Gayles & Hu, 2009; Humphrey et al., 2000). The second source of perceived stress is associated with scholarships (Humphrey et al., 2000). Some college student-athletes secure full or partial athletic scholarships based on their sports performance and abilities. They are recruited by universities to enhance their sports teams, and the annual renewal of their scholarships hinges on maintaining a certain level of athletic and academic performance. The third source of perceived stress arises from the dual career demands placed on student-athletes (Brown et al., 2020; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). Balancing academic and athletic standards is essential for maintaining scholarships and ensuring graduation. This necessitates juggling intense practice sessions, competitions, and travel commitments with academic responsibilities, including exams, assignments, and maintaining a designated Grade Point Average (GPA) level. Given that perceived stress has adverse effects on both physical health (Cohen et al., 1993; McGregor et al., 2008) and mental health (Catabay et al., 2019; Khodami et al., 2022; Slimmen et al., 2022), failure to effectively address sources of stress can adversely affect the well-being of student-athletes which may also ultimately lead to a decline in their sports performance. To prevent negative consequences and proactively enhance college student-athletes' well-being, it is crucial for researchers to identify the underlying buffers and coping skills associated with perceived stress, as well as understand how these protective factors individually and collectively help reduce their stress levels.

Theoretical Framework

Over the past five decades, the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC), has played a pivotal role in advancing research on stress and coping (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within the TTSC framework, stress is depicted as a transaction between an individual and their environment that is appraised by individuals as taxing or exceeding their resources and threatening their well-being. The TTSC model includes four key constructs: (a) personal and environmental stressor factors, (b) cognitive appraisal, (c) coping strategies, and (d) stress

outcomes (Schuster et al., 2003). According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), cognitive appraisal plays a crucial role because it determines how an individual interprets a situation or stressor, deciding whether it's seen as stressful, manageable, or irrelevant. Cognitive appraisal consists of primary and secondary appraisals. In the primary appraisal, individuals evaluate a situation or stressor to determine whether it represents a threat, challenge, or is irrelevant. If the situation is perceived as benign-positive or irrelevant, no further appraisal is needed. However, if the individual perceives the situation as a threat, they engage in a secondary appraisal to assess their available resources and coping options for managing both internal and external stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Schuster et al., 2003). The available resources mainly include social resources and psychological resources. Once a situation has been appraised as stressful, individuals engage in coping, which encompasses the cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage stressful demands and serves as a mediator between stress appraisal and adaptation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Within the TTSC model, mental toughness, social support, and coping efforts appear to be key protective factors in reducing the adverse effects of stress on an individual's mental health. Specifically, mental toughness plays a central role in primary appraisal by influencing how individuals evaluate stressors (Crawford et al., 2021; Levy et al., 2012). As an internal resource, mental toughness refers to the essential quality that enables individuals to flourish in challenging circumstances (Weinberg, 2010). Athletes with high levels of mental toughness tend to appraise stressors as "challenging" instead of "threatening", which leads them to use more adaptive self-regulation strategies compared to those with lower mental toughness (Levy et al., 2012; Mahoney et al., 2014). Additionally, when a situation is perceived as a challenge rather than a threat, athletes are also more likely to engage in task-oriented coping strategies (Kaiseler et al., 2009; Nicholls et al., 2012).

Social support refers to the resources offered to an individual by another person or a group (Cohen & Syme, 1985). The roles of social support can be fulfilled by family, friends, and significant others when individual encounters external stressors from their environment (Thoits, 1995). If an event is appraised as stressful, perceived social support acts as a buffer, mitigating the negative effects of stressors on mental health and physical well-being by providing both tangible aid and emotional comfort, especially when stressors become more intense or persistent (Glanz & Schwartz, 2008). Empirical evidence has confirmed that individuals with stronger social support networks are associated with lower risk for a variety of health concerns, including but not limited to stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, low self-efficacy, and physical health (Aziz et al., 2023; Dambi et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Lilympaki et al., 2016; Özer et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). For student-athletes, A stronger coach-athlete relationship has been linked to lower depression levels and higher quality of life (Powers et al., 2020). Additionally, greater social support from teammates has been associated with lower levels of depression (Hagiwara et al., 2017).

Coping skills also serve as a key internal resource that helps individuals reduce or tolerate stressful situations and regulate their emotional responses. Multiple stud-

ies have shown that student-athletes' coping skills not only have the potential to improve their sports performance, but also contribute to effectively managing daily stressors and enhancing overall well-being (Estanol et al., 2013; Gardner & Moore, 2004; Hanton et al., 2015; Smith et al., 1995). Additionally, empirical evidence has revealed that college student-athletes with higher levels of coping skills tend to experience significantly lower levels of perceived stress (Surujlal et al., 2013). Over the long term, effective coping is associated with improved psychological well-being, social functioning, and physical health (Biggs et al., 2017).

To date, the existing literature has shown that the TTSC model has been widely applied in sports settings (e.g., Crawford et al., 2021; Fogaça, 2019; Kim & Ahn, 2025; Leis et al., 2022). However, limited studies in sports psychology literature grounded in the TTSC model have examined the effect of mental toughness on an athlete's perceptions of their own stress (Crawford et al., 2021). Moreover, few studies using the TTSC model have simultaneously investigated the individual and combined influences of social support, mental toughness, and coping skills on perceived stress, particularly among National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes. This gap is significant because it leaves the relative importance of these protective factors unclear. By examining these factors concurrently, this study seeks to clarify their unique and overlapping effects, which will help determine the hierarchy and interplay of these resources in the stress process. Such an understanding is crucial for developing more targeted and efficient interventions. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine the individual and combined effects of social support, mental toughness, and coping skills, along with personal factors such as age and gender, on perceived stress levels among NCAA student-athletes.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 107 athletes aged between 18 and 24 years. Most participants were recruited from Division I universities within the American Athletic Conference (AAC) in the United States with only five college student-athletes coming from Division III institutions. The sample consisted of college student-athletes from a diverse range of sports, including track and field, golf, cross-country, basketball, softball, soccer, baseball, football, volleyball, bowling, cheerleading, diving, lacrosse, and sailing. A summary of the participants' demographics is provided in Table 1.

Procedures and Data Collection

Data collection was conducted from October 2024 through May 2025. After obtaining approval from the university's institutional review board, we contacted university athletic department directors through the AAC office and secured permission from both the directors and the participants. The questionnaire was administered through The Qualtrics Online Survey Platform (www.qualtrics.com). The survey consisted of demographic questions (e.g., gender, GPA, age, classification,

Table 1*Sociodemographic characteristics of participants (N = 107)*

Characteristic	N	%	M (SD)
Age(years)			20.13 (1.55)
GPA			3.58 (0.41)
Gender			
Male	25	23.40%	
Female	82	76.60%	
Division level			
Division I	102	95.30%	
Division III	5	4.70%	
Classification			
Freshman	30	28.00%	
Sophomore	22	20.60%	
Junior	29	27.10%	
Senior	20	18.70%	
Graduate	6	5.60%	
Athletic scholarship			
Full scholarship	43	40.20%	
Partial scholarship	40	37.40%	
No scholarship	24	22.40%	
Race			
Caucasian	58	54.20%	
African-American	8	7.50%	
Hispanic-American	17	15.90%	
Asian-American	4	4.70%	
Other	19	17.80%	

Division level, athletic scholarship, and race) and four assessment scales: perceived stress, social support, mental toughness, and coping skills. To ensure the accuracy of the participants' responses, student-athletes were assured that their responses would be confidential and that their participation was voluntary. Additionally, participants were informed that the data would be used for research purposes only. The completion of the questionnaire typically took the student-athletes between 7 and 12 minutes. Lastly, after completing the survey, participants were eligible to be entered into a raffle for a chance to win a \$25 Amazon electronic gift card. Gift cards were sent electronically to their registered email at the end of the study.

Perceived Stress Scale

The 10-item perceived stress scale (PSS) was employed to evaluate the frequency of individuals' perceived stress experiences over the past month (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). Participants rated the frequency of stress experiences on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = almost never, 3 = sometimes, 4 = fairly often, and 5 = very often). The scale comprises six negatively worded items (e.g., "In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?") and four positively phrased items (e.g., "In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?"). The total PSS score was calculated by reversing the scores of the four positively phrased items and then summing the scores for all 10 items. Thus, individual scores on the PSS ranged from 10 to 50, with higher scores denoting higher degrees of perceived stress. The PSS internal consistency reliability for this study was .86.

Mental Toughness Scale

We employed the 8-item Mental Toughness Inventory (MTI) to assess mental toughness of the student-athletes (Gucciardi et al., 2015). This scale is unidimensional, with items such as, "I can effectively apply skills or knowledge when faced with challenges." Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not true of me) to 5 (very true of me). Scores ranged from 8 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher levels of mental toughness. The internal consistency reliability for the MTI in the present study was .79.

Social Support Scale

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was used to assess college student-athletes' social support (Zimet et al., 1988). The MSPSS consists of three domains: family (e.g., "My family is willing to help me make decisions."), friends (e.g., "My friends really try to help me."), and a significant other (e.g., "There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.") with four items per subscale. Participants responded to options ranging from 1 (not true of me) to 5 (very true of me). For each source of social support, the score was obtained by summing the scores across all four items of that source category. Higher values on each of the subscales indicate higher levels of social support. The total perceived social score ranged from 12 to 60. The internal consistency reliability for the MSPSS was .86 in this study.

Coping Skills Scale

The Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28 (ACSI-28) was adapted to assess athletes' coping skills (Smith et al., 1995). This scale includes seven dimensions: coping with adversity (e.g., "I remain positive and enthusiastic during competition, no matter how badly things are going."), coachability (e.g., "When a coach or manager tells me how to correct a mistake I've made, I tend to take it personally and feel upset."), concentration (e.g., "When I'm playing sports, I can focus my attention and block out distractions."), confidence and achievement motivation (e.g., "I get the most out of my talent and skill."), goal setting and mental preparation (e.g., "On a daily or weekly basis, I set very specific goals for myself that guide what I do."), peaking under pressure (e.g., "I tend to play better under pressure because I think more clearly."), and freedom from worry (e.g., "I worry quite a bit about what others think of my performance."). Each subscale consists of four items. Student-athletes self-rated their skills using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = almost never, 3 = sometimes, 4 = fairly often, and 5 = very often). The composite score ranged from 28 to 140, with higher scores indicating a greater ability to cope with sport-related stressors. The internal consistency reliability for the ACSI-28 in the present study was .87.

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the sample's basic characteristics for the following variables: perceived stress scores, total social support scores, scores for each of the three social support subscales (family, friends, and significant others), mental toughness scores, total coping skills scores, and scores for each of the seven coping skill subscales: coping with adversity, coachability, concentration, confidence and achievement motivation, goal setting and mental preparation, peaking under pressure, and freedom from worry. Bivariate correlation analysis was employed to examine the individual relationship between perceived stress and each of the predictors such as social support, mental toughness, coping skills, including their subscales. Finally, a hierarchical multiple regression was utilized to investigate the individual and combined influence of five predictors: age, gender (0 = male; 1 = female), social support, mental toughness, and coping skills on college athletes' perceived stress levels. Four blocks were entered to measure the incremental variance accounted for by each predictor set. The change in R^2 (ΔR^2) was examined to determine the unique contribution of each predictor set beyond the variance accounted for by the preceding blocks. To better assess both the unique and potential overlapping effects of the predictors, variables were entered into multiple regression analysis in order of their relationship strength with perceived stress, ranging from weakest to strongest, as determined by the initial correlation analyses. Specifically, the four blocks were entered in the following order: (1) personal stress factors (age, gender); (2) social support; (3) coping skills; and (4) mental toughness.

To estimate the required sample size for our hierarchical multiple regression analysis, we conducted a power analysis using G*Power. Based on the linear multiple regression with four blocks, fixed model, and R^2 increase, G*Power analysis

indicated that a sample of 68 athletes was required to detect a conventional medium effect size ($f^2 = .15$) with 80% power at a significance level of .05. Our sample size also met a commonly accepted guideline of having at least 10 participants for each predictor variable when conducting a multiple regression analysis. Finally, to ensure the accuracy of the data analysis, the listwise deletion method was employed to handle missing data.

Results

Descriptive statistics for all study variables were presented in Table 2. On average, female athletes reported higher scores for perceived stress and social support, while male athletes scored higher in mental toughness and coping skills. Correlation analyses showed that except coachability, higher score in social support (including its three subscales: family, friends, and significant others), mental toughness, and coping skills (along with its six subscales: coping with adversity, concentration, confidence and achievement motivation, goal setting and mental preparation, peaking under pressure, and freedom from worry) were significantly associated with lower scores of perceived stress (see Table 3). Notably, social support ($r = -.349$) and coping skills ($r = .428$) demonstrated medium effect sizes on perceived stress, whereas mental toughness showed the strongest bivariate correlation ($r = -.57$) with perceived stress, representing a large effect size according to Cohen's (1988, pp. 79-80) guidelines (i.e., $r = .10$ small effect size; $r = .30$, medium effect size; $r \geq .50$, large effect size).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Variables Based on Gender

Variables	Male				Female			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>No%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>No%</i>
Perceived stress	25.32	6.25	25	23.36%	28.26	6.13	82	76.64%
Social support	49.95	11.69	21	22.58%	51.65	8.09	72	77.42%
Family	16.95	3.94	21	22.34%	17.59	3.21	73	77.66%
Friend	16.76	4.52	21	22.58%	16.74	3.14	72	77.42%
Person	16.24	5.11	21	22.34%	17.19	3.55	73	77.66%
Mental toughness	33.24	5.03	21	22.83%	31.62	4.93	71	77.17%
Coping skills	102.94	14.79	18	21.95%	95.92	11.12	64	78.05%
Goal setting*	14.75	3.39	20	22.99%	14.46	2.99	67	77.01%
Confidence*	15.95	2.37	20	23.26%	15.24	2.21	66	76.74%
Coachability	15.10	3.01	20	23.26%	15.52	2.62	66	76.74%
Concentration	15.11	2.78	18	21.43%	14.26	2.16	66	78.57%
Coping*	13.85	3.48	20	22.99%	13.51	2.18	67	77.01%
Peaking*	14.30	4.22	20	23.26%	13.23	2.62	66	76.74%
Freedom*	12.05	3.47	20	22.99%	9.51	3.55	67	77.01%

Note. Goal setting* = goal setting/mental preparation; Confidence* = confidence and achievement; Coping* = coping with adversity; Peaking* = peaking under pressure. Freedom* = freedom from worry.

Table 3
Correlation Coefficients

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Perceived stress	1.000													
2. Social support	-.349**	1.000												
3. Family	-.290**	.817**	1.000											
4. Friend	-.323**	.864**	.623**	1.000										
5. Person	-.270**	.826**	.473**	.561**	1.000									
6. Mental toughness	-.561**	.453**	.367**	.387**	.383**	1.000								
7. Total coping skills	-.428**	.359**	.297**	.345**	.273*	.725**	1.000							
8. Goal setting/mental preparation	-.230*	.389**	.326**	.301**	.366**	.409**	.605**	1.000						
9. Confidence and achievement	-.308**	.461**	.407**	.427**	.355**	.628**	.788**	.558**	1.000					
10. Coachability	-.172	.228*	.343**	.211	.069	.406**	.453**	.075	.275*	1.000				
11. Concentration	-.348**	.383**	.336**	.337**	.308**	.675**	.812**	.525**	.655**	.271*	1.000			
12. Coping with adversity	-.443**	.410**	.354**	.335**	.348**	.621**	.802**	.486**	.611**	.282**	.697**	1.000		
13. Peaking under pressure	-.267*	.236*	.163	.230*	.196	.454**	.736**	.313**	.599**	.287**	.627**	.545**	1.000	
14. Freedom from worry	-.212*	-.159	-.241*	-.067	-.112	.229*	.372**	-.121	.062	.044	.079	.150	.026	1.000

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). *. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

Table 4. Hierarchical regression models with varying predictor entry orders

Models with predictors		<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>sr</i>	95.0% <i>CI</i> for <i>b</i>		<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
							<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>		
1	(Constant)	9.381	9.804		.342		-10.141	28.904	.109	.109**
	Age	.454	.455	.107	.322	.107	-.453	1.361		
	Gender	4.971	1.690	.317	.004	.316	1.605	8.336		
2	(Constant)	26.890	10.295		.011		6.386	47.395	.241	.133**
	Age	.240	.427	.057	.575	.056	-.610	1.090		
	Gender	5.320	1.573	.339	.001	.338	2.188	8.452		
	Social support	-.268	.073	-.368	.000	-.364	-.414	-.121		
3	(Constant)	38.805	10.711		.001		17.468	60.142	.315	.073**
	Age	.327	.410	.077	.427	.076	-.489	1.143		
	Gender	4.042	1.571	.258	.012	.246	.913	7.171		
	Social support	-.180	.077	-.248	.022	-.224	-.333	-.027		
	Coping skills	-.163	.058	-.305	.006	-.271	-.278	-.048		
4	(Constant)	45.142	10.098		.000		25.021	65.263	.417	.102**
	Age	.144	.384	.034	.708	.033	-.620	.909		
	Gender	3.646	1.462	.232	.015	.221	.732	6.561		
	Social support	-.119	.073	-.163	.110	-.144	-.265	.027		
	Coping skills	.006	.071	.011	.936	.007	-.136	.148		
	Mental toughness	-.671	.186	-.485	.001	-.320	-1.042	-.300		
1	(Constant)	9.381	9.804		.342		-10.141	28.904	.109	.109**
	Age	.454	.455	.107	.322	.107	-.453	1.361		
	Gender	4.971	1.690	.317	.004	.316	1.605	8.336		
2	(Constant)	41.815	9.749		.000		22.399	61.232	.396	.287**
	Age	.211	.379	.050	.579	.050	-.544	.967		
	Gender	3.248	1.429	.207	.026	.203	.402	6.094		
	Mental toughness	-.761	.126	-.550	.000	-.536	-1.013	-.509		
3	(Constant)	45.285	9.874		.000		25.615	64.955	.417	.021
	Age	.149	.377	.035	.694	.035	-.603	.900		
	Gender	3.627	1.433	.231	.013	.223	.773	6.481		
	Mental toughness	-.661	.139	-.478	.000	-.419	-.939	-.384		
4	Social support	-.118	.072	-.162	.106	-.144	-.262	.026		
	(Constant)	45.142	10.098		.000		25.021	65.263	.417	.000
	Age	.144	.384	.034	.708	.033	-.620	.909		
	Gender	3.646	1.462	.232	.015	.221	.732	6.561		
	Mental toughness	-.671	.186	-.485	.001	-.320	-1.042	-.300		
	Social support	-.119	.073	-.163	.110	-.144	-.265	.027		
	Coping skills	.006	.071	.011	.936	.007	-.136	.148		

Note. $p < .01$. ΔR^2 is significant at the .01 level. *sr* = semi-partial correlation coefficient.

In the hierarchical multiple regression analysis, age and gender were entered in Step 1 (Model 1), which significantly accounted for 10.9% of the total variance in perceived stress ($F(2, 77) = 4.701, p = .012$). Age ($b = .454, \beta = .107, p = .322$) did not significantly contribute to explaining the variance, while gender was a significant predictor of stress scores with a medium effect size ($b = 4.971, \beta = .317, p = .004$), suggesting that after controlling for age, female athletes reported perceived stress scores approximately 4.971 points higher than their male counterparts.

In Step 2 (Model 2), social support was added, increasing the explained variance to 24.1% ($F_{(3, 76)} = 8.060, p < .001$). Age remained a non-significant predictor ($b = .240, \beta = .057, p = .575$), while gender continued to significantly predict perceived stress ($b = 5.320, \beta = .339, p = .001$). Social support contributed significantly to the model, demonstrating a medium effect size ($b = -.268, \beta = -.368, p < .001$) and accounting for an additional 13.3% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .133$). Specifically, each one-point increase in social support was associated with a .268-point decrease in perceived stress, holding age and gender.

In Step 3 (Model 3), coping skills were entered, further increasing the explained variance to 31.5% ($F_{(4, 75)} = 8.609, p < .001$). Coping skills significantly contributed to the prediction of perceived stress with a medium effect size ($b = -.163, \beta = -.305, p = .006$) and explained an additional 7.3% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .073$). Again, age remained a non-significant predictor ($b = .327, \beta = .077, p = .427$), while both gender ($b = 4.042, \beta = .258, p = .012$) and social support ($b = -.180, \beta = -.248, p = .022$) continued to be significant predictors. These results suggest that when controlling for age, gender, and social support, an increase of one-point in coping skills corresponded to a .163-point decrease in perceived stress.

Finally, in Step 4 (Model 4), adding mental toughness increased the total explained variance in perceived stress to 41.7% ($\Delta R^2 = .102, F_{(5, 74)} = 10.592, p < .001$), resulting in the best-fitting model for predicting perceived stress. After controlling for the effects of age ($b = .144, \beta = .034, p = .708$), gender ($b = 3.646, \beta = .232, p = .015$), social support ($b = -.119, \beta = -.163, p = .110$), and coping skills ($b = .006, \beta = .011, p = .936$), mental toughness made a significant and unique contribution to perceived stress, showing a nearly large effect size ($b = -.671, \beta = -.485, p < .001$) and accounting for an additional 10.2% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .102$). Notably, while gender was a significant predictor, the effects of both social support and coping skills became non-significant when mental toughness was included and emerged as the strongest contributor to stress reduction in the model, suggesting potential overlap among these predictors in their influence on perceived stress. However, all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values (1.045 – 2.296) were below 10, and all tolerance values (.436 – .957) exceeded .10, indicating no evidence of multicollinearity based on Ho's (2014) guidelines (i.e., $VIF \geq 10$ or tolerance $\leq .10$ suggests multicollinearity).

To confirm the overlapping effects of mental toughness in relation to social support and coping skills, we conducted a second hierarchical multiple regression. Predictors were entered in the following four sequential blocks: (1) personal stress fac-

tors (age, gender), (2) mental toughness, (3) social support, and (4) coping skills. As shown in Table 4, gender and mental toughness consistently emerged as significant predictors across the models, while social support and coping skills did not when mental toughness was entered into the model prior to them. These results aligned with our initial speculation. Additionally, among all predictors, mental toughness exhibited the largest semi-partial correlation (sr) values in both hierarchical regression analyses, further indicating that it played the most substantial individual role in buffering perceived stress.

Discussion

Informed by Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping, the current study examined the individual and combined effects of age, gender, social support, coping skills, and mental toughness on perceived stress levels among college student-athletes. Our data showed that age did not have a significant impact on perceived stress across all four regression models. In contrast, gender consistently emerged as a significant predictor. Consistent with previous studies (Bureau, 2016; Lassiter et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2025), female athletes in our sample reported higher stress levels than male athletes.

Our correlation analyses revealed that all three types of social support (family, friend, and significant others), mental toughness, and six of the seven coping skill subscales (coping with adversity, concentration, confidence and achievement motivation, goal setting and mental preparation, peaking under pressure, and freedom from worry), with the exception of coachability, were significantly and negatively related to perceived stress. This suggests that when considered individually, each of these factors played a significant role in buffering perceived stress among college student-athletes.

Aligning with our correlation analyses and previous studies (Fogaca, 2019; Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009), the hierarchical multiple regression confirmed that social support significantly reduced perceived stress levels. Additionally, our study showed that higher levels of coping skills were significantly associated with lower levels of perceived stress in the third step of the model, which is consistent with the findings reported by Surujlal et al. (2013), further supporting the important roles of social and psychological resources within the TTSC model. However, both social support and coping skills were no longer significant predictors of stress when mental toughness was included and emerged as the strongest contributor to stress reduction in the model. This finding highlights the central role of mental toughness in the TTSC's primary appraisal stage. As a key internal resource, mental toughness influences athletes to appraise stressors as challenges rather than threats. Such positive appraisals promote the use of more adaptive self-regulation strategies compared to those with lower levels of mental toughness.

Additionally, the results from the hierarchical multiple regression indicated a potential overlap among these variables in their influence on perceived stress levels,

suggesting that mental toughness may play a more prominent role than social support and coping skills in reducing stress levels among student-athletes. One possible explanation is that social support and coping skills may be partially embedded within the broader construct of mental toughness. Rather than being entirely separate constructs, they may contribute to the development of mental toughness, which in turn more directly impacts stress. Our study aligns with the findings of Pandian et al. (2022), who found that mental toughness and coping skills are deeply and positively correlated. This conceptual overlap could explain why the predictive power of social support and coping skills diminishes when mental toughness is accounted for in the model. Given the significance and important roles of social support, coping skills, and mental toughness within the TTSC model, future research is warranted to further explore their impacts of interrelationships and conceptual overlaps within this theoretical framework on perceived stress across different populations.

Our findings suggest two implications for future research. First, primary appraisals (e.g., mental toughness) may hold greater importance than secondary appraisals in reducing stress levels, as it serves as an initial filter in how stressors are evaluated. Second, internal resources (e.g., coping skills and mental toughness) may be more influential than external resources (social support) in managing stress because internal resources are relatively stable, controllable, and personally owned, whereas external resources are often temporary, uncontrollable, and dependent on others. To confirm these two implications, further research in this area is warranted.

Practical Recommendations

Our study points to several practical recommendations for reducing perceived stress among college student-athletes. First, our results highlight the role of mental toughness and social support in buffering perceived stress among college student-athletes. Mentally tough athletes can push through adversity and stay composed, enabling them to excel even in high-stress situations (Gucciardi, 2014). Importantly, mental toughness can be developed through both direct and indirect methods. Research has identified several direct methods through which athletes acquire mental toughness. For example, athletes can enhance mental toughness through Psychological Skills Training (PST). PST programs typically involve psycho-educational sessions focused on a set of skills, including motor imagery, attention control, arousal regulation, self-talk, and goal setting. Research by Gould et al. (2002) examining the psychological characteristics of Olympic athletes found that Olympic champions, compared to less successful athletes, are more likely to utilize these psychological strategies, which are often taught by their coaching staff. It is therefore essential for coaches to intentionally integrate mental skills training into regular practice. Techniques such as visualization, goal-setting routines, and pre-competition plans can help student-athletes develop the mental fortitude to navigate challenges and perform optimally (e.g., Land et al., 2021; Vella-Fondacaro & Romano-Smith, 2023). Notably, these training techniques require minimal financial resources while offering substantial benefits. Moreover, they provide a dual benefit, as these psychological strategies are highly transferable and can be effectively applied to manage stressors

beyond the competitive environment, such as academic pressures and personal challenges (Gould & Carson, 2008).

In addition to direct methods, an athlete's family support system appears critical in indirectly developing the mindset and resilience needed for mental toughness. For example, Gould et al. (2002) found that the family environment contributed to the psychological development of Olympic champions through several mechanisms, including: emphasizing improvement over winning, instilling a belief in the child's ability to succeed, and valuing hard work, persistence, and high personal standards. Additionally, Gould and colleagues noted that coaches also indirectly supported psychological development through emphasizing hard work, discipline, and having fun. Moreover, they fostered deep trust and respect from their athletes through encouragement and support. These findings are consistent with those of the current study, emphasizing the role that social support plays in supporting college athletes' ability to manage perceived stress.

Our findings also highlight the critical role of coping skills in managing perceived stress. Importantly, a substantial body of research has demonstrated that mental toughness and coping skills are not independent constructs but are deeply and positively correlated (Pandian et al., 2022). Mentally tough athletes are not individuals who are immune to stress; rather, they are individuals who consistently manage stress more effectively through the deployment of superior coping strategies (Beckford et al., 2016). In fact, a study by Romanová (2021) has found that an athlete's existing coping skills are a significant predictor of their overall level of mental toughness. To strengthen athletes' coping skills for managing perceived stress, coaches are uniquely positioned to teach and model problem-focused coping strategies. They can influence their athletes' coping skills in several ways. For instance, coaches can help athletes anticipate and plan for adversity by creating contingency plans for competition and training demands. They can also facilitate reflection on prior experiences with stress, helping athletes learn from those events to improve their confidence and develop more effective coping strategies. Additionally, coaches can purposefully implement stress into practice to simulate the pressures of competition. The core idea of this approach is to expose athletes to manageable doses of stress in a controlled environment, which builds resilience by allowing them to learn from mistakes in practice rather than in high-stakes competition. Importantly, this coping skills training is both sustainable and cost-effective, as it can be implemented within regular training sessions without requiring additional resources or specialized personnel.

Lastly, our findings indicate that female athletes experience higher levels of perceived stress compared to their male counterparts, a result that emphasizes the significance of the team's motivational climate. Motivational climate is critical, as an athlete's motivation level influences not only their effort but also their capacity to cope with adversity. This is particularly salient given research suggesting that female athletes are often more motivated by social connectedness and a sense of belonging compared to their male counterpart (Sirard et al., 2006). Consequently, teams and coaches who intentionally cultivate a strong sense of togetherness can enhance the motivation of female athletes and bolster their resilience against perceived stress.

This approach is further supported by evidence that team cohesion has a more pronounced effect on performance in female teams than in male teams (Carron et al., 2002). Practical strategies to foster this positive climate include developing a shared team vision, engaging in structured team-building activities, cultivating a strong group identity, preventing the formation of social cliques, and strengthening social support networks (Weinberg & Gould, 2024). On the other hand, although male athletes reported lower levels of perceived stress and tended to rely less on social support for emotional reasons (Crocker & Graham, 1995), we encourage them to actively engage with social support resources to further strengthen their resilience, even if social factors may play a less central role in their motivation compared to female athletes.

Limitations

This study had four limitations. First, this study employed a cross-sectional survey design. All variables were assessed through self-report measures, which may have introduced response bias and social desirability effects. Additionally, although our data indicated that mental toughness was the strongest predictor of perceived stress, we cannot discern the directionality of cause-effect relationship between mental toughness and perceived stress. To determine whether enhancing mental toughness causally reduces stress, future studies should employ longitudinal or experimental research designs. Second, the predominance of female participants and the high proportion of athletes from Division I may limit the generalizability of the findings to student-athlete populations across other NCAA divisions. Future studies should aim to recruit larger and more diverse samples, including a greater number of male athletes Division II and III athletes. Third, although no direct evidence showed that the raffle incentive introduced biased responses, it remains possible that athletes motivated by incentives differ in certain characteristics from those who were not, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research examining and controlling for this potential bias is warranted. Finally, the limited sample size in the current study permitted only a broad examination of social support and coping skills, restricting the ability to analyze specific subtypes of these variables within the regression model. Future research should pursue a more nuanced analysis of how different forms of social support and coping skills influence perceived stress. Specifically, researchers should explore whether specific types of social support are more effective in alleviating stress, whether particular coping skills provide greater benefits, and whether there are potential racial differences in perceived stress.

Conclusion

The design of the current study was guided by the TTSC model. Individually, gender, social support, mental toughness, and coping skills each showed a significant relationship with and impact on perceived stress among college athletes. Collectively, mental toughness was the most influential predictor for perceived stress among these variables. Although social support and coping skills significantly influenced the levels of perceived stress, these two variables were no longer significant pre-

ditors of stress once mental toughness was included in the regression model. The findings not only underscore the importance of mental toughness in buffering college student-athletes' perceived stress, but also provides a direction for broadening the current nomological network in perceived stress research within the TTSC model. Findings suggest that reducing college student-athletes' stress by improving mental toughness may be an effective way to ameliorate perceived stress in student-athletes. Moreover, the findings from this study may be used to guide coaches, instructors, athletic department, and universities in creating specific and effective intervention programs for improving NCAA student-athletes' mental well-being and athletic performance.

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“We are in a Better Place”: The Effect of Conference Realignment on the Culture of One NCAA Division I Athletic Department

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Conference realignment is among the most transformational changes in intercollegiate athletics. The financial ramifications of realignment are significant. Though these have garnered the most attention, many changes stemming from realignment deal with qualitative elements of athletic departments. Altering rivalries, traditions, and sport sponsorship could affect athletic department cultures, yet little research has examined them. Therefore, this study used the organizational culture perspective to investigate the effects of conference realignment on the culture of Erie University’s athletic department. In 2013, Erie joined the Catholic Athletic Conference (CAC). To assess the effect of this change on Erie’s athletic culture, 20 interviews with coaches and administrators were conducted before the move and 16 were conducted two years after. Interview and other archival data were interpreted using thematic analysis. Findings indicate the athletic department culture shifted following two years of CAC membership. Participants conveyed an improved sense of pride and better institutional alignment. This culture change occurred despite a noticeable lack of success and lingering resource shortfalls. Erie’s realignment reflected consistencies and inconsistencies with existing literature on conference change. The findings highlight the psychological power of affiliation and the importance of institutional alignment when changing conferences.

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Introduction

Conference realignment has transformed intercollegiate athletics (Russo, 2023). Cycles of realignment have occurred throughout its history, but recently powerful conferences (i.e., Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten, Big 12, Southeastern Conference) have added members that expand their geographic footprint and revenue capacity. The financial ramifications of these conference shifts are significant. Moves into the Big Ten and Southeastern Conference (SEC) have increased income for new members by at least \$27.5 million (Berkowitz, 2025; SEC, 2025). However, these windfalls do not always lead to profit. New members of power conferences still struggle to balance their budgets (Rimbach & Koloff, 2022). When conference realignment trickles down from the power conferences to smaller leagues, financial outcomes are equally bleak (Hoffer & Pinson, 2015).

Qualitative elements of conference membership may offer some clues as to why universities continue to play "the everlasting game of musical chairs known as conference realignment" (Federman, 2024, paragraph 1). Such elements include conference mottos like the SEC's "it just means more," the Big Ten's traditional agreement to send a football team to the Rose Bowl, or the Big East's strong basketball heritage. Affiliating with conferences that have widely known artifacts, values, or assumptions may benefit the organizational cultures of migrating institutions regardless of financial outcomes. For example, Southern Methodist University (SMU) recently joined the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) with the caveat that it would not receive shares of television revenue until 2033. However, membership was viewed as a way for SMU to fully reestablish itself after the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) forced the university to disband football in 1987 (Wilson, 2024).

The organizational culture perspective is well-suited to help understand such paradoxical actions. Schein (2017) defines organizational culture as a pattern of shared assumptions that drives behavior in an organization. A growing body of research has applied this perspective to sport organizations (Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014; Dahlin & Schroeder, 2022; Heil, 2018; Maitland et al., 2015; Schroeder & Scribner, 2010). However, there has been minimal investigation of the relationship between conference realignment and organizational culture. Given its focus on artifacts, values, and basic assumptions, this perspective can provide a holistic view of universities that move conferences. Therefore, this study used Schein's model of organizational culture to longitudinally examine how conference realignment affected the athletic department culture at an NCAA Division I institution pseudonymously named Erie University. This case study provides a picture of Erie's culture two years prior to and two years after joining a new conference. It closes by offering university and athletic administrators considerations for successful conference realignment.

Literature Review

Conference Realignment

Stemming from the 1984 Supreme Court decision that decentralized television media rights (*NCAA vs. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*), major

conferences began adding members to “capture the most value for bundled and individual broadcast and licensing rights” (Lattinville & Speyer, 2013, p. 235; Petersen & Judge, 2021). The modern cycle of conference realignment began in 1990 with Pennsylvania State University’s move to the Big Ten and the SEC’s 1991 addition of South Carolina and Arkansas (Thamel & Bonagura, 2025). It continues today as powerful conferences poach valuable institutions, while diluted conferences subsequently scramble to add members from weaker conferences. The cycle even trickles down to Division II and Division III as schools transition to Division I at the behest of conferences offering membership (Borzi, 2023; DSU Athletic Media Relations, 2019; Petersen & Judge, 2021). These developments have produced “the super conference era,” a period in which even power conferences are at risk without adequate expansion (e.g., Southwestern Conference; Pac-12; Fertak, 2013; Russo, 2023, paragraph 10).

Financial objectives drive the super conference era, and data are widely publicized (USA Today, 2024). Conferences gain financial power by negotiating media rights deals, collecting NCAA distributions, and having members appear in post-season football games. Conferences then distribute these revenues to member institutions. Members of the two wealthiest conferences, the Big Ten and SEC, received distributions of \$60.5 million and \$51.3 million respectively in 2023-2024 (Berkowitz, 2024). While not all migrating institutions immediately earn a full share of conference distributions, most will still increase revenue compared to their original conference payouts (Berkowitz, 2025; SEC, 2025). Previous cycles of realignment have resulted in statistically significant revenue increases at the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) and Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) levels (Hoffer & Pinson, 2015). However, Hoffer and Pinson (2015) also found significant increases in total expenditures for both types of institutions. As a result, realignment at the FCS level did not create increases in profit and led to only marginal returns for FBS institutions. In an extreme example, Rutgers joined the Big Ten in 2014-2015 expecting an annual conference distribution of \$55 million but ultimately ended up with \$265 million in debt (Rimbach & Koloff, 2022). In essence, realignment boosts revenue, but causes athletic department expenditures to “substantially increase, preventing profits from increasing” (Hoffer & Pinson, 2015, p. 1222).

Though financial implications have garnered the most attention, many changes stemming from realignment deal with more subjective elements of intercollegiate athletics. For example, the evaporation of traditional rivalries, increase in travel schedules, emergence of new media partners, and changes in competition levels could all impact the cultures of realigned athletic departments (Covell & Barr, 2010; Schrottenboer, 2023). Research has examined some of these elements. Havard et al.’s (2017 a; 2017b) work on rivalries found fans have difficulty adapting and accepting new rivals when their institutions change conferences. Even after multiple years in a new league “fans will often hold on to their feelings toward the former rival” (Havard et al., 2017a, p. 33). Joining a new conference can also hinder the winning percentage of a university’s athletic teams. Although conference membership cannot be pinpointed as the lone reason, teams who move conferences have struggled to sus-

tain success (Perline et al., 2012; Schrottenboer, 2023). Of the 15 schools who moved into Power 5 football conferences since 2004, only 37% of the collective 183 seasons have resulted in winning records and only eight seasons resulted in conference championships (Schrottenboer, 2023). In men's basketball, realignment has been shown to decrease three key metrics: success against non-conference opponents, competitive balance, and revenue from NCAA tournament appearances (Perline & Stoldt, 2007; Perline et al., 2012). Finally, Milstein, et al. (2023) contend that joining a new conference could alter the sports offered by a particular athletic department. Their results indicated institutions seeking to move leagues "were encouraged to add specific sports as incentives to become new members" (Milstein, et al., p. 217, 2023).

Organizational Culture and Intercollegiate Athletics

Although "culture" has become a buzzword in college athletics (Athletic Director U, 2022; Smith, 2023), the organizational culture perspective originally emerged from the corporate sector (Ashkanasy et al., 2000; Bolman & Deal, 2017; Burke 2002; Hopkins et al., 2005; Schein, 2017; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Researchers of corporate culture contend that culture provides "the superglue that bonds an organization" by giving meaning and symbolism to its members (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 253). This connection ultimately aids the organization in achieving its goals (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The perspective also acknowledges that organizational cultures are dynamic and subject to change (Schein, 2017). To diminish the effects of such ambiguity, organizations and their members develop cultural forms. As these forms become patterned and internalized, they ultimately guide the way members "perceive, think, feel, and behave" (Schein, 2017, p. 33).

Levels of Organizational Culture

Although there are multiple iterations of organizational culture with varying types of cultural forms, Schein's (2017) three-level model formed the basis for this study. Its leader-centered, integrative perspective fits well with the structure and nature of college sport and has been used in other studies of college athletic department culture (Dahlin & Schroeder, 2022; Heil, 2018; Maitland et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2021). In this model, artifacts comprise the first level of culture. Artifacts are cultural forms that are easy to access, and include elements such as uniforms, architecture, colors, songs, logos, or mascots. However, as the most superficial level of culture, artifacts offer a limited assessment of its depth. Espoused values form the second level of culture. These provide an explicit declaration of what the organization deems important and often places them in a hierarchy. The significance of espoused values is they should "provide the day-to-day operating principles by which members of the group guide their behavior" (Schein, 2017, p. 27). Combined, artifacts and espoused values often present a clear picture of an organization's culture, yet on occasion, organizations still take actions that contrast with these top two levels (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Schein, 2017). Thus, research must also account for the third, and deepest, level of culture: basic assumptions. Schein (2017) contends basic assumptions are the key to fully understanding an organization's culture because they form the true

premise for organizational actions. Basic assumptions are often subconscious, yet they tell organizational members “what to pay attention to, what things mean and how to react emotionally to what is going on” (Schein, 2017, p. 32).

Athletic Department Culture

The organizational culture perspective has underpinned research across numerous levels of sport (Frontiera, 2010; Maitland et al. 2015; Thompson & Parent, 2025). However, organizational culture research at the intercollegiate level remains fragmented (Maitland, 2015). The perspective has been used to study an assortment of elements in college sport, and these studies consistently show how the culture of an athletic department can influence the attitudes and behaviors of its members. For example, cultural assumptions have been shown to affect the development and implementation of athletic department policies (Corman et al., 2019; Nite et al., 2013). Smith et al. (2021) found that misaligned athletic department cultures led to poor communication, unmanageable workloads, and employee turnover. Athletic department culture can also influence employee satisfaction and perceived opportunity for advancement (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004). More broadly, university culture can drive the manner in which university administrators situate athletics within the overall institution (Schroeder, 2010; Welty Peachey & Breuning, 2012). Conversely, strong department and institutional values can impede leaders’ ability to accomplish cultural change in athletics (Welty Peachey & Breuning, 2011).

However, much of this research looks at culture as a driver of behavior within athletic departments. Only recently have researchers begun to assess how external changes affect organizational cultures within college athletics. Recently, Corr et al. (2024) found that changes in NCAA transfer rules inhibited “the ability of coaches to cultivate longstanding organizational culture” and subsequently forced them to “continuously perform culture (re)construction in their football programs” (p. 9). Clark et al. (2025) have also suggested that the legal decisions permitting name, image, and likeness (NIL) deals have altered the power balance in athletic cultures.

Like transfer and NIL rules, conference realignment is an external change that may also affect athletic department cultures. With numerous cultural forms, college athletics are central to the identities of many colleges and universities and important to stakeholders (Sperber, 2001). However, conference realignment threatens to alter these cultures as traditional rivalries evaporate, travel schedules expand, and competition levels increase (Russo, 2023; Schrottenboer, 2023). Despite these changes, little research has explored the relationship between conference change and athletic department culture. Therefore, this qualitative, longitudinal case study explored how conference change affected Erie University’s athletic department culture. Specifically, Schein’s model of organizational culture was used to assess Erie’s athletic culture two years prior to joining the Catholic Athletic Conference (CAC) and again two years into its membership.

Method

Setting and Context

Erie is a pseudonym for a private, urban university that enrolled approximately 3,500 undergraduates on its residential campus and another 3,000 graduate students on other campuses. The athletic department was a non-football NCAA Division I member and, at the study's outset, was a member of a conference hereafter referred to as the Urban Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (UIAC). Besides Erie, the conference was comprised entirely of public institutions with enrollments over 20,000. Erie sponsored 17 sports in the UIAC, and in the early 2000's it was among the best non-football institutions in the National Association of College Directors of Athletics (NACDA) Director's Cup. However, in the three years prior to the start of this study, none of its teams qualified for post-season play. In its last year of membership, the men's basketball team did win the UIAC tournament, and the aquatics programs had significant success in the NCAA Championships.

In 2011, Erie appointed a new athletic director (AD) who established five priorities, one of which was culture change. During his first two years, the AD took several actions aimed at culture. One of these actions was spearheading an effort to join the Catholic Athletic Conference (CAC). He worked behind the scenes with athletic directors and other stakeholders to solicit an invitation to the CAC believing it would be a better fit for Erie and that would inspire change within his department. Ultimately, Erie's president filed a formal application for conference membership and the CAC presidents and commissioner offered an invitation in the spring of 2012.

Erie began competing in the CAC in the 2013-2014 academic year. The CAC was comprised primarily of private, Catholic universities with enrollments similar to Erie. Conference members were located in the same geographic region, and the conference had a strong history in men's basketball. Erie still offered 17 sports but dropped men's volleyball and added men's soccer when it joined the CAC. During its first two years as a conference member, Erie failed to win a conference title or earn an NCAA tournament bid in any sport that was sponsored by the CAC.

Methodology

Early in his tenure, the AD asked if the first author would be willing to track culture change in the athletic department. After discussing the structure and extent of the AD's objectives, the first author agreed to collect data and provide annual summary reports about cultural change. In addition, IRB approval was obtained in order to use the data for research purposes with the caveat that it would not be public until the AD retired. All administrators and head coaches were aware of these purposes and agreed to sit for multiple interviews. Subjects were assured they would remain anonymous. To protect participants, only status (i.e., administrator or coach) will be connected to quotes in the results, and Table 1 provides the sports and departments represented in the study. All participants agreed to the conditions, and of those, only six remain employed at Erie.

Table 1
Participant Roles at Erie and Years Interviewed

Title	Sport/Role	2011	2015
Coach 1	Women's Water Polo	Yes	No*
Coach 2	Women's Volleyball	Yes	No
Coach 3	Field Hockey	Yes	No*
Coach 4	Women's Cross Country	Yes	Yes
Coach 5	Men's Volleyball	Yes	No*
Coach 6	Women's Soccer	Yes	Yes
Coach 7	Men's Basketball	Yes	No*
Coach 8	Men's Water Polo	Yes	Yes
Coach 9	Softball	Yes	Yes
Coach 10	Women's Basketball	Yes	No*
Coach 11	Men's Golf	Yes	No*
Coach 12	Men's Tennis	Yes	Yes
Coach 13	Baseball	Yes	No
Coach 14	Field Hockey	No*	Yes
Coach 15	Women's Basketball	No	Yes
Coach 16	Swimming (men's and women's)	No*	Yes
Coach 17	Men's Basketball	No	Yes
Administrator 1	Associate AD/Senior Woman Admin.	Yes	Yes
Administrator 2	Assistant AD Media Relations	Yes	No*
Administrator 3	Director Marketing	Yes	No*
Administrator 4	Assistant AD Business/Finance	Yes	Yes
Administrator 5	Associate AD Development	Yes	Yes
Administrator 6	Assistant Director Development	Yes	Yes
Administrator 7	Assistant AD Facilities & Operations	No	Yes
Athletic Director	Athletics	Yes	Yes
President	President's Office	No	Yes

Note. A * indicates the participant was not employed by Erie during the year of data collection.

Data collection began in the summer of 2011 after the AD presented his priorities to the athletic department at an off-campus retreat. During the summer and early fall of 2011, interviews with seven senior athletic administrators and 13 head coaches were conducted. This first set of interviews was kept intentionally unstructured to gain a broad overview of Erie's athletic department culture. While Appendix A provides the baseline questions, interviews included numerous probes that led to additional questions about facilities, finances, and staff interactions. The second set

of data was collected in the summer of 2015 after Erie completed its second season in the CAC. All 16 participants were asked questions listed in Appendix B, which centered on evolution of the department culture and its facilitators. Conference change was a major focus of the questions although each interview featured follow-up questions based on participant responses. Of these 16, five administrators and five head coaches were repeat participants from 2011. Three of the 2015 participants held the same positions as those interviewed in 2011 (e.g., the women's basketball coach left, but the replacement was interviewed). The remaining three 2015 participants were interviewed due to their involvement in or perspective on conference change (e.g., the president). All interviews were conducted outside the athletic department at various locations across campus and lasted from 45-90 minutes. In addition, interview data was triangulated with observations and documents. The first author was given full access to department retreats, meetings, press conferences, and fundraisers. Extensive field notes were recorded by the first author at these events. Documents included in the analysis were prospective facility designs, strategic plans, and internal memos.

Data Analysis

The findings emerged out of a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). It is a qualitative approach in which data sources are systematically evaluated to improve the accuracy of "interpreting observations about people, events, situations, and organizations" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 6; Braun & Clark, 2006). Due to its versatility, thematic analysis allows researchers to create a "rich and complex, yet, detailed, account of the data" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 78). The detailed descriptions that come out of such analyses are especially valuable when "investigating an under-researched area" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 83). The process is comprised of six dynamic phases—familiarization, initial coding, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, producing the report—that allow themes to emerge and fade (Braun & Clark, 2006).

In this study, thematic analysis occurred in two cycles. The first cycle focused on the set of 2011 interviews when Erie was in the UIAC. Transcriptions were read and assessed for initial codes which were developed around Schein's (2017) levels of culture and repeated patterns in the data. A coding matrix was used to develop themes and to organize codes across the entire data set. This allowed repeated codes to merge into themes while less common codes were subsumed into themes or set aside. During this step, the peer examiner was given over 250 codes and asked to connect them to initial themes or develop new ones. Then in phase four, these themes and codes were reviewed through a detailed discussion with the peer examiner. The themes that resulted from this discussion became the artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions for Erie's athletic department culture in 2011 which are presented below.

The second cycle of thematic analysis focused not only on assessing the department's culture in 2015, but also how changing conferences may have contributed to cultural differences. Again, familiarization began by transcribing the 2015 inter-

views. These transcriptions were read and meaning units related to culture and conference membership were highlighted. Other forms of data were also assessed here. Field notes taken at the CAC press conference and department retreat were scanned for meaning units as were internal documents such as the strategic plan and some memos. In step two, initial coding began by compiling lists of the meaning units. Initial codes were based on repeated patterns, previous literature, cultural significance, and contradictions with the 2011 data. The third phase, searching for themes, started by tabulating the frequency of codes across the 2015 data to establish the deepest themes (e.g., CAC prestige, increased competition). The elements of these themes were then parsed out and detailed visually on a whiteboard. In the fourth phase, reviewing themes, the authors spent hours developing initial themes with supporting codes (see Table 2). This group of themes and codes was shared with two participants during the member check.

Based on member feedback and further discussion, the data was repositioned in three ways. The category of ‘resources’ was created to include facilities and budgets, value shifts merged with alignment to become ‘(mis)alignment,’ and logistics and visibility were relocated as subcategories under ‘prestige’. Fifth, the interaction of the themes was diagrammed via a thematic map (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Thematic Map of Erie’s 2015 Athletic Department Culture After Joining the Catholic Athletic Conference

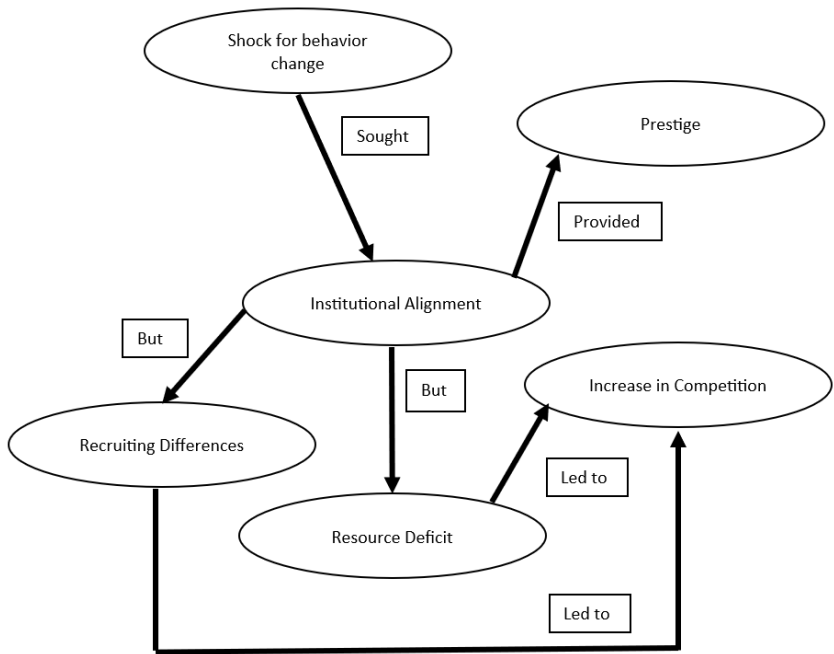


Table 2

Cultural Categories and Themes After Erie University's Conference Change

Major Themes	Supporting Codes	
Shock & Behavior Change	Adapt or die	Wake-up call
	Excitement	Harder than expected
	Need the challenge	
Budget	Fundraising	Assistant coach salaries
	Huge gaps with CAC members	Guarantee games
Facilities	Dead weight (stadium)	Lower ceiling
	Fundraising	Gap with top CAC members
Alignment	Similar schools	Similar challenges
	Similar philosophies	Facilities & budgets
Values	Basketball conference	Sports increase importance
	Sport decrease importance	Sports still w/ no conference
Prestige	Pride	First class
	Reputation	Feels/sounds better
	Job attractiveness	Parents appeal
Logistics	Tournaments	Gifts
	Organization	Professionalism
Visibility	Footprint	Branding
	TV deal	Broadcast quality
Competition	Less winning	Teams higher ranked
	NCAA bids harder	Recruiting harder
Recruiting Changes	Pass the look test	City hurts
	Lost niche	Broader competition
	Behind CAC competition	

Supporting quotes and examples were also selected here. Finally, a thick, rich narrative of Erie's conference realignment and its 2015 culture was developed.

Qualitative researchers must establish positionality and account for reflexivity, particularly when relying on interview data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clark, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the study, the first author was a faculty member at Erie who served as a major advisor to several student-athletes and student interns in the athletic department. As a result, he developed professional relationships with many members of the athletic department. This provided extensive access to the department and facilitated deep, thoughtful interviews. However, this proximity also increased the potential for bias in the interviews and analysis.

Three tactics were used in the analytical process to account for reflexivity. First, an external colleague was asked to serve in the role of peer examiner who could "scan some of the raw data and assess if the findings are plausible" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 250). He [the examiner] had no ties to Erie nor relationships with its coaches or administrators, and his experiences as an athlete, coach, and professor had been outside the NCAA Division I level. Therefore, he was able to serve as a contrarian, checking for biases and challenging assumptions. Second, a member check solicited feedback from two participants to see if the "interpretation 'rings true'" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). It is among the most important ways to ensure credibility for the analysis and enables fine-tuning to better reflect the participants' perspectives. For this study, one coach and one administrator were asked to provide input on our analysis and improve our interpretations of the data. Third, the second author served as a triangulating analyst who could "independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings" (Patton, 2015, p. 665). The second author was a senior completing undergraduate research for credit. He was not enrolled at the university during data collection but, as a student-athlete, was familiar with the athletic department culture.

Several additional measures were taken to account for any resulting biases and maintain the four quality standards of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007). The study's credibility was established by keeping an audit trail and triangulating data from transcripts, field notes, and documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability was developed through transparency and description of the setting and offering attributes of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Confirmability comes through presenting the authors' backgrounds, establishing a theoretical framework, and using member checks (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Dependability was achieved by detailing the methods, coding, and analysis (Edwards & Skinner, 2009).

Findings

This section will present the three levels of culture in the athletic department both before and after Erie joined the CAC. However, more depth and detail will be presented on the culture following realignment since that is the central focus of the study. Prior to the move, Erie's athletic culture was dysfunctional. Findings indicate

the culture had changed after two years of CAC membership to become more aligned and optimistic. Again, it is important to acknowledge the AD and other university leaders took several actions over the course of the study that could have contributed to cultural change (e.g., personnel changes, new scholarship model). This section will concentrate on changes that related specifically to conference realignment.

Erie Athletics' Culture in the UIAC

When the AD took over in 2011, the culture of the athletic department was in decay. It was described by various participants as "left for dead," "burned out," "stagnant," and "depressing." The three elements of culture—artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions—were misaligned and sent mixed messages to the members of the athletic department. The AD was aware of this and worked for a new conference affiliation in part to assist with cultural change efforts.

Artifacts in the UIAC

Two obvious artifacts defined Erie's culture in 2011. The most obvious was its football stadium. Erie dropped football in 1996, but the stadium remained the most visible structure on the west side of campus and was located on a major city thoroughfare. It sat across from the basketball arena and abutted the softball field, pool, and soccer field. Although soccer games were initially played in the stadium, it became so decrepit that it could no longer even be used for practice. Coach 6 stated "They kind of just chuckle at you when say anything about the stadium. I mean it's frustrating because the plan was to knock the stadium down." Plans to replace it with a smaller soccer stadium were mired in campus politics and lacked funding. The AD told coaches "The stadium is empty, but not this year. It's going to take time." So, the stadium lingered as a public eyesore that cast a literal shadow over many other sports facilities. Coach 13 further attributed Erie's lack of success to the absence of football. "There is a reason why people invest money in football because I think it goes beyond campus. I mean how many teams in the history of the College World Series have won without football?" In essence, the stadium symbolized the lack of success, inability to accomplish goals, and general stagnancy of Erie athletics.

The second major artifact in Erie's athletic culture was poor funding. In the initial phase of interviews, four of the seven administrators and all but one coach attributed Erie's stagnancy to insufficient resources. Administrator 6 admitted "Something that might inhibit us from doing more? It comes down to resources." In particular, subpar facilities, low coaches pay, and a lack of scholarships were consistently identified as barriers to improvement. Coach 8 added "resources-wise, you can go out and make a great dinner out of something, but if you don't have the money for good ingredients, there is only so high a level of dinner you can make." In essence, "budget" was the default excuse for any problem within Erie athletics.

Values in the UIAC

While these artifacts offered a superficial view of the culture, Erie's espoused values added a deeper yet skewed view of its culture in the UIAC. Three main values

were espoused by coaches and administrators. First, they believed Erie was a place where all sports had the opportunity to succeed. This value seemed to remain from the early 2000's when multiple sports won conference championships, qualified for post-season play, and/or had award-winning athletes. However, the existence of this value was undercut by the fact that only two teams had qualified for NCAA Championships between 2005-2010. Coach 11's comment reflects this mixed message:

The vision has to be around winning, and it has to be about winning conference championships... My team cried when we lost. My four seniors, when we lost at UIAC last year, they cried on the 18th hole because they never got a ring. So at least I sold them on that vision, right, and they bought in.

The second value espoused at Erie in the UIAC was that the athletic department featured an intimate family atmosphere. Coach 10 admitted "I think why I am here and what kind of sold me on it was just the private school, family atmosphere kind of vibe." At his initial summer retreat, the AD described Erie as a place where coaches should feel support and a sense camaraderie amongst the different staffs. He even hosted department functions at his house to facilitate this sense of togetherness. Veterans of the athletic department, as Administrator 4 noted, "generally do like working with each other." Conversely, younger coaches, such as coach 1, found the culture to be "very lonely" and that "some people that maybe don't want you to do well, because they're not doing well."

Third, Erie believed it offered student-athletes a great experience. As was written in the athletic department's strategic plan, Erie aimed to provide "the best educational opportunities, nationally recognized coaching, and superior student-athlete services." The AD summarized this at a staff meeting, indicating how Erie has always been a place where "they take care of student-athletes" because there "just are not many cracks they can fall through." Again, others expressed skepticism that Erie reinforced its claim of supporting student-athletes. Administrator 1 noted "we just cannot compare to the staffing level of an Ohio State overall." Coach 1 added "[my players] go to the training room, and we can't get seen."

Basic Assumption in the UIAC

Due to the misalignment of artifacts and values, Erie's athletic culture in the UIAC was ultimately driven by one basic assumption: a desire to survive. In coach 3's perspective, there was no "Erie Way" indicating "this is how we do things, or this is how we dress, this is the spiel we give recruits, this is the spiel out in the community." Therefore, coaches and administrators all turned inward. Administrator 5 elaborated, "Everybody gets tunnel vision where, 'This is my program.... We are taking care of our own and that's what we are going to do.'" The assumption was depicted in several ways. Administrator 8 referred to the mindset as "siloed." Coach 10 said "It's every man for himself." Coach 8 stated "You play your cards super close to the vest." Coach 6 added a financial rationale for focusing on survival. "I think we did feel like we had to fend for ourselves, absolutely. I mean we are raising 40% of our budget. Hell yeah, I'm fending for myself." Locating support to survive was difficult because as coach 12 noted, "It's just quiet. It's like a jail cell. You are in your cell..."

and no one gets together." As mentioned, the AD was aware of the department's dysfunctional culture and knew changing it was imperative. He took several actions to improve culture, and one was to help Erie gain CAC membership.

Erie Athletics' Culture in the CAC

Erie joined the CAC to much fanfare. A festive press conference was held on campus to make the announcement featuring colorful decorations, the pep band, and the mascot. It also included speeches from the conference commissioner, Erie's president, another CAC president, and the AD. The ceremony was covered by several local media outlets and numerous alumni, boosters, and fans attended. The significance of the event and the conference move was apparent to coaches and administrators at the ceremony who noted "it's exciting," "you felt it right away," and "there is a sense of pride in the CAC."

Although the move had long been discussed, most thought it was a pipedream. When the CAC invitation came, it served as an eye-opener to many. Most felt like Coach 8 who said "I feel like everyone took a big bolt. Ok, like the ante was upped. I felt like kind of an 'oh crap' feeling. Here we go. We better belly up to the bar. Do we need that? Yeah." The wake up came on two levels. First, many did not realize the CAC's quality across sports. Most knew it was a strong basketball conference but were not aware of its depth in other sports. For example, Administrator 6 acknowledged he did not realize the strength of CAC tennis. "Do you realize how many teams were ranked? In tennis, seven out of the 10 teams were ranked at one point last year. God, I didn't know that." Second, the conference change was a signal to coaches that complacency would no longer be tolerated and that jobs might be at stake. Coach 4 explained "I don't know if that's why there's been turnover, but I think for some of these coaches, it's a wake-up call. Yeah, you can't be complacent and be decent. You gotta be always learning and looking for new motivation."

Erie responded to the wake-up call. After being in the CAC for two years, there were clear changes within each level of culture. Administrator 4 summarized "Overall, I think we are in a better place with schools more like us." In terms of artifacts, Erie made progress on its facilities but still suffered from obvious budgetary constraints. Erie's athletic department values adapted with a renewed focus on competition, changes in sport offerings, and altered approaches to recruiting. However, these were not always seen as positive. Moving to the CAC also transformed Erie's basic assumptions. The athletic department felt an increased sense of prestige about joining a conference that Coach 15 described as "An entirely different level and step up." The move also left the university feeling more aligned, although that sense of alignment was not true for all sports.

Artifacts in the CAC

Moving to the CAC was accompanied by changes to some of Erie's artifacts. In preparing to join the conference, a new facilities plan was developed for an "athletics quadrant." While the conference did not specifically require new facilities, the facilities plan was part of the push to get a CAC invitation. A draft of the plans involved

demolishing the football stadium, building new facilities for field hockey, soccer, beach volleyball, and tennis. In early 2014, demolition of the stadium commenced, and the field hockey turf was ready for the fall 2014 season. Ground was broken for the tennis complex in the fall of 2014, and beach volleyball courts opened in spring 2015. Initially, these facility developments enabled the members of the organization to buy into the AD's vision for culture change. Administrator 1 acknowledged "I think it's way better today definitely than it was four years ago. I think the planning, having some vision, facility changes have really got people—'Wow there's change!'" However, the AD was concerned that hiccups slowing progress of the soccer and tennis facilities threatened his credibility.

It's been disappointing to the athletes because they are told one thing and something else happens. Yeah, it's also absorbed a tremendous amount of emotional energy administratively because it's so frustrating. How can this happen? There have been a number of setbacks... When you build stuff like that, it builds a sense of excitement. It's a pretty neat deal. And whatever we were going to do for tennis and soccer, our incompetence at getting the facility built in a timely way has undermined the positive nature of it.

The resource deficit was a second artifact that became very pronounced after joining the CAC. Although coaches and administrators felt they were underfunded in the UIAC, they realized there was an even larger resource gap with their CAC peers. Administrator 6 acknowledged:

I don't know that we were funded or are still funded enough to be where we need to be. And it's not all funding. It's coaching and recruiting and stuff like that too, but when you compare most of our programs, we are in the bottom tier in terms of funding. And to compete in this conference you need as much ammo as you can get.

This gap manifested in several ways. Head coaches felt it was hard to hire and retain assistant coaches on low salaries. Unlike top teams in the conference, Erie did not have the money to pay for guarantee games. Administrators and coaches both felt facilities were better in the CAC. Even though Erie was progressing with facilities, there was a sense that other schools had deeper pockets and would ultimately out-build them. Some coaches felt this was only specific to the top-tier CAC members. Coach 6 said "No one would be able to compete with [top CAC program]. They got the facilities. They got the money. That's the easiest to sell an athlete on: the facility. They're way better than anyone in the UIAC." Other coaches felt it applied even to the lower tier members. Coach 17 explained "Now we're tenth in facilities. The problem with tenth is we might be tenth and 800 miles behind nine. [Unsuccessful CAC member] is better than us."

As a result, members of the athletic department felt extra pressure to fundraise. During the introductory press conference, the president openly stated that additional university resources would not accompany the conference shift. Thus, administrators and coaches spent more time fundraising in order to compete in the CAC. Erie's coaches did not believe this was a task that concerned their peers. Coach 6 indicated:

I think the president even said it...that we would be fully funded. Still not happening, right. I'm still having to raise \$40,000 a year just to operate and whatever it is—\$42,000 this year, \$38,000? I don't know. And [CAC colleague] is not worried about fundraising to keep his program afloat, right. He's fundraising to enhance either what he's bringing home or what his assistant coaches are bringing home.

Values in the CAC

Moving to the CAC also altered the values of Erie's athletic culture. The most obvious change was an increased emphasis on competition. Outside the athletic department, there was a belief that the president and public knew men's basketball was entering a more difficult league. Otherwise, coaches and administrators sensed a public perception that Erie would regularly contend for conference titles since it was now competing against true peers—small, private institutions. These stakeholders failed to realize that CAC had teams nationally ranked in several sports. Coach 6 explained "I don't know that everybody understands...this is a soccer conference, and we got two teams in the top 10 in the RPI. So, for us, I knew what we were getting into." This expectation left coaches somewhat frustrated because they suspected it was going to be harder to win conference titles or earn at-large NCAA bids. However, some in athletics believed that a shift in perspective *was* needed. Administrator 7 observed "I think it definitely raises the bar competition-wise. It makes it more difficult to compete, but also you want to compete at that level."

Moving conferences also forced Erie to change what sports it valued. Only a few months after it joined the CAC, Erie dropped men's volleyball and added men's soccer. Administrator 7 said that "We had planned on both until the [budget] thing. They really were two independent decisions." However, the CAC sponsored men's soccer but not men's volleyball. In addition, men's soccer was seen by Administrator 8 as "another men's sport besides basketball that the community has an interest in." So, to the chagrin of some coaches, men's soccer was intensely marketed by the department. Coach 12 stated:

I mean, it's a visible sport and they talk about it in our staff meetings, and we gotta hit the Hispanic community because it's in soccer, and it's just natural. It's a realistic thing that they can do. They put it up there on the slide shows on the screens. You know, this is what we're prioritizing. So, it is at least clear. It's *very* clear.

Other coaches also sensed a shift in priorities with the conference move. Some sports that had been strong in the UIAC were not strong in the CAC. Coach 9, whose team had qualified for multiple NCAA tournaments, expressed "I'm still not convinced of the CAC's investment in our sport." Others whose sports were stronger in the CAC felt better about the move. Coach 6 indicated that "When the CAC came in, their first statement was...Soccer and basketball are our priorities on the women's side."

Values around recruiting were a third set of adaptations that arose from joining the CAC. Most coaches found they had to adapt their recruiting philosophies although the adjustments varied by sport. Many started looking for different qualities

in recruits. Some began looking for “athletic” or “skilled” players while Coach 17 believed he would have to recruit players “We’re gonna have to develop” because the CAC was a “junior/senior loaded conference.” Others, like Coach 15, changed where they recruited. “I think we can get somebody from the inner city a little bit better attracted to our school.” Coaches also struggled to develop their recruiting niche in the CAC. In the UIAC, Erie was the lone private school and by far the smallest, and as Coach 6 noted “We were the odd one, you know, we drew because we were different than everybody in the UIAC.” Conversely, Coach 17 noted in the CAC “A lot of those options look exactly like us. They look identical.” Not only did Erie lack distinction, but many participants also felt they were at geographic and facility disadvantages. Coach 9 acknowledged “in the grand scheme of things, [CAC schools] are in more destination cities than [our city]. And facility wise? [Two CAC schools] are ahead of us and they didn’t have to raise any money.” According to Coach 12, new values and loss of a niche made recruiting “harder. We actually have to work more in the CAC.”

Basic Assumptions in the CAC

Moving to the CAC did alter the deepest level of Erie’s athletic culture—its basic assumptions. The first new assumption was a sense of prestige. The AD believed conference membership enabled Erie to move beyond its past survival assumption because “the CAC gave us more of a collective identity.” Furthermore, an identity associated with the CAC was viewed as a step up for the athletic department. Administrator 1 acknowledged “I just think there is a prestige with the CAC. The UIAC was always thought of negatively and its public perception is not the strongest... So, I think the prestige of the conference is a big positive.” Coach 12 added “I guess it’s just word of mouth. There is a gap in the CAC. It’s just more prestigious...people think of it differently.” Administrator 5 suggested the CAC “for many of us, this is where we belong.”

The assumption of prestige was rooted in the CAC’s visibility. The conference had national and regional media rights deals for men’s basketball, and virtually all participants were excited about the benefits those might provide. Even though Erie games were not designated for national TV, many felt even the regional visibility would raise its profile and provide revenue for athletics. Coach 12 explained:

I get that it’s important to every person because we are in a conference that there’s going to be a basketball game on [TV] once a week, whether it’s us or not...UIAC: four games a year. Here: 40 games a year. Do the math, ok? The CAC also had its own digital network that allowed members to stream any sport, and the conference provided financial assistance to purchase the equipment needed for production. Administrator 4 said “I mean just the sheer broadcast element alone with the ESPN deal and the online broadcasts, the digital initiative that the CAC had. I think it is better for the university exposure wise, prestige wise that we are in the CAC.”

Prestige was reinforced by the sense that Erie had joined a more professional organization. Coach 15 felt that “the CAC operates with a whole different level of class

than the UIAC does... It just makes you feel like, entirely different, you know, you're an entirely different program all together." For administrators, this feeling stemmed from the aforementioned streaming platform as well as the locations and logistics of conference meetings. For coaches, prestige came from the way the conference treated its athletes and ran its tournaments. This even extended to non-revenue sports. Coach 4 described his experience:

We show up at the [CAC tournament], tents are set up for every team already with our logo and a banner. There's a team tent for food. We have our meeting at the hotel with the CAC folder there. I mean, this is quality. It's not thrown together. So, even on the organizational level... it's just a different mentality.

Although Erie's department felt more prestigious, its teams' success did not reflect that. While their recent level in the UIAC had dropped, Erie was still viewed as one of the more prominent members of that conference. Coach 17 explained:

We had a serious niche in the last league, like we're the only private school in a public school league. Wow. I'd say we were top two or three all the time...everything you look at in a job: facilities, salaries, coaches, scholarships. Everything you want, we were one, two, or three. You could argue that we were one. Now? We are 10.

As suggested above, Erie did not hold the same status in the CAC. None of its basketball games were nationally televised, and none of its teams finished in the top three of the league standings. In the all-sports competition, Erie finished tenth out of ten in its first year as a member and ninth in year two. Even coach 14 acknowledged:

The only thing I see is that none of our sports' records were as good as they were when we were in the UIAC. So do people look at that and go, 'Oh, that was a dumb move for us?' No, I've never heard that was a dumb move.

So, while Erie did not have tangible evidence of increased prestige in the CAC, participants still felt it improved their culture.

The second assumption that changed after joining the CAC was a sense of university alignment. On a macrolevel, Erie felt it had become partners with institutions that better reflected who they were and wanted to be. With one exception, the other conference members were small, private schools that had strong academic reputations and focused primarily on undergraduate education. The university president was very clear about the role of institutional reputation during the decision-making process, saying:

And so, for me, what really drove the conference was much less, how would it impact the [athletics] department. That was sort of secondary. My thinking was much more of how would it align with the values of us as a university and our identity as a university?

Administrator 7 believed the effects of CAC membership were felt in other parts of the university. "I've talked to [admissions director] about admissions and said, 'How does this transition work for you and other folks in admissions?' And they are like 'It's a different deal. People think of us differently.'"

This macro-perspective was also reflected in the athletic department. Competing against peers with similar admissions standards, tuition costs, budget models, and institutional challenges felt more fair to coaches. The AD explained:

I think we're in a conference now where other people are not taking short-cuts to be successful. Not only is it more prestigious and people feel better about it, but it's also a league where other people have the same challenges we have. There's not that feeling out there that [former UIAC peer] has so many advantages we don't have.

While the general sense was that conference realignment was better for the university and athletics, that was not true for all coaches. On a micro-level, some were concerned the conference was not a good fit for their sports. Some sports that were not sponsored in the UIAC also failed to get a desired home in the CAC and were forced to remain in hybrid leagues. Coach 16 claimed the move “doesn't make sense. I mean, we're still in the [hybrid conference]. All the UIAC schools and the CAC schools that have [his sport] are in still in [the hybrid league].” Other coaches found the CAC weaker in their sports. Coach 9 explained how that hurt his team's chances for post-season play.

Truthfully, for me, it's been tough, not just because of the relationships over the years in the other conference, but the UIAC has more teams with an RPI. So, if you take some lumps, you still have a shot at [the NCAA tournament].

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how conference realignment affected the culture of Erie's athletic department. Conference realignment did appear to help instigate culture change at Erie. Hopkins et al. (2005) contend a crisis is needed to unfreeze old assumptions and “develop a sense of urgency for change” (p. 177). Erie's move to the CAC was seen as a shock and helped instigate change to multiple levels of its athletic culture. Artifacts like the football stadium were removed and new facility plans were developed. In terms of values, joining the CAC increased Erie's focus on competition, reset its sport offerings, and changed the way its coaches recruited. Even Erie's basic assumptions shifted because athletic department members thought they were in a superior conference that was, for the most part, better aligned with its overall institutional values.

Comparison to Existing Literature

In some ways, Erie's cultural shifts after joining the CAC are different from the existing literature on conference realignment. Unlike realignment in the power conferences, this move was not driven by the influx of media rights revenue (Hoffer & Pinson, 2015; Latinville & Speyer, 2013). The CAC did have a better media rights deal and assisted with streaming broadcasts, but it did not provide Erie with a financial windfall. So instead of being driven by financial motives, this move re-

flects a more traditional approach to conference affiliation in which philosophically aligned institutions in geographic proximity join for equitable competition (Abbott, 1990; Farley, 2015). The move also did not appear to affect Erie's rivalries in any meaningful way. While loss of rivalries was a notable finding in Havard's (2017a; 2017b) work on realignment, it almost never came up at Erie. Erie did not have any long-standing rivals in the UIAC, and the lack of an engaged fanbase probably limited the significance of these cultural elements as compared to power conference realignment.

In other ways, the changes in Erie's culture were similar to those seen in past research on conference realignment. Consistent with the findings of Milstein, et al. (2023), changing conferences did affect Erie's sport offerings. Not only was men's soccer added when Erie joined the CAC, but it also became a focal point of the athletic department's marketing efforts. Men's soccer was seen as a way to connect the athletic department with a new group of fans and deepen its connection to the community. Simultaneously, men's volleyball, a sport not sponsored by the new conference, was dropped. These moves reflect what Milstein et al. (2023) call a "functional utility" where sport offerings are not random but help the university achieve specific institutional objectives. Erie's lack of success in the CAC was a second consistency with the literature. Both Perline et al. (2012) and Schrottenboer (2023) found realigned schools struggled to succeed in their new conferences. Likewise, Erie had trouble competing in sports across the CAC. While participants acknowledged and expected it in some sports, continued losing may make cultural buy in more difficult. To embed cultural changes, organizations need to experience success, and leaders need to connect those successes to new values and assumptions. According to Schein (2017), leaders can implement numerous cultural change actions "but none of those changes will produce culture change unless the new way of doing things actually works better" (p. 339).

Theoretical Implications

The findings demonstrate several key notions about culture change in college athletics. First, prestige is an extremely strong assumption. Erie's coaches and administrators quickly adopted the assumption that affiliation with nationally prominent schools and athletic programs was good for its culture, despite evidence to the contrary. Compared to their CAC peers, Erie's teams were underfunded and less successful. Coaches had a harder time recruiting and felt disadvantaged when doing so. Yet virtually all participants were excited to be in the CAC and believed it had changed the department culture. This contradiction may best be explained by research on institutional logics in college sport (Nite & Bopp, 2017; Southall et al., 2008; Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2011). Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011) note the dominant logic among athletic departments is to take the actions necessary to provide "legitimacy and acquire resources necessary for competitive success" (p. 211). However, subscribing to dominant logics may become problematic and place leaders in "precarious positions" when it creates incompatibilities with "field-level logics" (Nite & Bopp 2017, p. 369).

Second, Erie's move to the CAC highlights the importance of cultural alignment. Schein (2017) notes strong cultures feature "beliefs, values, and assumptions [that] are in alignment" (p. 181). At Erie, there appeared to be diverse perspectives on the rationale for joining the CAC. The president valued affiliation with other small, private schools. Many administrators and coaches wanted to be members of a stronger, more visible conference. A minority of coaches did not see the value in joining the CAC. When diverse values are allowed to linger, subcultures can arise and potentially impede the development of a strong central culture (Hopkins et al., 2005).

Third, Erie's move to the CAC suggests changing conferences might lead to unintended cultural consequences. Erie, which was the lone private school in the UIAC, lost its recruiting niche when it joined the all-private CAC. Its coaches thought budgets were in the top three of the UIAC but were drastically lower than their CAC peers. As a result, their teams were struggling to see the expected benefits of conference realignment. In some ways Erie's situation reflects Rutgers' move to the Big Ten where the athletic department suffered as a result of realignment. Rutgers' leaders expected to generate more revenue but had more difficulty winning and amassed millions in debt trying to do so (Rimbach & Koloff, 2022).

Practical Recommendations

Changing conferences may be an effective way for athletic directors and presidents to assist with athletic department culture change, but it is a mechanism that has the potential to backfire. Therefore, leaders must carefully consider the rationale for conference change, how they resource it, and its possible consequences. First, university leaders must establish clear institutional intentionality about conference change. Whether the goals for realignment are financial, cultural, reputational, or something else, senior leaders need to share this rationale clearly and repeatedly with internal and external stakeholders. When the rationale for change is clear, coaches and administrators will be less likely to resist, and cultural alignment will improve (Hopkins, et al., 2005).

Second, athletic directors and presidents must support conference change with resources. Schools 'moving up' to wealthier and more visible conferences need support for coaching salaries, facilities, travel, recruiting, and revenue-sharing. Even if the new conference provides resources via media rights, it is still imperative for university leaders to obtain additional funding. Boosters, sponsors, institutional support, and/or ticket revenue can be used to maximize benefits of the move (Wilson, 2024). Failing to do so is likely to undercut whatever goals the university seeks to achieve with conference realignment.

Third, it is important for leaders to try and foresee the unintended consequences of realignment. This can be achieved by researching the past movements of peer institutions, tracking the history of conference membership, and/or digging into conference financial models. Such knowledge will enable university leaders to best determine if and where a conference move should occur. As research on institutional logic demonstrates, joining a more prominent conference seems like a rational or

even desired decision (Nite & Bopp, 2017; Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2011). However, if the new conference is unstable or the university cannot reap the benefits of membership, such a move might actually hurt the athletic department's culture.

Finally, leaders must constantly remain abreast of conference realignment. Change is happening at every level of college athletics and conference decisions are made rapidly (Spisak, 2024). It is imperative leaders understand the strengths and weaknesses of their existing conference, potential conference destinations, as well as their own athletic department's fit with them. As the demise of the Pac-12 and Southwest Conferences demonstrates, getting caught on the periphery of conference decisions can have longstanding effects on department finances, values, assumptions, and ultimately cultures (McCullough, 2023).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The findings of this study may be mitigated by a few limitations but offer possibilities for additional research. First, the study took place at an NCAA Division I institution outside the power conferences, without football, and lacking a passionate fan base. Studying realignment in a variety of other settings (e.g., power conferences, Division II or Division III conferences) would likely yield different and valuable results. Additionally, examining cultural change at schools with football or other sports of significant public interest may alter stakeholder interpretations of conference change. While the study did draw from numerous forms of data, it did not include input from athletes, boosters, or fans. Such perspectives would add a deeper understanding of culture before and after conference realignment. Finally, the data may be somewhat dated as it comes from earlier cycles of realignment. However, numerous universities are still transitioning to new conferences without overt financial objectives (e.g., SMU, University of Delaware, Lindenwood University; Becton, 2025; Wilson, 2024). Therefore, the findings can still provide value for administrators considering conference changes.

Conclusion

Conference realignment is certain to continue. Media companies, conference commissioners, governing bodies, and the schools themselves are creating conditions that will keep conference membership in flux (Mandel, 2024). To best grapple with the dynamic conference landscape, leaders of college athletic departments need to have a strong sense of their cultures. Athletic directors must establish and communicate distinct values for their departments, including which sports to offer, how they expect coaches and administrators to operate, and the type of experience they want athletes to have. Presidents need clear assumptions about the role of athletics within their overall institutions — be it a revenue generator, a marketing tool, a driver of enrollment, or a forum for alumni relations. Only when leaders firmly establish these elements of culture will they be able to make judicious decisions about what conferences best fit their institutions.

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Appendix A

Initial Culture Questions for Coaches and Administrators (2011)

How would you describe the vibe in the Athletic Department? What's the culture like?

What were your takeaways from [the new athletic director's] retreat?

How do you feel about the vision and the plan presented at the retreat?

Follow-up on some of the major themes from the retreat:

1. What is your sense of the "the genius of and" [a core value presented by the AD]?
2. The AD wants the decisions in the athletic department to stem from what's best for the student athlete [core value]. Has that not been happening? Why/why not?
3. What could be done to make the athletic department feel more like a family [core value]?
4. Describe the level of planning and professionalism in the athletic department [core value]?
5. Is this a great place to coach? Why? If not, what would make a better place to coach [core value]?

Are there any other things I should know about the culture of the department or improving it?

Appendix B

Culture Change Questions Year Four (2015)

How would you describe the culture of the department today?

Is the culture different than it was 4 years ago? In what ways?

What has led to those changes?

Personnel changes? Is there a common theme in the new hires/replacements?

What gets a staff member or coach fired?

How do you feel about the CAC move?

-Dropping of men's volleyball?

-Adding men's soccer?

-Facilities?

-Budgets?

-Are there things that have detracted from a change in culture?

How do you feel about the technology and innovation push? Is everyone buying in?

What determines how resources are allocated?

Are star coaches treated differently if they win/produce?

Anything I missed?

University Administrator extras:

What was your sense of the culture in the athletic department when you came to Erie?

How did the idea of joining the CAC make its way to you?

What were your objectives specifically for the athletic department? How did you think the CAC would transform the athletic department? Have those objectives borne out?

How did you think it would affect the university? Has it?

How has it changed the administration's engagement with athletics?

Do you feel differently about Erie because it is now in the CAC?

Anything I missed about the effect of the CAC on the athletic department?

Exploring NIL Self-Marketing and Branding Strategies of NCAA Group of Five Collegiate Athletes: A Single-Site Qualitative Case Study

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This single-site qualitative case study examines how NCAA Division I Group of Five student-athletes engage in self-marketing and personal branding in the evolving name, image, and likeness (NIL) landscape. Guided by the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), the study explores how student-athlete branding practices align with the framework's three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle). Fourteen student-athletes representing six distinct sports participated in semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate student-athletes' NIL efforts were largely self-directed, shaped by limited institutional resources typical of NCAA Division I Group of Five contexts. Participants relied heavily on direct outreach and inconsistent social media strategies, with most emphasizing performance and appearance over lifestyle branding. Despite these challenges, student-athletes identified NIL participation as beneficial for developing communication, professionalism, and financial literacy skills. This study contributes to the literature by applying MABI to a collegiate NIL environment, offering a theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes at resource-constrained institutions build personal brands in the absence of formalized support. Implications highlight the need for athletic departments to provide structured NIL education, branding guidance, and strategic support that better prepare student-athletes for the demands of NIL participation.

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In 2021, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) enacted its name, image, and likeness (NIL) policy, allowing student-athletes to earn compensation for promotional activities, endorsements, and personal branding (NCAA, 2021a). This policy shift introduced new entrepreneurial opportunities for student-athletes while simultaneously placing additional expectations on athletic departments to provide education, guidance, and compliance oversight. For many institutions, the NIL era has challenged existing support structures, especially where resources, staffing, and administrative priorities already differ markedly across NCAA subdivisions (Meares et al., 2024).

Although recent scholarship has begun to explore student-athletes' experiences navigating NIL, much of this research has approached the topic from broad or inductive perspectives that examine general challenges and opportunities (Bredikhina et al., 2026; Corr et al., 2023; Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). Studies have increasingly examined the influence of institutional context and resource levels, noting that NIL is experienced differently at large, well-funded athletic departments than at smaller or NCAA Division I Group of Five programs (Gonzales & Short, 2025). However, far less attention has been given to how student-athletes at Group of Five institutions actively engage in personal branding and self-marketing considering their athletic departments often have fewer staff, reduced visibility, smaller local markets, and more constrained NIL infrastructures. Because NIL compensation for most college athletes is generated through local or regional networks, institutional resource disparities meaningfully shape how student-athletes identify opportunities and present themselves to potential partners (Meares et al., 2024).

While the NIL literature has contributed important insights into student-athlete experiences, most studies have used inductive coding without anchoring findings to a theoretical model of athlete branding. As a result, the field knows relatively little about the ways student-athletes' branding behaviors align with or diverge from established branding frameworks. Addressing this gap is critical, as theoretical lenses can help clarify not only what strategies student-athletes are using, but also how their practices compare with idealized branding processes and where targeted education or support may be beneficial.

To provide a theoretically grounded perspective, this study employs the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI; Arai et al., 2013, 2014), which conceptualizes athlete brands through three dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Though originally developed to examine professional athletes, MABI offers a useful structure for analyzing student-athlete branding in the NIL era, particularly in contexts where formal branding education is limited. Applying the MABI to an NCAA Division I Group of Five environment enables a clearer understanding of how student-athletes construct their brands under resource constraints and how their practices align with theoretical expectations.

The purpose of this single-site qualitative case study is to examine how NCAA Division I Group of Five student-athletes engage in personal branding and self-marketing within the NIL landscape and to analyze how their branding practices align with the three dimensions of the MABI. This study also explores how the resource

limitations inherent to NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions influence student-athletes' capacity to develop and sustain effective branding strategies.

By centering the lived experiences of student-athletes and grounding the analysis in the MABI, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of NIL participation in NCAA Division I Group of Five athletic settings. It offers insights for scholars seeking to extend athlete branding theory and practical guidance for athletic departments working to support student-athletes in the NIL era.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do the personal branding practices of student-athletes at a NCAA Division I Group of Five institution reflect the three dimensions of the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI)?

RQ2: How do student-athletes' perceptions of important branding elements align with the dimensions of the MABI framework?

RQ3: How do institutional resource limitations at a NCAA Division I Group of Five university influence student-athletes' ability to develop personal brands consistent with MABI?

Theoretical Framework

The present study is guided by the MABI, a framework developed to conceptualize how athletes cultivate brand identities that resonate with audiences (Arai et al., 2013, 2014). The MABI proposes athlete brands are composed of three interrelated dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Athletic performance encompasses on-field success, competitive accomplishments, and perceived expertise; attractive appearance includes physical aesthetics, style, and visual presentation; and marketable lifestyle captures off-field behaviors, personality traits, values, and social engagement of the athlete. Together, these dimensions describe how athletes create a coherent, appealing brand identity that appeals to fans and commercial partners.

Although the MABI was developed in the context of professional sport, several scholars have examined how its principles extend to collegiate athletes, particularly in the NIL era (Arai et al., 2014; Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023). As student-athletes take on new responsibilities in constructing marketable identities, the branding elements described in the MABI offer a structured way to analyze how they present themselves and engage with external audiences. For example, Bredikhina et al. (2026) emphasize student-athletes must now manage both performance-based and lifestyle-driven components of their identities to succeed in NIL partnerships, even though many lack formal training or strategic support. Similarly, research examining student-athletes' experiences under NIL has shown brand-building often requires navigating pressures related to visibility, self-presentation, and audience expectations, demands that map closely onto the three dimensions of the MABI (Gonzales & Short, 2025; Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024).

Recent literature has also demonstrated that personal branding is influenced by institutional context. In particular, student-athletes at resource-constrained programs may face heightened challenges related to both lifestyle and appearance branding due to limited staff support, reduced exposure, and fewer educational opportunities regarding NIL participation. Madden and O'Hallarn (2024) illustrated institutional climates and support systems significantly shape how athletes perceive themselves and manage external expectations. These dynamics are especially relevant for NCAA Division I Group of Five athletes, whose NIL opportunities are often generated locally and without the branding infrastructure available at Power Four institutions. The MABI provides a useful framework for examining how these athletes navigate performance, appearance, and lifestyle branding amid constrained resources.

While previous NIL studies have identified broad themes related to opportunity, pressure, and self-promotion, few have explicitly evaluated student-athletes' branding practices in relation to a theoretical model. Using the MABI offers two advantages. First, it grounds the analysis in a widely recognized branding framework, enabling a systematic assessment of how student-athletes construct their identities. Second, it highlights specific areas, such as lifestyle branding, where student-athletes may require more support or strategic development. By applying the MABI to a single-site NCAA Division I Group of Five context, this study extends athlete branding theory into a unique and underexplored segment of collegiate athletics while responding directly to calls for more theoretically anchored NIL research.

Literature Review

NIL in Collegiate Athletics

Since the NCAA implemented its NIL policy in 2021, student-athletes have been permitted to engage in commercial activities ranging from sponsored social media posts to paid appearances and personal brand partnerships (NCAA, 2021a). Early NIL scholarship has documented the rapid expansion of athlete entrepreneurship, identifying both new opportunities and persistent challenges (Bredikhina et al., 2026; Corr et al., 2023). Much of this work emphasizes student-athletes' need to manage their online presence, develop branding competencies, and navigate compliance and financial responsibilities, tasks many feel unprepared to take on (Corr et al., 2023; Economou & Gamble, 2024; Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023).

Recent research indicates NIL participation is also shaped by social, cultural, and demographic factors. Female athletes, for instance, often face competing pressures to maximize marketability while managing gendered expectations related to appearance and self-presentation, a tension described by Gonzales and Short (2025) as the female athlete dilemma. NIL has also introduced stressors related to constant visibility, public evaluation, and self-management, with student-athletes describing how the demands of branding and performing for an audience can affect both identity and well-being (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024).

Together, extant scholarship suggests NIL has altered the collegiate sport experience by requiring student-athletes to assume professionalized branding roles for which institutional preparation varies widely.

Institutional Context and Resource Disparities

Although all NCAA student-athletes may pursue NIL opportunities, institutional resources play a significant role in shaping the level of support they receive. Larger, better-funded NCAA Division I Power Four institutions typically offer broader branding infrastructures, such as social media staff, NIL education programs, and department-endorsed third-party platforms, compared to NCAA Division I Group of Five programs (Gonzales & Short, 2025). These disparities influence both visibility and opportunity, as athletes at resource-constrained institutions often rely more heavily on local partnerships, direct outreach, and self-guided branding strategies.

Institutions and their personnel play a central role in shaping NIL engagement. Coaches, administrators, compliance staff, and donor or booster groups influence how athletes understand NIL expectations, gain access to opportunities, and manage the demands of personal branding (Gonzales & Short, 2025). Athletic departments with larger creative or marketing staffs can provide content creation, education, and brand development resources, while institutions with limited staffing often rely on athletes to navigate NIL independently (Corr et al., 2023; Meares et al., 2024). These structural differences are particularly evident in NCAA Division I Group of Five contexts, where institutions often have fewer resources to support student-athletes' NIL activities than their Power Four counterparts (Meares et al., 2024).

Scholars have highlighted how institutional climates and forms of support can affect athletes' perceptions of empowerment, pressure, and personal identity development (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). Within NCAA Division I Group of Five environments, student-athletes may experience fewer structured branding resources, but also greater autonomy in shaping their NIL activities. The unevenness of institutional support underscores the need for research that captures NIL experiences within distinct athletic department contexts rather than assuming uniformity across NCAA Division I. This study responds to that need by focusing specifically on student-athletes at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution, where resource limitations shape both branding behaviors and the broader NIL landscape.

Student-Athlete Personal Branding in the NIL Era

Personal branding has become a central component of NIL participation, requiring student-athletes to strategically manage their public identity across social media, community interactions, and athletic performance. Prior research shows student-athletes often recognize the importance of developing a brand, but lack formal guidance on how to do so effectively (Bredikhina et al., 2026). Common strategies include consistent posting, showcasing athletic achievements, highlighting personality traits, and engaging with local businesses; however, execution varies widely depending on athletes' familiarity with branding concepts and digital marketing.

Work examining the lived experiences of student-athletes who engage in NIL suggests branding is shaped not only by performance and visibility, but also by the norms of online self-presentation, personal identity exploration, and perceived expectations from followers and commercial partners (Bredikhina et al., 2026; Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). For female athletes, these expectations can be further complicated by gendered pressures around appearance and marketability (Gonzales & Short, 2025). Collectively, this research demonstrates student-athlete branding is a complex, multidimensional process that often evolves without structured institutional support.

Despite this growing body of literature, few studies have examined student-athlete branding using an established theoretical model. Much of the existing work relies on inductive thematic analysis, limiting opportunities to evaluate how student-athletes' branding strategies align with known dimensions of athlete branding theory. The present study addresses this gap by applying the MABI to assess how student-athletes conceptualize and enact their personal brands within an NCAA Division I Group of Five context.

Social Media and NIL Activation

Social media has emerged as the primary site of NIL activation, shaping both the visibility and marketability of collegiate athletes (Cocco et al., 2023; Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023). Recent research demonstrates an athlete's social media following is the strongest predictor of NIL value, surpassing on-field performance, institutional prestige, or competitive success (Stokowski et al., 2024). Because most NIL partnerships rely on digital impressions and influencer-style promotion, athletes with consistent online engagement are better positioned to secure opportunities, regardless of competitive level. However, this shift also intensifies well-documented issues associated with social media participation, including heightened scrutiny, gendered appearance pressures, identity negotiation, and vulnerability to online harassment, dynamics that are further amplified when financial incentives become tied to digital visibility (Gonzales & Short, 2025; Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). For athletes at NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, who often have fewer institutional branding resources and rely more heavily on local partnerships, social media becomes an especially critical platform for reaching potential sponsors and cultivating the dimensions of personal brand described in the MABI. As a result, understanding NIL requires acknowledging the central role of social media as both a marketing mechanism and a source of psychosocial pressure for student-athletes.

Despite this emerging research, few studies have examined student-athlete branding using an established theoretical model.

Method

Research Design

This study used a single-site qualitative case study design to examine how student-athletes understand and engage in personal branding and NIL activities within

the context of one NCAA Division I Group of Five institution. A case study approach is appropriate for investigating contemporary phenomena within bounded, real-world settings where contextual conditions shape participant experiences (Yin, 2018). Although “Group of Five” was not used as a recruitment criterion, the institutional context remained central to the study’s purpose; therefore, the framing emphasizes that the study represents an exploratory case study conducted at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution, rather than a comparative analysis across subdivisions.

The selected institution is located in a mid-sized regional market and possesses limited branding, marketing, and NIL support infrastructure compared to NCAA Division I Power Four universities. This context provides a meaningful environment for examining how student-athletes navigate branding practices under typical NCAA Division I Group of Five resource constraints.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants included 14 NCAA Division I student-athletes (five males, nine females), all eligible for athletic participation and over the age of 18. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit athletes across a range of sports who had engaged in at least one NIL activity or expressed interest in NIL participation. Participants represented both revenue and non-revenue sports, as well as a range of academic standings and demographic backgrounds.

Following approval from the institution’s Institutional Review Board, recruitment began with eight interviews, followed by interviews with six additional participants. Saturation in this study was reached at the thematic level through open and axial coding. Four main themes were identified, and as interviews progressed, no new themes emerged. Additional data only refined existing themes, signaling further interviews would not provide new insights. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) describe saturation as when “no additional issues or insights are identified and data begin to repeat so that further data collection is redundant, signifying that an adequate sample size is reached” (p. 4). Their review found saturation in thematic analysis typically occurs between nine and 17 interviews, which aligns with the sample size in this study. Saturation was evaluated throughout the coding process to ensure all themes were fully developed. The sample included student-athletes from both revenue and non-revenue sports, such as men’s volleyball, women’s field hockey, women’s gymnastics, football, and women’s softball, with NCAA experience ranging from one to six years.

While participants represented a range of team and individual sports, the sample lacked representation of all sports. The sample was also skewed toward upperclassmen and fifth-year student-athletes, many of whom had been exposed to NIL policy since its inception in 2021. This concentration reflects the availability and willingness of certain student-athletes to discuss NIL, particularly those with more experience navigating branding and sponsorship opportunities. Participant demographics are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Sport	Year	Sex	Transfer	# of Deals
P1	Softball	Sophomore	Female	No	0
P2	Softball	Sophomore	Female	No	0
P3	Field Hockey	5th Year	Female	No	20
P4	Football	Senior	Male	No	2
P5	Football	6th Year	Male	No	24
P6	Field Hockey	Junior	Female	No	4
P7	Volleyball	5th Year	Male	No	0
P8	Gymnastics	5th Year	Female	No	5
P9	Volleyball	Junior	Male	Yes	5
P10	Field Hockey	Senior	Female	No	1
P11	Volleyball	5th Year	Male	No	5
P12	Field Hockey	Senior	Female	No	0
P13	Field Hockey	Senior	Female	No	4
P14	Softball	Junior	Female	No	15

Sampling Technique and Instrumentation

Recruitment began with a few initial participants selected for their varying demographics, including sport type, gender, and individual or team sport affiliation (Creswell, 2014). The lead researcher directly contacted initial participants to invite them to take part in the study. These participants referred others, helping to ensure a diverse pool. Potential participants were either referred to the lead researcher and then contacted directly or expressed interest following a referral and subsequently reached out to the lead researcher themselves. Interviews were scheduled at convenient times and locations for participants, all conducted face-to-face to ensure consistency and minimize bias.

Interviews lasted 20 to 35 minutes, averaging 29 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed in real time using Rev VoiceHub (Rev, n.d.). Transcriptions were reviewed and edited for accuracy. The interview guide, developed to align with the study's research questions, covered key themes such as personal branding, marketing strategies, NIL experiences, and institutional support (Doyle et al., 2022; Economou & Gamble, 2024; Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023). The full interview guide is provid-

ed in Appendix A. It followed a semi-structured format. The interview protocol was developed using prior NIL and student-athlete branding scholarship and the MABI's three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, marketable lifestyle). The MABI was used deductively to ensure the protocol elicited participants' experiences with the components of athlete branding. For example, questions asked athletes how they presented themselves online (appearance), how they communicated their off-field identity (lifestyle), and how athletic performance shaped their public image (performance). Additional open-ended questions allowed for inductive insights related to institutional support, local market opportunities, and NIL barriers.

Rev VoiceHub technology was used to transcribe interviews, combining advanced speech recognition with human verification to ensure accurate transcriptions (Rev, n.d.). After transcription, the lead researcher reviewed each transcript by cross-referencing it with the original audio to correct discrepancies. Member checking was employed by providing participants with their transcripts to confirm accuracy and ensure their responses were represented appropriately.

Data Analysis

All data, including transcripts and recordings, were stored securely on password-protected devices and accounts in compliance with university data protection policies. Transcripts were first cleaned by correcting discrepancies between the audio recordings and the autogenerated transcripts, including adjustments to punctuation and formatting for clarity.

Data were analyzed using a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic analysis approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). Analysis began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to build familiarity with the dataset and to document initial impressions. Because the purpose of the study was to explore student-athlete personal branding through the lens of the MABI, the first cycle of coding incorporated several deductive codes aligned with the MABI's three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle). These deductive codes ensured the analysis systematically captured branding-related content tied to the theoretical framework. At the same time, the lead researcher engaged in inductive coding to identify emerging concepts outside of the MABI, such as institutional support, social media practices, NIL education barriers, resource constraints, and local market influences. As coding progressed, deductive and inductive codes were compared, refined, and consolidated to develop a coherent set of analytical categories that reflected both the structure of the theoretical framework and the nuances of participants' experiences.

Throughout this process, the lead researcher maintained reflective memos documenting analytic decisions, interpretation shifts, and connections to emerging themes. These memos, combined with member-checking feedback, supported the confirmability and trustworthiness of the final thematic structure. Member checking was conducted by sharing a summary of emergent themes with participants via email and inviting feedback on accuracy and resonance. Several athletes responded affirming the interpretations aligned with their experiences, and no contradictory feedback

was reported. The resulting themes represented both the theoretical grounding of the MABI and the contextual realities of NIL engagement within the case study.

Positionality Statement

The lead researcher identifies as a White woman from an upper middle-class background in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Her personal, academic, and professional experiences have shaped her perspective on collegiate athletics and informed her approach to this study. She competed as an NCAA Division I student-athlete and later completed a master's degree in sport administration at the institution where this research was conducted. Her experiences as both a student-athlete and an athletics department intern provided her with familiarity regarding institutional structures, athlete support systems, and the emerging landscape of NIL opportunities. She has also participated in NIL activities herself, using third-party platforms to secure partnerships and develop her personal brand.

These experiences offer valuable contextual understanding, but also present potential biases, including positive views of NIL and beliefs about the importance of personal branding for student-athletes. To mitigate these influences, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexive journaling, documented her assumptions prior to data collection, and revisited these reflections throughout analysis. This reflexive process helped ensure that interpretations foregrounded participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's prior experiences or professional aspirations.

The remaining authors also brought professional experiences that may have influenced their perspectives on the study and its interpretation. One author has 18 years of professional experience in intercollegiate athletics at an NCAA Division I institution without football and contributed extensively to manuscript development. This professional experience provided familiarity with the institutional structures, resource considerations, and student-athlete experiences relevant to the study, while also creating the potential for assumptions about how athletic departments and student-athletes navigate NIL opportunities. Another author contributed to manuscript development and previously worked in a university admissions role, providing experience with higher education administration and student-facing institutional processes. A fourth author also contributed to manuscript development and previously worked in academic support for student-athletes at the institution where the study was conducted, providing familiarity with student-athlete support structures and the collegiate athletics environment. Although these authors were not involved in data collection or analysis, their professional experiences may have influenced how they approached the development and interpretation of the manuscript.

The authors recognize that these collective experiences may shape how NIL, institutional support, and student-athlete development are understood. Accordingly, the authors sought to maintain transparency regarding their professional perspectives and to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' accounts and the study's theoretical framework. Acknowledging the positionality of all authors supports the transparency, trustworthiness, and credibility of this qualitative case study.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how student-athletes at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution understand, engage with, and navigate self-branding and NIL participation. Through interviews with 14 student-athletes across six sports, four central themes emerged that collectively illustrate the opportunities, challenges, and learning processes associated with NIL engagement in an NCAA Division I Group of Five athletic environment. Because NIL activities inherently blend promotional actions with personal identity construction, the Findings and Discussion are merged to present both the athletes' experiences and the interpretive insights shaped by prior NIL and athlete-branding scholarship.

The four themes highlight the multifaceted nature of NIL participation: (a) *methods of communication and outreach*, which reflects the informal and inconsistent ways student-athletes initiate NIL relationships; (b) *social media presence and inconsistent brand strategy*, which reveals how athletes struggle to develop cohesive online identities; (c) *limited institutional support and education*, which underscores the role of resource disparities in shaping NIL readiness; and (d) *practical benefits and skill development from NIL*, which illustrates the personal and professional growth that emerges even from small-scale NIL activity. Together, these themes provide a nuanced understanding of how student-athletes build and express their personal brands within the constraints and opportunities of the NCAA Division I Group of Five context.

Theme 1: Methods of Communication and Outreach

Student-athletes described a range of strategies they used to pursue NIL opportunities, most of which relied on personal initiative rather than formalized institutional structures or third-party representation. Across sports, participants explained their communication and outreach efforts were primarily self-directed, reflecting the individualized and decentralized nature of NIL activity at a NCAA Division I Group of Five institution. Their accounts underscored how building relationships with potential partners required proactive, sometimes uncomfortable forms of engagement, from cold outreach messages to maintaining professional correspondence, behaviors that align with the “marketable lifestyle” dimension of the MABI yet often occurred without training or guidance.

Several athletes described direct outreach as the only viable avenue for securing deals in a localized market. As one volleyball player explained:

I've found success just directly messaging the company, whether that be by email or through Instagram . . . I also feel like the direct form of communication kind of makes you stand out a little bit in their eyes and shows a little bit more interest (Volleyball, P9).

His experience reflects recent NIL scholarship suggesting athletes at smaller institutions or in less-visible markets must rely more heavily on self-promotion and personal communication rather than being approached by brands (Stokowski et al., 2024).

Similarly, a gymnastics athlete emphasized the individualized nature of outreach: “So I genuinely just wrote a little template body introducing myself, saying how I was interested in this brand and how I’d love to promote it. And I’d send it to probably 20 different brands at a time” (Gymnastics, P8). These examples demonstrate that NIL activation at this institution depended less on institutional infrastructure and more on athletes’ personal willingness to engage in unmediated communication with businesses.

Importantly, athletes noted their outreach extended beyond initiating deals. It also involved maintaining relationships and ensuring fulfillment of deliverables. A softball participant described:

I mean, without posting, you’re not going to get anywhere. But start creating your own brand by yourself. So, whether that’s you love the outdoors and you love traveling, well then start accumulating collages so that you can post once a week (Softball, P14).

This highlights how NIL often requires professionalized communication skills typically associated with marketing or influencer work, yet athletes at this institution frequently learned these practices through trial and error. Given the limited institutional guidance discussed later, the responsibility to cultivate, negotiate, and manage communication remained squarely on the athletes.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate a NIL environment in which outreach and communication are essential, individualized skill sets athletes must self-develop to access market opportunities. Consistent with recent scholarship, athletes at NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions generally lack robust institutional support or access to major brands, making direct outreach a primary avenue for securing NIL partnerships. Within the MABI, these outreach behaviors reveal how athletes actively construct their brand through the lifestyle dimension, curating how they present themselves, how they communicate with businesses, and how they build ongoing professional relationships. The communication strategies reported by participants demonstrate both the entrepreneurial potential and emotional demands of NIL engagement, emphasizing the self-driven nature of branding work in a constrained institutional setting.

Theme 2: Social Media Presence and Inconsistent Brand Strategy

Across interviews, student-athletes consistently described social media as the primary platform for NIL activation, yet their accounts revealed substantial inconsistency in how they understood, curated, and strategically used their online presence. While most participants recognized social media visibility played a direct role in their NIL opportunities, they also expressed uncertainty about what constitutes a coherent personal brand and how to maintain one across platforms. These narratives reflect both the increasing centrality of social media to NIL (Stokowski et al., 2024) and the heightened pressures associated with curating an online persona, pressures that disproportionately affect athletes in smaller markets who rely heavily on digital visibility to reach potential partners.

Many athletes understood social media followings were critical to NIL success but admitted they lacked a clear strategy for leveraging their platforms. A football player explained, “I’ll say getting more active on social media. Not just posting, just like, ‘Hey, I’m here, I’m here,’ just doing more engaging things, making people want to click onto my profile” (Football, P5). His description reflects a common theme: although athletes were aware their online presence mattered, they had received little guidance on how to develop a consistent brand identity aligned with the dimensions of MABI, particularly “attractive appearance” and “marketable lifestyle.” Instead, their feeds tended to be informal, unstructured extensions of their personal lives, making it challenging to present a professional brand image appealing to sponsors.

Similarly, a field hockey participant described using social media inconsistently, noting:

I didn’t really care what I was posting. I didn’t care about my brand. I didn’t care what content they made me post. I didn’t care what I had to do to make the post look good...I’m doing it because I’m getting something for free and I’m getting paid to post (Field Hockey, P3).

This sporadic, reactive approach demonstrates how athletes often shifted into “branding mode” only when obligated by a partnership agreement, rather than integrating branding into their everyday social media habits. This reactive pattern aligns with broader NIL research showing how many collegiate athletes lack long-term content planning and instead approach social media transactionally rather than strategically.

At the same time, several athletes acknowledged the emotional and psychological pressures of handling negativity as they curated an online presence. A softball athlete noted, “...staying true to myself and being okay and being happy with myself internally rather than looking for external validation” (Softball, P14) was challenging. Her comments mirror broader social media scholarship documenting the tension athletes feel between authenticity and marketability, especially when financial incentives intensify the stakes of audience judgment. For many participants, this tension contributed to inconsistent branding behaviors and a reluctance to position themselves as influencers or content creators, even though NIL often pushes athletes into those roles.

Finally, some athletes indicated inconsistent branding stemmed from a lack of knowledge rather than disinterest. A softball player described wishing she had clearer guidance, saying, “I definitely think there needs to be more education on how to get our names out there and how to use our image and likeness” (Softball, P1). This uncertainty reflects the institutional gap discussed in Theme 3. Without structured branding education or content creation support, athletes are left to independently navigate the complex expectations of influencer-style engagement. In NCAA Division I Group of Five programs, where creative staffing, marketing teams, and administrator availability are more limited, this struggle becomes even more pronounced.

Together, these findings highlight that while student-athletes understand the importance of social media for NIL opportunities, they lack the knowledge, confidence, and institutional support needed to maintain a consistent and compelling brand strat-

egy. This inconsistent approach often results in fragmented online identities and missed NIL opportunities, particularly in localized markets where digital visibility plays an outsized role. Within the MABI framework, these behaviors reveal both the potential and challenges of aligning the “appearance” and “lifestyle” dimensions with authentic self-presentation. The tension between authenticity, audience expectations, emotional labor, and strategic branding underscores the complex realities athletes face in building a coherent personal brand in the NIL era.

Theme 3: Limited Institutional Support and Education

Student-athletes across all sports emphasized that the most significant barrier to navigating NIL effectively was the lack of structured institutional support, education, and guidance. Despite being eligible for NIL opportunities, participants consistently described feeling unprepared to manage branding expectations, communication with businesses, content creation, and compliance requirements. The experiences shared by athletes reflected a broader pattern common in NCAA Division I Group of Five environments: NIL responsibilities are pushed to athletes individually because athletic departments often lack the staffing, resources, and infrastructure to provide robust support programs. This limited support shaped athletes’ ability to engage with the athlete branding process, especially the lifestyle and appearance dimensions of the MABI, and significantly influenced their NIL outcomes.

Many student-athletes described institutional messaging about NIL as vague, sporadic, or insufficient to meet their needs. A softball player expressed, “Opendorse, I believe, is the one that our school provides for us as student-athletes, but there’s no education on how to use it and how to get those deals or anything” (Softball, P2). Her description mirrors emerging research documenting how many NCAA Division I Group of Five athletic departments offer minimal operational guidance on NIL beyond basic compliance reminders. Without clear support, athletes are left to independently interpret and operationalize NIL expectations, often resulting in uncertainty and underutilization of opportunities.

Other athletes noted information provided by the institution tended to be compliance-focused rather than instructional. As a football player explained, “They’ll tell us to make sure we’re communicating with compliance with all our deals and whatnot” (Football, P5). However, as a field hockey player elaborated, “I feel like they introduced us to the app [Opendorse] and then kind of were like, okay, use that and then didn’t really support as much after that” (Field Hockey, P12). This emphasis on compliance reflects what scholars have described as a defensive administrative approach to NIL, where risk avoidance, rather than athlete development, drives educational priorities. For athletes attempting to build their brands, a compliance-only model offers little practical value and leaves them navigating the complexities of NIL without strategic support.

Participants also highlighted the absence of resources typically available at larger, NCAA Division I Power Four programs, such as in-house creative teams, branding workshops, or staff dedicated to helping athletes pursue opportunities. A field hockey player reflected, “I knew from the beginning that it was going to be difficult

coming from a mid-major school and a sport that no one really knows of” (Field Hockey, P13). Another field hockey athlete echoed:

I think there’s a huge lack of education and support with NIL deals. There could even be a whole course on it for student-athletes, how to promote it, how to use it to the best of your benefit. I think there should be a full-time position for student-athletes at every school that provides those resources (Field Hockey, P10).

At NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, limited staffing and media infrastructure means athletes must self-manage activities that, at larger programs, are supported by professionalized marketing staff who help athletes build cohesive brands and pursue partnerships.

Even athletes who had secured multiple deals felt institutional support remained minimal. A field hockey athlete with significant NIL experience shared, “But for the most part, I was just like apply, apply, apply, and hope for the best” (Field Hockey, P3). This reliance on independent learning reflects a broader trend in NIL research indicating student-athletes often turn to peers, external content creators, or online guides rather than institutional personnel. Such self-directed learning can lead to inconsistent branding behaviors and uncertainty about how to best align personal identity with NIL goals.

Several participants described wanting more opportunities to learn or practice NIL-related skills, including negotiation, digital content creation, brand strategy, and public communication. A field hockey athlete explained, “I would like to see someone that would at least come and talk to teams about how to start building your brand or come to you with potential brands they think you could work with” (Field Hockey, P6). Her comments reinforce the idea that NIL engagement is not simply about opportunity but about developing competencies most athletes have never been formally taught. These competencies intersect with the MABI’s lifestyle and appearance dimensions, which require intentional cultivation rather than ad hoc or intuitive efforts.

The lack of structured support not only limited athletes’ branding skills but also contributed to unequal access to opportunities. Athletes from higher-visibility teams or those with prior social media experience found it easier to navigate NIL independently, while others, particularly those from non-revenue sports, felt disadvantaged. As one football player articulated, “I would say the level of school you’re at is definitely the biggest, and then probably your gender and the sport you play” (Football, P4). His reflection aligns with broader literature suggesting that NIL opportunities may reinforce existing inequalities between athletes, particularly when institutions do not actively scaffold support for those with less social media literacy, fewer personal networks, or lower sport-specific visibility (Cocco et al., 2023; Corr et al., 2023).

Collectively, athletes’ experiences demonstrate how limited institutional support created a fragmented NIL environment where athletes were motivated, but underprepared. This environment reinforces the individualized nature of NIL participation and shifts the burden of branding entirely onto student-athletes,

an issue especially salient in NCAA Division I Group of Five contexts where resource limitations restrict institutional intervention. Within the MABI framework, this lack of support affects athletes' ability to develop consistent appearance and lifestyle branding strategies and may limit their capacity to maximize performance-related brand signals. Ultimately, the absence of structured NIL education constrained athletes' readiness and confidence, contributing to the inconsistent branding behaviors and outreach challenges described in earlier themes.

Theme 4: Practical Benefits and Skill Development from NIL

Despite the challenges described in prior themes, student-athletes consistently emphasized participation in NIL provided tangible benefits and contributed to skill development that extended beyond financial gain. These benefits included professional competencies such as communication, content creation, time management, and confidence in self-presentation. While many athletes acknowledged NIL opportunities at their NCAA Division I Group of Five institution were modest, they also described NIL as instrumental in building skills that aligned with their future careers. These experiences reinforce emerging scholarship suggesting NIL offers developmental opportunities tied to personal branding, entrepreneurship, and identity management, areas closely connected to the "marketable lifestyle" and "attractive appearance" dimensions of the MABI (Bredikhina et al., 2026).

Several athletes highlighted how NIL engagements helped them cultivate professional communication and relationship-building skills. One football athlete noted, "I think it helped just with me being confident and networking myself... I feel like sometimes people forget that [NIL deals] can be a professional aspect because it's a partnership in a way" (Football, P5). His reflection illustrates how NIL participation teaches interpersonal competencies not traditionally embedded in collegiate athletics, but essential for personal branding and post-graduation career success. Even athletes who engaged in only one or two deals described these experiences as valuable professional practice.

Similarly, student-athletes recognized NIL as a vehicle for developing digital media and content creation skills. A field hockey player explained:

I think what I did with [company]... showed me a lot of what I want to do with my personal career... I learned that stuff and I learned my interest for it and that that's what I want to do (Field Hockey, P10).

Her description aligns with broader NIL scholarship noting how athletes increasingly engage in influencer-style promotion, requiring them to cultivate digital literacy and aesthetic awareness in alignment with the appearance and lifestyle dimensions of the MABI (Bredikhina et al., 2026; Stokowski et al., 2024). At a resource-constrained institution where professional content support was limited, athletes often taught themselves these skills, making NIL both a branding exercise and an informal media apprenticeship.

Athletes also described NIL as expanding their confidence and sense of agency. One football participant shared, "I'll say accepting denial... just learning from your failures and trying to build off things like that" (Football, P5). His reflection is par-

ticularly meaningful in the context of NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, where athletes often internalize messages about being less visible or less marketable compared to peers at Power Four programs. NIL provided a mechanism for athletes to recognize and leverage their value, reinforcing the identity-building aspects of personal branding that extend beyond commercial partnerships.

For some athletes, NIL participation also offered unexpected professional clarity or opened doors to career-relevant experiences. A football participant described the experience of teammates discovering new interests: “I know for a fact that some NIL partnerships have gotten some of my old teammates jobs... it kind of gets you ready for the real world” (Football, P4). His experience reflects findings from recent sport management research suggesting that NIL may provide opportunities for athletes to explore professional and vocational identities alongside their athletic identities (Bredikhina et al., 2026). By experimenting with promotional activities, content creation, and partnership negotiation, athletes often encountered new forms of professional engagement that enriched their post-athletic aspirations.

Even modest NIL earnings were meaningful for athletes, particularly those in non-revenue sports who historically have received fewer material benefits. As one field hockey athlete explained, “We don’t have much time for a job or a steady income. So, I think a big part of NIL for college athletes is either free stuff or the money you can get from it” (Field Hockey, P3). A football athlete echoed, “It made the end of my college career a lot easier” (Football, P5). Their experience underscores how financial benefits, even when small, can carry symbolic value related to recognition, visibility, and validation, especially for athletes whose sports rarely attract commercial interest.

Collectively, these experiences demonstrate how NIL opportunities at NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, while limited in scale, facilitated important forms of practical development. Athletes gained communication skills, digital literacy, self-presentation competence, and confidence navigating commercial spaces, skills that are increasingly valuable in both sport and non-sport careers. Within the MABI framework, these developmental outcomes reveal how NIL participation can strengthen athletes’ understanding and enactment of brand dimensions by encouraging more intentional lifestyle and appearance presentation. At the same time, these benefits highlight how NIL is not solely a financial enterprise; it functions as a meaningful developmental platform that empowers athletes to cultivate professional identities, articulate their value, and prepare for life beyond collegiate sport.

Summary

Taken together, these findings demonstrate how NIL participation is both a branding process and a developmental experience for student-athletes, shaped significantly by institutional resources, individual initiative, and social media fluency. While athletes at this NCAA Division I Group of Five institution engaged in NIL to varying degrees, their experiences consistently reflected the challenges of self-directed branding and the absence of structured institutional guidance. Simultaneously, NIL activities offered meaningful opportunities for skill-building, identity explora-

tion, and personal empowerment. These dual realities illustrate the ongoing tension between the promise of NIL and the uneven infrastructure supporting it, underscoring the need for more intentional educational programming and institution-driven support. Ultimately, the findings highlight the ways NIL can both constrain and enable student-athlete branding efforts within the MABI framework, offering important implications for athletic departments seeking to enhance NIL readiness and equity across sports.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends athlete branding theory by demonstrating how the three dimensions of the MABI (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle) manifest within the NIL experiences of student-athletes at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution. While the MABI has primarily been applied to professional athletes (Arai et al., 2013, 2014), these findings show how collegiate athletes construct and manage their brand identities in resource-constrained environments where institutional support is limited and NIL activity is individualized. By situating the MABI within the lived NIL experiences of student-athletes, this study offers several theoretical contributions that expand and contextualize existing athlete-branding frameworks.

First, the theme *methods of communication and outreach* theme aligns most closely with the MABI's "marketable lifestyle" dimension, which reflects personal characteristics and behaviors that enhance an athlete's market appeal (Arai et al., 2013). Participants' descriptions of cold-messaging local businesses, maintaining professional correspondence, and developing outreach strategies reveal lifestyle-driven branding labor that has not been emphasized in prior research. NIL scholarship has shown many student-athletes navigate NIL "on their own" without agency support (Corr et al., 2023), and our findings extend this by illustrating how behind-the-scenes communication work now constitutes a central component of student-athlete brand construction. This expands the marketable lifestyle dimension conceptually by demonstrating that private, administrative interactions, rather than only public-facing behaviors, play a critical role in collegiate brand-building.

Second, the theme *social media presence and inconsistent brand strategy* intersects with both the "attractive appearance" and "marketable lifestyle" dimensions of the MABI. Athletes' struggles with content consistency, aesthetic presentation, and authenticity reflect the expanding importance of digital identity in NIL valuation. Stokowski et al. (2024) show social media following is the strongest predictor of NIL potential, underscoring why participants felt pressure to curate their online persona despite lacking formal guidance. For female athletes, these pressures were compounded by gendered scrutiny noted by Gonzales and Short (2025), where appearance-based judgment increases the emotional labor of branding. Thus, this study broadens theoretical understanding by showing the MABI's appearance and lifestyle components are not static identity attributes, but ongoing, negotiated, and sometimes burdensome processes amplified by social media visibility and gender dynamics.

Third, the theme *limited institutional support and education* theme exposes structural boundaries within the MABI when applied to the collegiate context. The MABI implicitly assumes athletes have access to the knowledge, time, and resources required to intentionally cultivate their brand image (Arai et al., 2014). Yet student-athletes in this study consistently described a lack of NIL education, branding instruction, content creation support, and administrative guidance, patterns consistent with early NIL research documenting significant disparities in university-level support (Meares et al., 2024). These findings demonstrate that institutional capacity shapes whether and how student-athletes can activate each MABI dimension. In NCAA Division I Group of Five environments, limited staffing and smaller markets restrict both performance-based visibility and lifestyle/appearance-driven promotional opportunities. This contributes theoretically by situating the MABI within the institutional ecology of collegiate sport, emphasizing how brand-building is both an individual and structural process.

Finally, the theme *practical benefits and skill development from NIL* suggests a potential expansion of the MABI to account for branding competence. Student-athletes described gaining communication skills, digital content creation experience, negotiation abilities, and greater confidence in self-presentation through NIL, a finding echoed by Bredikhina et al. (2026), who emphasize person-environment fit and identity development in NIL engagement. NIL participation thus acts as a developmental mechanism through which athletes acquire competencies that enable them to more effectively enact the lifestyle and appearance dimensions of the MABI. This suggests athlete branding in the collegiate NIL era is not only expressive, but also developmental, meaningfully expanding the conceptual scope of the MABI beyond its original focus on consumer perceptions of athlete attributes.

Collectively, these findings position the MABI as a valuable framework for understanding student-athlete branding, while also demonstrating its limitations when applied to a context defined by structural inequality, gendered pressures, social media demands, and the developmental needs of young athletes. This study extends athlete branding theory by illustrating how the MABI operates within the constraints of institutional resources and by proposing branding competence and skill development be considered integral components of collegiate athlete brand formation in the NIL era.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study highlight several practical considerations for athletic departments, administrators, coaching staffs, and NIL-support personnel, particularly within NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions where resource constraints shape the NIL environment. The following section identifies three core areas where institutions can meaningfully enhance student-athletes' NIL readiness: (1) building structured and developmentally aligned NIL education, (2) strengthening social media and branding support for athletes, and (3) addressing institutional resource disparities through targeted partnerships and scalable programming.

Participants consistently described navigating NIL independently, often learning through trial-and-error rather than through institutional guidance. This mirrors broader research documenting gaps in NIL education across the NCAA landscape (Corr et al., 2023; Meares et al., 2024). Institutions can address these gaps by implementing multiphase, skill-based educational programming that emphasizes communication strategies, brand alignment, content creation, and basic contracting principles. Effective programming may include workshops on professional communication with businesses, training modules on negotiating expectations and deliverables, peer-led panels featuring athletes with successful NIL experience, or collaborations with business faculty or university marketing units. Such programming aligns with the NCAA's emphasis on athlete support during policy shifts (NCAA, 2021a, 2021b) and ensures student-athletes, especially those in non-revenue sports, acquire foundational competencies needed to participate confidently in NIL opportunities.

Given social media following is a key predictor of NIL value (Stokowski et al., 2024), and athletes in this study reported inconsistent posting habits and uncertainty about content strategy, institutions can improve NIL readiness by offering social media-focused branding support. This includes guidance on content consistency, analytics, platform selection, and audience engagement. Importantly, such support should account for gendered dynamics identified in recent NIL scholarship. Female athletes, in particular, navigate heightened scrutiny around appearance and self-presentation (Gonzales & Short, 2025), making social media training an equity-centered imperative rather than a marketing enhancement. Practical initiatives may include content creation workshops facilitated by athletics communications staff, access to basic photography, video, or design support, or assistance in aligning content choices with authentic athlete identities. These forms of support help athletes leverage the attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle components of the MABI more intentionally, while reducing the cognitive and emotional burdens associated with online visibility.

For NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, resource limitations present significant structural barriers to equitable NIL participation. Participants in this study consistently noted the absence of creative staffing, branded content pipelines, or personnel devoted to NIL education, conditions that mirror broader disparities reported across NCAA divisions (Meares et al., 2024). To address these constraints, institutions can adopt scalable, partnership-driven models rather than attempting to replicate NCAA Division I Power Four infrastructures. Possibilities include partnering with local businesses, alumni entrepreneurs, or campus offices to provide NIL workshops at low cost, leveraging external NIL marketplaces or educational platforms already used by athletes, creating cross-campus collaborations with communications, business, graphic design, or digital media programs, or building small, sustainable NIL "micro-units" within athletics staffed by interns, graduate assistants, or shared personnel. Such approaches acknowledge the structural realities of NCAA Division I Group of Five athletics, while still expanding the institutional capacity to support student-athlete branding. In doing so, athletic departments help level the playing field for athletes in lower-resource environments.

Together, these practical implications emphasize how institutional support must move beyond compliance messaging to include developmental skill-building, digital branding support, and resource-conscious infrastructure. These steps position athletic departments to better prepare student-athletes for the demands of NIL participation, enhance brand-building opportunities across sports, and reduce inequities shaped by institutional size and visibility.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all qualitative research, the findings of this study should be interpreted within the context of several limitations. First, although the interview lengths ranged from approximately 20 to 35 minutes, which may appear shorter than ideal for in-depth qualitative inquiry, these durations were sufficient to address the research questions for several reasons. Student-athletes were relatively familiar with the topic of NIL and responded with clarity and specificity, resulting in rich, experience-focused data even within a shorter window. Prior methodological research suggests interview length alone is not the determinant of data adequacy; rather, sufficiency depends on the focus of the questions, participants' level of expertise, and the saturation of concepts across interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Across the 14 interviews, participants consistently described similar patterns in communication behaviors, branding strategies, and institutional support, indicating thematic saturation was achieved for this single-site case (Bowen, 2019; Creswell, 2014). However, the relatively short interview durations remain a limitation, as longer or multiple interviews could have yielded deeper insights into nuanced aspects of athletes' branding identities, emotional experiences, and longitudinal NIL engagement.

Second, this study was conducted at a single NCAA Division I Group of Five institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other NCAA contexts. Institutional support structures, NIL education, and local market opportunities vary widely across divisions and conferences. As Yin (2018) notes, case study research provides depth, but not statistical generalizability; thus, the findings should be interpreted as reflective of this specific institutional environment rather than representative of all collegiate athletics settings.

Third, all participants were drawn from sports with varying levels of visibility, gender representation, and NIL engagement. Although this diversity strengthened the depth of perspectives, it also means certain NIL experiences within the Group of Five context, such as those of athletes in higher-profile revenue-generating sports, are not captured in this dataset.

Future research should explore NIL engagement across multiple institutional types, including high-resource and low-resource athletic departments, to better understand how structural contexts influence the enactment of the MABI dimensions and branding competencies. Longitudinal studies would also provide insight into how athletes' branding behaviors evolve over time and how NIL participation contributes to identity development, skill acquisition, and post-graduation outcomes. Finally, future work could examine institutional strategies that effectively support NIL

readiness and compare models across conferences or divisions to identify scalable, evidence-based approaches.

Conclusion

This study examined how student-athletes at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution understand, approach, and activate their personal brands within the evolving NIL landscape. Through interviews with 14 athletes across six sports, four interconnected themes emerged: *methods of communication and outreach*, *social media presence and inconsistent branding strategies*, *limited institutional support and education*, and *the practical benefits and skill development gained through NIL engagement*. Collectively, these findings reveal student-athletes recognize the growing importance of personal branding, but often lack the structured guidance, resources, and confidence needed to engage with NIL opportunities strategically.

Theoretically, the study extends applications of the MABI by demonstrating how its three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle) manifest in the collegiate NIL context. While student-athletes naturally emphasized performance-based identity, many expressed uncertainty about how to intentionally cultivate lifestyle or appearance elements, underscoring an important misalignment between branding expectations and athlete readiness. The findings also show how institutional structures shape how the MABI can be enacted; without education, feedback, or support, student-athletes' brand activation remains fragmented and inconsistent. These insights advance understanding of athlete branding by illustrating how NIL's unique opportunities and constraints reshape the branding process for non-professional athletes.

Practically, the study highlights an urgent need for institutions to develop more systematic, equitable, and actionable NIL education. Student-athletes clearly benefit from NIL participation, gaining communication skills, confidence, financial literacy, and professional experience, yet these benefits are not guaranteed and vary widely across sports, genders, and institutional resources. Targeted programming that integrates brand development, social media training, and hands-on support would help reduce disparities and better prepare athletes for both NIL participation and future careers. Given NIL has become embedded in the student-athlete experience, institutions have a responsibility to equip their athletes with the tools necessary to navigate this environment effectively and ethically.

Although limited to a single site, the study contributes meaningful insight into how student-athletes conceptualize NIL and their own branding practices. Future research should continue to explore variation across institutional types, examine longitudinal identity development within NIL ecosystems, and evaluate institutional strategies for supporting branding literacy and participation. As the NIL landscape continues to evolve, research that centers athletes' lived experiences will remain essential for understanding not only how they engage with branding opportunities, but also how colleges and universities can better support them in doing so.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Interview Questions:

Background

1. I want to confirm that you have read the consent form in full and agree to participate in this study?
2. Please provide a brief overview of your background, including your name, age, year in school, self-identified gender, and whether or not you are a transfer student-athlete.
3. In which sport do you participate?
4. How would you describe your level of engagement with social media platforms?
 - (e.g., active user, occasional user, not on social media)
 - What social media platforms do you most regularly use? Why?
5. Describe any experience you have had with NIL during your college athletic career?
6. Do you have any NIL deals?
 - What is the size of the deals?
 - What are the brands?

Strategies Used for NIL Deals

1. Tell me about any strategies that you have used in trying to get NIL deals during your collegiate athletic career.
 - a. What strategies were successful? What strategies weren't?
 - b. What strategies have your peers reported using?
2. Do you use social media in seeking out partners and carrying out NIL deals?
 - a. Of the social media platforms you use, which do you utilize most frequently for NIL deals?
 - b. Are there any particular tactics relating to social media that you found to be effective in securing NIL deals?
3. What is your personal brand that you post on social media?
 - a. How much time do you spend working on creating your brand to seek NIL partnerships?
 - b. Do you look for alignment between your personal brand and potential NIL endorsers?

Driving Factors in NIL Opportunities (Physical appearance, social media engagement, field success, unique story, or other)

1. What do you believe are the most significant factors driving NIL opportunities for college athletes?

2. Do you think the success factors are different from sport to sport?
 - a. Does this influence your approach to NIL?
3. What is the role of athletic performance in either creating your online brand or securing NIL deals?
 - a. How important is your individual achievement and athletic capability?
 - b. How important is your specific style of play?
 - c. How important is being perceived as having respect for the game and integrity?
 - d. How important is your rivalry with other teams and athletes?
4. What is the role of attractive appearance in either creating your online brand or securing NIL deals?
 - a. Do you find that you post content related to your physical qualities and appearance that your audience may find appealing?
 - b. Do you highlight your personal style or some type of trademark that is unique to your brand?
 - c. Do you highlight your level of fitness within your sport?
5. Do you promote your lifestyle in creating your online brand or securing NIL deals?
 - a. What is unique about your lifestyle that resonates with followers and with sponsors?
 - b. Do you present yourself as a role model for future athletes?
 - c. Do you have a positive attitude toward interacting with fans, sponsors, and the media?
6. How do these driving factors vary among athletes from different sports, and how does this impact NIL pursuits?

Dynamics and Institutional Support

1. Has the introduction of NIL opportunities impacted the culture within your team or athletic program?
 - a. What about team dynamics?
2. How would you describe the level of support provided by your university or athletic department in navigating the NIL landscape?
 - a. Have you sought assistance from university officials or staff regarding NIL deals?
 - b. What was your experience?
3. What resources should universities offer to better support student-athletes in managing NIL opportunities?
4. Are there specific areas where you feel the university could improve its support for athletes in this regard?
5. Are there any skills or lessons from your NIL experience that you plan to apply to your professional career?
 - a. What advice would you give to future student-athletes navigating NIL opportunities?
6. Are there any additional comments you would like to share?

Preparing for Life After Sport: Exploring the Feasibility of Offering a Health-Related Transition Program for NCAA Division II Student-Athletes

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Health-related transitional programs can provide strategies for student-athletes to help them navigate the challenges they may face as they transition away from competitive athletics. However, few evidence-based transitional programs with a health-related focus exist, and even less research addresses program feasibility within specific institutional contexts. This study evaluated the feasibility of implementing a health-related physical activity (PA) transitional program for student-athletes at one NCAA Division II (DII) institution. Student-athlete alumni ($n = 85$) from the past five years were surveyed to gather information about their current PA and health-related quality of life. Additionally, these former student-athletes along with athletic department personnel ($n = 28$) responded to survey items assessing various dimensions of program feasibility. Results showed that over 90% of participants from both groups agreed more support is needed for the transition out of sport, particularly regarding PA and health resources. In addition to limited mental health resources, student-athletes perceived there to be a lack of resources related to post-career exercise guidance, highlighting a key gap given that 60% of former student-athletes in this sample were not engaging in recommended PA levels. Responses from athletic personnel suggested opportunities exist to integrate transitional programming within existing campus resources. These findings highlight the need for more health-related transitional support. As such, athletic departments should prioritize efforts to develop and evaluate programs that support health-related aspects of sport transition to optimize student-athletes' adjustment to life after sport. This feasibility study provides insights into the needs, resources, and barriers institutions face when developing transitional programming. These findings offer a foundation for implementing evidence-based support addressing student-athletes' health and wellness needs beyond competitive athletics.

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Introduction

Student-athletes often face challenges transitioning from sport-focused exercise to exercise for health, with many not maintaining high physical activity levels post-graduation (Plateau et al., 2017; Reifsteck et al., 2013). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) estimates that only 2% of student-athletes each year go on to play sport professionally, leaving the majority to transition out of competitive sports participation after college (NCAA, 2021). Research on the challenges associated with athlete retirement has led to calls for the development of transitional programs to support this key life transition (Lavallee et al., 1997; Agnew & Pill, 2025). While researchers have advocated for proactive transitional practices, few evidence-based programs focused on post-competitive physical activity exist, especially within the Division II (DII) context (Lally, 2007; Petitpas et al., 1992; Reifsteck et al., 2018).

Programs that specifically focus on promoting lifetime physical activity and health prior to retirement from sport can help student-athletes cope with the transition and maintain a healthy lifestyle. While athletes are often seen as models of health, former student-athletes may not maintain a physically active lifestyle post-retirement and often report lower health-related quality of life compared to their non-athlete peers (Simon & Docherty, 2014; Simon et al., 2021). Despite their previous high levels of physical activity during competition, these individuals may struggle to sustain similar activity levels after their athletic careers end, with former athletes reporting less weekly aerobic exercise compared to recreational non-athletes (Simon & Docherty, 2017).

Several factors contribute to this decline in physical activity, including physical and psychological barriers resulting from injuries sustained during their athletic careers. Many former athletes experience pain, stiffness, and fear of re-injury, which impedes their ability to engage in regular physical activity (Russell et al., 2018). Additionally, the loss of identity as an athlete and difficulty with adapting to new roles post-retirement can further complicate their transition to a healthy lifestyle (Reifsteck et al., 2022; Tracey & Elcombe, 2004).

How well an athlete can transition out of sport can be affected by available resources and planning that took place in advance of the transition to help the athlete cope with post-competition life (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004). Empowering an athlete to prepare and have more control over their transition leads to a more positive transition out of sport (Alfermann et al., 2004; Cecić Erpič et al., 2004). In line with the NCAA's mission to "provide a world-class athletics and academic experience for student-athletes that fosters lifelong well-being" (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2025, para. 2), it should be the responsibility of athletic departments to help student-athletes develop necessary coping strategies to support their transition out of sport, and these coping methods should be introduced prior to graduation (Hansen et al., 2019).

Some transitional programs have been developed to support student-athletes in adjusting to life after sport by equipping athletes with strategies to navigate the psychological, social, and physical changes they face (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Smith et al., 2020). Specific to health-related programming, the Moving On! program provides a framework for helping student-athletes transition to a healthy lifestyle by fostering self-efficacy, goal setting, and the exploration of new activities (Reifsteck & Brooks, 2018). Similarly, the Pilates Connect program helps student-athletes gain confidence in their ability to engage in post-competitive physical activity by promoting competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Smith et al., 2020). While such programs have shown promise, most have been tested with Division I (DI) and Division III (DIII) athletes (e.g., Brooks et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020), leaving a gap in evidence for DII student-athletes.

DII athletics operates under the distinctive “Make it Yours” philosophy, which emphasizes student-athletes’ involvement across academic, athletic, and community domains (NCAA, 2025). Unlike DI’s focus on elite athletic performance or DIII’s emphasis on the student experience, DII uniquely positions practical career preparation and holistic development as central to its mission. This includes preparation related to health behaviors and lifetime wellness, areas directly aligned with the transitional programming examined in this study. The DII culture is characterized by collaborative relationships within athletic departments, shared investment in student-athlete wellbeing, and holistic support and development (NCAA, 2025). These contextual factors make DII a valuable setting for examining health-related transitional programming, as the division’s stated values emphasize the type of holistic, practical preparation such programs aim to provide. However, the extent to which these values are consistently translated into practice may vary across institutions, particularly given the resource constraints often faced by DII athletic departments (Hanson & Peachey, 2022).

DII student-athletes are often underrepresented in health-promoting programs and may have lower health literacy compared to their peers (Beasley et al., 2021). This may reflect structural differences across NCAA divisions, including fewer dedicated health promotion personnel, limited access to specialized programming, and competing resource demands within athletic departments. As a result, DII student-athletes may have fewer opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to maintain physical activity and overall well-being after their athletic careers end. Given the distinct circumstances of the DII level, where a balanced emphasis on academics, athletics, and community engagement is central, it is important to explore the feasibility of implementing programs for this population specifically (NCAA, 2014).

The connection between physical and mental health during athletic transitions is particularly salient for DII student-athletes. Recent research has documented elevated anxiety and mental health concerns among DII athletes (Hebert & Newland, 2023), with many reporting inadequate mental health support and personal well-being challenges (Ryan et al., 2022). The transition out of sport can exacerbate these concerns, as student-athletes lose not only their athletic identity but also the struc-

tured support systems that promoted both physical and mental wellness. Understanding this interconnection between physical activity, mental health, and transitional challenges is essential for developing comprehensive programming that addresses the holistic needs of transitioning DII student-athletes. Research has shown that athletic departments vary widely in their mental health screening practices and support services (Drew et al., 2023), suggesting that intentional programming focused on the health-related aspects of transition may help fill critical gaps in student-athlete support.

Feasibility studies are critical for ensuring that interventions are designed to meet the specific needs of the target group before full-scale implementation (Bowen et al., 2009; Orsmond & Cohn, 2015). By conducting feasibility studies, researchers can assess the practicality, acceptability, and potential effectiveness of transitional programs for DII student-athletes, thereby ensuring that these interventions lead to positive behavioral changes and support long-term health outcomes. Demonstrating the feasibility of a health-related physical activity program at a DII university can provide a holistic framework for supporting student-athletes in their transition to lifelong health within this unique context.

The purpose of this feasibility study was to assess the potential for implementing a health-related physical activity transition program at an NCAA DII university. The feasibility study serves as a foundational step in understanding the viability of such a program within the university setting, gathering key insights from stakeholders including former student-athletes and athletic personnel. Guided by recommendations from Bowen et al. (2009), the study was designed to address five critical questions:

RQ₁: Acceptability: Do stakeholders (former student-athletes and athletic personnel) express interest in a student-athlete transitional program with a health-related physical activity focus?

RQ₂: Demand: Do stakeholders perceive a need for this program, and is there expected use of the program?

RQ₃: Implementation: What are the necessary steps to develop the program? What needs to be created or tailored for successful implementation?

RQ₄: Practicality: Are the available resources sufficient to deliver the program effectively, and what additional resources are necessary?

RQ₅: Integration: How could the program integrate with existing initiatives on campus, or is there a current program that could support the transition?

By exploring the feasibility of this type of program, findings will lay the groundwork for potential future implementation and help to ensure that the program is both practical and beneficial for student-athletes.

Method

A cross-sectional survey was administered to recent student-athlete alumni and athletic department personnel from the same institution to describe the current health-related quality of life and physical activity levels of recent student-athlete

alumni and to explore the feasibility of implementing health-related physical activity transitional programming at the institution.

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted at a liberal arts university in the southeast United States that competes at the NCAA DII level. The institution emphasizes student-athlete wellness, holistic development, and preparation for life beyond collegiate athletics. Two groups of participants were recruited from this institution for the study: former student-athletes and athletic personnel.

Group 1: Former Student-Athletes

Recruitment was limited to recent alumni (i.e., within five years at the time of data collection) to reflect advancements made within the athletics department that included expanded resources, while also providing insight into resources that may still be lacking. A total of 85 former student-athletes ($n = 45$ women, $n = 40$ men), ages 22-29, who participated in varsity sports at the university between 2017 and 2022, completed the survey, representing 17.4% of the potential pool of 490 student-athlete alumni. The majority identified as White (61.2%) or Black/African American (24.7%). A total of 14 different sports were represented in the sample (see Table 1). The demographic composition of our former student-athlete sample generally reflects the racial diversity of the broader student population and the athletic department's student-athlete demographics during this period. The gender distribution in our sample (52.9% women, 47.1% men) aligns reasonably well with the university's overall gender ratio. Our sample's representation across 14 different sports and balanced gender distribution suggests reasonable representativeness of the former student-athlete population at this DII institution.

Group 2: Athletic Personnel

A total of 28 athletic personnel, including coaches, administrators, and athletic trainers, participated in the survey, representing 35% of all athletic department staff. The sample was balanced by gender, with 82.1% identifying as White. Over half (53.6%) of the group was composed of coaches (see Table 2). The demographic composition of our athletic personnel sample reflects the broader patterns observed in DII athletic departments, where coaching staff typically comprise a substantial portion of athletic personnel. The balanced gender representation in our sample (50% women, 50% men) is notable given the historical underrepresentation of women in coaching and athletic administration within intercollegiate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014), including continued underrepresentation within DII athletic departments (Lapchick, 2022). The inclusion of multiple role types (coaches, administrators, and athletic trainers) across 35% of all department staff provides diverse perspectives on student-athlete transitional needs and departmental capacity for program implementation.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Former Student-Athlete Survey Participants

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Female	45	52.9
Male	40	47.1
Ethnicity		
White	52	61.2
Black/African American	21	24.7
Asian	2	2.4
Two or More Races/Ethnicities	4	4.7
Native American	1	1.2
Hispanic/Latinx	1	1.2
Other	1	1.2
Prefer Not to Answer	3	3.5
Sport Participation		
Baseball	12	14.1
Basketball	10	11.8
Football	10	11.8
Lacrosse	11	12.9
Volleyball	7	8.2
Track and Field	6	7.1
Swimming	6	7.1
Soccer	6	7.1
Softball	5	5.9
Track and Field/Cross Country	4	4.7
Golf	2	2.4
Tennis	2	2.4
Triathlon	2	2.4
Spirit Team	1	1.2
Track and Field/Football	1	1.2

Note. *n*=85

Table 2*Demographic Characteristics of Athletic Personnel Survey Participants*

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	14	50
Male	14	50
Ethnicity		
White	23	82.1
Black/African American	2	7.1
Hispanic/Latinx	1	3.6
White & Hispanic/Latinx	1	3.6
Prefer Not to Answer	1	3.6
Primary Role in Athletics		
Coach	15	53.6
Athletic Trainer	4	14.3
Administration	4	14.3
Strength and Conditioning	3	10.7
Other	2	7.1

*Note. n=28***Measures**

Former student-athletes and athletic department personnel both provided demographic information and responded to feasibility questions. The survey administered to former student-athletes also collected information on their current physical activity levels and health-related quality of life to explore the need for relevant programming.

Physical Activity

The National College Health Assessment (NCHA III) is a questionnaire covering multiple health topics, including physical activity among college students within the United States (ACHA, 2022). Three questions from the NCHA III related to physical activity were selected for use in this study to ask participants about the number of minutes over the past 7-day period that they performed moderate-intensity cardiovascular or aerobic exercise, vigorous-intensity cardiovascular or aerobic activity, and how many days they did exercise to strengthen or tone their muscles. Based on their responses, participants were categorized according to whether they met (Yes/No) the U.S. recommended guidelines for physical activity for adults (i.e., at least 2 days of muscle-strengthening activity and 150 or more minutes per week of moderate aerobic activity, where 1 minute of vigorous activity equals 2 minutes of moderate activity; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

In addition to assessing weekly physical activity levels, the Stage of Exercise Questionnaire developed by Marcus and co-authors (1992) was used to assess exercise behaviors in five stages (precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance) based on individuals' intention to, and regularity of participation in, exercise. This measure has been widely used in literature to determine the stage of exercise relative to current physical activity levels (Dannecker, et al., 2003; Marcus & Simkin, 1993).

Additional questions were included to assess self-reported changes in physical activity levels and perceived difficulty in maintaining desired physical activity post-collegiate athletics. Self-reported physical activity measures are commonly used in research due to their practicality and ability to capture subjective experiences, despite potential recall bias (Craig et al., 2003; Prince et al., 2008). Participants were asked to report whether their physical activity had increased, decreased, or remained the same since their collegiate athletic career, as well as how easy or difficult it had been to maintain their desired level of activity. These questions provided insight into variability of post-sport changes to exercise behavior, complementing the standardized measures by capturing additional nuances of participants' experiences (Dishman et al., 2001; Helmerhorst et al., 2012).

Health-related Quality of Life

The Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System (PROMIS) Global Health version 1.2 was used to assess physical, mental, and social health (Hays et al., 2009). The questionnaire includes 10 items, including a pain scale, that assess overall health and quality of life. Raw scores for each subscale (i.e., Global Mental Health, Global Physical Health) were calculated and then converted to standardized T-scores ($M = 50$, $SD = 10$) using the PROMIS scoring manual. Higher T-scores indicated better health relative to the US general population norms.

Feasibility

Feasibility items incorporated modified questions from a study by DeFreese and co-authors (2021) with former collegiate women's soccer players to identify the resources, facilitators, and barriers student-athletes experience as they transition out of collegiate athletics. Additional institution specific questions were developed for the present study to evaluate key elements of feasibility identified by Bowen and co-authors (2009), including acceptability, demand, implementation, practicality, and integration of a health-related physical activity transition program. Questions were tailored to reflect the specific context of the university and its student-athletes. Additionally, open-ended questions were asked to athletic department personnel to gather feedback on the resources available or needed, and the challenges related to program implementation.

Procedures

Prior to administering the survey to student-athlete alumni and athletics department personnel, preliminary interviews were conducted with one former student-ath-

lete and one strength and conditioning coach from the university to help inform the survey design. These interviews aimed to gather initial insights into the views of the target groups regarding student-athlete transitional programming. These semi-structured and informal interviews helped refine the survey questions, especially those related to implementation, integration, and practicality of the proposed program (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Turner, 2010). Sample interview questions included: *What health-related physical activity resources do you feel student-athletes need when making the transition out of sport? And, if a program were to be offered, what do you feel would be the best format?*

Cognitive interviews were then conducted with two individuals (i.e., one former DII athlete, one former coach) from outside the university. These cognitive interviews helped identify potential issues with survey phrasing, validity, and measurement (Willis, 2005). This technique enhanced the survey design by detecting misunderstandings, unclear wording, and format-related issues, particularly when adapting questions for different devices (Beatty & Willis, 2007). For example, feedback led to modifying a question for clarity when presented on mobile devices, breaking it into two separate questions.

Upon Institutional Review Board approval and completion of preliminary work, former DII student-athletes and athletic personnel from the university were recruited to complete the online survey via Qualtrics. Student-athlete alumni were recruited by email through the office of advancement and through athletic coaches, as well as using flyers distributed at homecoming events. Athletic department personnel were contacted via their university email. Participants reviewed consent information prior to beginning the survey and could choose to be entered into a drawing for a gift card or university gear to incentivize survey completion.

Data Analysis

Survey data were downloaded from Qualtrics and analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies, means, standard deviations) were calculated separately for the two groups to allow for comparison of perspectives. Descriptive statistics were deemed most appropriate for this feasibility study given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the goal of understanding the current landscape of perceptions, needs, and resources rather than testing specific hypotheses or relationships between variables (Bowen et al., 2009). The focus on frequencies, percentages, and means allowed for a clear presentation of stakeholder perspectives that will inform future program development and implementation decisions.

Open-ended responses were systematically reviewed, coded, and grouped into common categories to identify key themes related to the feasibility of the transition program using qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Specifically, responses with similar concepts were grouped together to identify patterns in stakeholder perspectives regarding available resources, needed resources, and potential barriers to implementation. For example, responses mentioning “lack of staff,” “need

more personnel,” or “insufficient coaches” were grouped under personnel limitations. Three descriptive categories emerged from this process: funding constraints, personnel limitations, and time availability. These summative categories were used to provide contextual support for the quantitative feasibility findings specific to the institutional setting rather than to generate standalone qualitative themes. This approach allowed for a descriptive representation of site-specific feasibility factors while maintaining the study’s primary focus on quantitative feasibility indicators across the domains of acceptability, demand, implementation, practicality, and integration (Bowen et al., 2009). Results were integrated to discern the feasibility of implementing a health-related physical activity transition program for student-athletes at the university and guide future decisions for program design and delivery.

Results

The results for former student-athletes’ current physical activity and health-related quality of life are presented first to provide context for the potential need of this type of program at the university, followed by results for each of the guiding areas of feasibility.

Former Student-Athlete Physical Activity and Health-related Quality of Life

The majority of former student-athlete participants reported that they currently engage in less physical activity ($n = 72$, 84.71%) compared to when they were in college, and that it has been difficult ($n = 47$, 55.29%) or very difficult ($n = 24$, 28.24%) to maintain physical activity since the completion of their collegiate athletic career. Almost two-thirds (64.7%) of participants reported currently engaging in regular exercise based on their stage of exercise change (i.e., action or maintenance), which is presented on Table 3. Based on responses to the NCHA III physical activity questions, participants engaged in an average of 140.41 minutes of moderate physical activity and 73.26 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week. Over 40% of the sample ($n = 35$, 41.18%) reported engaging in no muscle strengthening activities, with 60% of participants ($n = 51$) not meeting the recommended physical activity guidelines. This information is presented on Tables 4 and 5.

A descriptive comparison of the means suggests participants scored close to the average global mental health and physical health scores ($M = 50$) for the general US population (Health Measures, 2023). Participants reported a global mental health T-score of 48.3 ($SD = 3.7$) that is slightly lower than the US population (mean difference -1.7 points) and a global physical health T-score of 50.8 ($SD = 4.6$) that is slightly above the US population (mean difference $+0.8$ points; Hays et al., 2009). Less than 6% of participants ($n = 5$) rated their overall health as excellent, but most participants (88.24%) rated their overall health as either very good ($n = 34$, 40%) or good ($n = 41$, 48.24%).

Table 3*Self-Reported Physical Activity Behaviors and Stage of Exercise Change*

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Change in PA		
I currently engage in more physical activity	2	2.35
My physical activity has stayed about the same	11	12.94
I currently engage in less physical activity	72	84.71
Maintaining PA		
Easy	2	2.35
Neutral	12	14.12
Difficult	47	55.29
Very Difficult	24	28.24
Regular Exercise Engagement		
I don't engage in regular exercise now, but I intend to start in the next six months	12	14.12
I don't engage in regular exercise now, but I intend to start in the next month	16	18.82
I have been engaging in regular exercise for less than six months	19	22.35
I have been engaging in regular exercise for more than six months	36	42.35
Missing	2	2.35

Table 4*Summary Statistics for NCHA III Weekly Aerobic Physical Activity*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>SE</i>	Min	Max	<i>Mdn</i>	Mode
Vigorous	73.26	80.91	85	8.78	0.00	300.00	50.00	0.00
Moderate	140.41	129.06	85	14.00	0.00	800.00	100.00	60.00

Table 5*Frequency for NCHA III Weekly Muscle Strengthening Activity*

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
0 days	35	41.18
1 day	7	8.24
2 days	21	24.71
3 days	10	11.76
4 days	6	7.06
5 days	6	7.06

Feasibility of Implementing a Transition Program with a Health-related Focus at the University

Table 6 provides key results from each feasibility area (acceptability, demand, implementation, practicality, and integration) from the perspective of both former student-athletes and athletics department personnel.

Table 6
Summary Statistics for Sample of Findings within Each Feasibility Domain

	Former Student-Athletes		Athletic Personnel	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Acceptability				
A SA transitional program with a health-related focus is important in preparing SAs for life beyond sport	4.73	0.52	4.75	0.52
Demand				
The university should support SAs:				
Personal Development	4.89	0.35	4.71	0.46
Physical Development	4.85	0.42	4.71	0.46
Psychological Development	4.91	0.33	4.71	0.46
Implementation				
The university should offer the following resources to help the SA transition out of sport:				
PA/Exercise Guidance	4.85	0.42	4.68	0.61
Career Guidance	4.89	0.35	4.89	0.31
Mental Health Resources	4.91	0.33	4.93	0.26
Practicality				
A SA transition program with a health-related focus should be delivered				
As an Elective	4.45	0.85	4.43	0.69
Face-to-face	4.23	0.74	4.11	0.74
By health/exercise/sport faculty	4.38	0.77	4.36	0.73
Integration				
A SA transition program with a health-related focus can be integrated into existing programming at the university	4.38	0.72	4.14	0.80

Note. Former Student-Athletes: *n*=85, Athletic Personnel: *n*=28; SA = Student-Athlete; 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Acceptability

Approximately 90% of former student-athlete and athletics department personnel agreed or strongly agreed that health-related transition programming is important for preparing student-athletes for life beyond sport and that programming should have a health-related physical activity focus, encompassing ways to help the student-athlete cope with the transition out of sport and maintain a physically active lifestyle upon graduation.

Demand

Results indicated a perceived demand for transition programming, with close to 90% of former student-athletes and 100% of athletic personnel participants strongly endorsing that athletics should support student-athletes' personal development, psychological development, physical development, transition out of sport, and health beyond athletics. Former student-athlete participants felt that access to resources/facilities ($n = 42$, 49.41%), financial resources ($n = 44$, 51.76%), knowledge of PA benefits ($n = 49$, 57.65%), and support from others ($n = 58$, 68.24%) were facilitators to maintaining their physical activity upon graduation.

Implementation

Most participants from both groups agreed that all example resources presented to them within the survey should be offered to aid the student-athletes transition out of sport. When asked to select the top three most important resources among a list of 12 options, participants from the student-athlete group most often chose career guidance ($n = 57$, 67.06%), mental health resources ($n = 45$, 52.94%), and physical activity/exercise guidance ($n = 43$, 50.59%). The athletic personnel also reported the same top three most important resources, but in comparison to the former student-athlete group reported mental health resources ($n = 19$, 67.86%) as their most important resource, followed by career guidance ($n = 16$, 57.14%), and physical activity/exercise guidance ($n = 12$, 42.86%).

Practicality

Approximately 80% of former student-athlete participants and more than half of athletics department personnel participants did *not* agree that support is currently being provided to student-athletes regarding transition out of sport and health beyond athletics. Former student-athlete and athletic personnel respondents perceived that the university is currently offering some key transitional resources such as social support, career guidance, and medical resources, but is currently lacking resources related to physical activity/exercise guidance and access to a sport psychologist. See Table 7.

Table 7.
Frequency for Resources the University Currently Offers

	Former Student-Athletes			Athletic Personnel		
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Unsure</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
Social Support	50	19	16	26	0	2
Coaches/Athletic Personnel Support	38	30	17	26	0	2
Mentorship/Internship	54	13	18	25	1	2
Career Guidance	64	12	9	25	0	3
Mental Health Resources	40	39	6	17	9	2
Spiritual Guidance	63	10	12	18	5	5
Medical Resources	29	30	26	16	9	3
Time Management Resources	15	56	14	12	14	2
Nutritional Guidance	17	59	9	9	17	2
Financial Guidance	17	59	9	9	17	2
PA/Exercise Guidance	8	64	13	9	15	4
Sport Psychologist	9	51	25	3	17	8

Note. Former Student-Athletes: $n=85$, Athletic Personnel: $n=28$

Participants provided input on the most appropriate delivery method for a transitional program as well as who should deliver it. Most participants from both groups found an elective course in a face-to-face format to be the most ideal delivery format, with health, exercise, and sport faculty as well as athletic trainers viewed as the most appropriate individuals to deliver health-related programming.

Integration

Participants generally agreed that the university at large and the athletic department specifically would be supportive of a student-athlete transitional program with a health-related focus. Furthermore, over 90% of former student-athletes and 75% of athletic personnel respondents felt programming would be a good use of institutional resources and could integrate into existing programming at the university.

Qualitative Findings: Resources and Implementation Barriers

Open-ended responses from athletic personnel were systematically reviewed and coded using qualitative content analysis to identify patterns related to available resources, needed resources, and barriers to implementation (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Overall, three descriptive categories of implementation barriers emerged from the content analysis: funding constraints, personnel limitations, and time availability. These qualitative findings were used to provide contextual support for the quantitative feasibility results rather than to generate standalone qualitative themes.

Athletic personnel most frequently cited funding constraints ($n = 13$) as a barrier to implementation, with responses indicating limited athletic department budgets and the need for financial resources to develop and sustain programming. Personnel limitations were also frequently mentioned ($n = 11$), with respondents describing the need for additional staff, dedicated program coordinators, or faculty time to effectively deliver programming. Time availability ($n = 7$) emerged as a related barrier, as participants indicated that existing staff members are already managing multiple responsibilities and may not have sufficient capacity to assume additional programming demands. Together, these findings highlight the tension between recognizing the value of health-related transitional programming and navigating the practical realities of implementation within resource-constrained athletic environments.

Despite these challenges, athletic personnel identified several existing resources that expanded health-related programming, if implemented, could integrate with or build upon. Responses mentioning Health, Exercise, and Sport (HES) faculty ($n = 6$) indicated that existing faculty expertise could support program delivery. Participants also identified capstone courses ($n = 6$), personal health courses ($n = 4$), athletic training services ($n = 11$), strength and conditioning programs ($n = 6$), and existing student-athlete development initiatives as potential integration points. These responses suggest that rather than requiring entirely new infrastructure, health-related transitional programming could leverage existing university resources and personnel.

Discussion

This feasibility study explored the potential for implementing a health-related physical activity transition program for student-athletes at an NCAA DII university. Survey results from both former student-athletes and athletic personnel highlighted strong support for such a program, with most participants agreeing on its importance for preparing student-athletes for life after sport. These findings contribute to the limited literature on DII student-athlete transitions (Beasley et al., 2021) by documenting not only the need for health-related programming but also the practical considerations that must be addressed for successful implementation.

Demand for Health-related Transitional Programming

Both former student-athletes and athletic personnel identified career guidance, mental health resources, and physical activity/exercise guidance as the most critical resources for a successful transition, domains commonly identified as central to athlete career transition support (Lavalley et al., 1997; Stambulova et al., 2009). While former student-athletes prioritized career guidance, athletic personnel ranked mental health resources as the most essential. This alignment between stakeholder groups is particularly important, as successful program implementation requires buy-in from both the athletes who will participate and the personnel who will support the programming (Bowen et al., 2009).

The slight difference in prioritization between groups offers valuable insight. Student-athletes may be focused on immediate post-graduation concerns like finding employment, while athletic personnel recognize the foundational role mental health plays in supporting all aspects of the transition. This finding aligns with recent research documenting elevated mental health concerns among DII athletes (Hebert & Newland, 2023) and suggests that athletic personnel are increasingly aware of the psychological support needs of their student-athletes (Ryan et al., 2022).

Physical Activity Decline and Resource Gaps

Findings suggest that many former student-athletes struggle to meet the recommended physical activity guidelines, highlighting a need for health-related transition programs to support them in overcoming this challenge. Indeed, 60% of former student-athletes in this sample were not meeting recommended physical activity guidelines, and 84.71% reported engaging in less physical activity compared to their collegiate years. Over 80% found it difficult or very difficult to maintain physical activity post-sport. These findings reinforce previous research documenting significant declines in physical activity following athletic career termination (Reifsteck et al., 2013; Simon & Docherty, 2014).

While exercise guidance was cited as one of the top three most desired resources among both the student-athlete alumni and the athletic personnel, it was reported to be one of the least available resources currently offered to transitioning student-athletes. This gap between what student-athletes need and what is being provided supports previous observations that existing transitional resources focus primarily on career aspects while neglecting health-related components (Petitpas et al., 1992; Reifsteck et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004). The current study extends this literature by documenting this gap specifically within a DII context and showing that stakeholders at multiple levels recognize the deficiency.

Understanding Feasibility: Barriers and Facilitators

While the strong demand for programming demonstrates that stakeholders see value in health-related transitional support, the feasibility findings help explain why such programs have not yet been implemented despite this widespread recognition. Athletic personnel identified three primary barriers: funding constraints ($n = 13$), personnel limitations ($n = 11$), and time availability ($n = 7$). These findings align with broader research on DII athletic department resource constraints (Hanson & Peachey, 2022) and reveal the tension between recognizing program value and having the capacity to implement it.

However, participants also identified existing infrastructure that could support program implementation. Athletic personnel mentioned Health, Exercise, and Sport faculty ($n = 6$), capstone courses ($n = 6$), personal health courses ($n = 4$), athletic training services ($n = 11$), and strength and conditioning programs ($n = 6$) as existing resources that health-related programming could integrate with or build upon. This is particularly important for feasibility because it suggests that effective programming might leverage existing services rather than creating entirely new structures, a

more sustainable approach given the resource constraints identified by stakeholders (Bowen et al., 2009).

Participants identified existing courses (e.g., Life and Career Planning, Personal Health) that could be adapted to integrate health-related content, which would help this athletic department, and other DII institutions like it, to overcome potential barriers like limited funding and personnel. Although financial constraints are often a challenge for DII programs (Hanson & Peachey, 2022), leveraging established courses offers a viable solution to incorporate health-focused components into the curriculum. This integration model reflects the collaborative, holistic approach characteristic of DII athletics' "Make it Yours" philosophy (NCAA, 2025).

Constraints to Program Implementation

The question of why such programs have not been implemented, despite widespread recognition of need, is answered by looking at the practical realities revealed in this study. The barrier is not lack of awareness or support, as both stakeholder groups strongly endorsed the importance of health-related transitional programming. Rather, the barriers are practical and structural: limited funding, insufficient personnel, and competing time demands, challenges commonly reported in DII athletic departments (Hanson & Peachey, 2022) and in feasibility-focused program development (Bowen et al., 2009). Athletic personnel are already stretched thin with existing responsibilities, and adding new programming without additional resources presents a significant challenge, particularly in resource-constrained athletic environments such as those typical of DII institutions (Hanson & Peachey, 2022).

Additionally, the finding that participants perceived the university as adequately providing career guidance but lacking in physical activity and health resources suggests a historical emphasis on certain aspects of the transition over others. This pattern aligns with previous observations that transitional programming has traditionally focused more heavily on career development while health-related components receive less attention (Petitpas et al., 1992; Reifsteck et al., 2018). The current study's documentation of this gap, combined with stakeholder endorsement of health-related programming, provides evidence that could support efforts to address these deficiencies.

Holistic Support and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Collectively, these findings underscore a significant demand and need for transitional programs focused on holistic support, including career guidance, physical activity, mental health resources, and other services like financial and nutritional guidance. This holistic approach aligns with contemporary models of student-athlete development that emphasize the interconnection between physical, psychological, and social wellbeing (Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and reflects DII's emphasis on comprehensive student-athlete support (NCAA, 2025).

Findings also suggest that to be able to feasibly implement such transitional programming, there is a need for interdisciplinary collaboration across departments like student success, career services, wellness services, and alumni relations. This ap-

proach would ensure that transitional programs address the comprehensive needs of student-athletes, not just in terms of career but also their physical, psychological, and social well-being, consistent with holistic models of student-athlete development (Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Such collaboration also distributes implementation responsibilities across multiple units, potentially addressing the personnel and time constraints identified as barriers, and reflects the integrated, relationship-focused culture characteristic of DII institutions.

Division II Context

This study makes an important contribution by focusing specifically on DII student-athletes, a population that has been significantly under-researched compared to their DI counterparts (Beasley et al., 2021). The findings suggest that DII student-athletes face similar transitional challenges to those documented in DI populations: physical activity decline, identity loss, mental health concerns (Reifsteck et al., 2013; Simon & Docherty, 2014), but may have access to fewer formalized support resources (Hanson & Peachey, 2022; NCAA, 2025). However, the collaborative culture and existing infrastructure identified in this study suggest that DII institutions may be well-positioned to implement integrated, holistic programming that leverages existing resources. This approach may be more feasible and sustainable than resource-intensive standalone programs.

The identification of specific courses, personnel, and services that could support programming provides a concrete roadmap that other DII institutions facing similar resource constraints could adapt to their own contexts. While this study was conducted at a single institution, the barriers and facilitators identified likely resonate across DII athletics, where resource limitations are common but collaborative relationships and holistic support philosophies are central to institutional culture.

Limitations and Future Directions

This feasibility study reinforces the need for proactive transitional programs for student-athletes, aligning with previous research advocating for such initiatives (Lavallee et al., 1997). However, it uniquely highlights the specific needs of DII student-athletes, a group that has been under-researched. Despite a small sample size limited to one institution, the findings provide valuable insights into the feasibility of implementing a health-focused transition program in the DII context. The results indicate strong interest and commitment from both student-athletes and athletic personnel in supporting health-related transition programming.

Although the study's sample size was limited, it represented a significant portion of the athletic personnel at the university, suggesting that the athletic community is ready to embrace and support these types of programs. The positive findings from this sample provide a strong foundation for developing a health-promoting transition program, which could be applicable to other NCAA DII institutions facing similar challenges. By drawing on these insights, institutions can proactively implement evidence-based strategies that foster student-athlete well-being, personal growth, and a more supported transition beyond sport.

Looking forward, more research is needed to develop, implement, and evaluate specific health-related transitional programs for NCAA DII student-athletes. Focusing on resources for mental health and physical activity would be particularly of interest to student-athletes, and future studies should assess the effectiveness of these programs in enhancing their overall health-related transition experiences. The qualitative feedback from athletic personnel in this study also provides a foundation for future research examining implementation strategies and stakeholder perspectives on program design and sustainability within DII athletic environments. This will ensure that tailored resources are available to support their successful adjustment to life after sport.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the university appears to provide strong career-related support for student-athletes, a gap remains in the provision of physical activity and health-related resources. This finding is particularly concerning given that 60% of former student-athletes in this sample did not meet recommended physical activity guidelines and over 80% reported difficulty maintaining physical activity after their competitive careers ended. This study contributes to the literature by providing needed evidence on DII student-athletes, a population that has been significantly under-researched compared to their DI counterparts. It documents both the demand for health-related transitional programming and the feasibility considerations that must be addressed for successful implementation. The identification of specific integration opportunities within existing courses, faculty expertise, and campus resources suggests that health-related transitional programming is both needed and feasible within resource-constrained DII environments. The current study provides an evidence-based foundation for such efforts and offers a roadmap that other DII institutions could adapt to their own contexts.

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A Systematic Review on the Relationship between Student-Athletes' Identities and their College Experience Through the Lens of Social Identity Theory

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Student-athletes' identities play a significant role in shaping their college experience. Despite a growing body of literature, additional investigations are needed to create a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities shape their college experiences and outcomes. Therefore, in this study, I began by systematically reviewing previous literature to identify which college experiences and outcomes tend to be associated with student-athletes' identities. Following, I utilized Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a guiding framework to better understand how student-athletes' identities may shape the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments. Utilizing two coding cycles, five salient student-athlete identities were identified that impact seven common dimensions of their college experience. Interpreted through the lens of SIT, it appeared student-athletes may actively engage or disengage from certain individuals, groups, behaviors, or activities in relation to their perceptions of prestige and sense of belonging. Practical implications suggest coaches and athletics staff should collectively aim to create a team culture that demonstrates norms, values, and behaviors that elevate and support student-athletes' holistic identity development.

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The value of higher education is often demonstrated through higher education institutions supporting students' cognitive and noncognitive development and their search for a sense of belonging (Black & Allen, 2017; Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Despite the variety of learning and developmental activities and population-specific programs designed to support higher education students, disparities persist in how students experience the value of higher education (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024; Renn & Reason, 2021). Among the groups navigating these disparities are students who participate in intercollegiate athletics.

Students participating in intercollegiate athletics, commonly referred to as student-athletes, have the unique responsibility of balancing both athletic and academic participation during their college experience. The combined commitment to athletic and academic participation inherently creates a rigorous schedule for student-athletes, averaging 70 hours per week, completing athletic and academic responsibilities (NCAA, 2020). While student-athletes receive support through financial aid, academic tutors, medical care, access to athletic facilities, and other specialized resources, many continue to struggle to balance their multiple commitments (Gaston-Gayles, 2015). Consequently, student-athletes are often faced with making difficult choices between competing commitments, with athletic participation taking precedence (Chaplin & Lim, 2020; Edwards & Froehle, 2023; Grafnetterova et al., 2021; Zvosec et al., 2023). As a result, student-athletes are often limited in their ability to participate in exploratory behaviors (e.g., on-campus extracurricular activities, internships, or part-time employment) outside of their regular responsibilities.

Brewer and Petitpas (2017) described exploratory behaviors as an optimal way for individuals to discover and develop unique skills, values, and interests, which form the foundation of their occupational and ideological beliefs and opinions. In the case of student-athletes, exploratory behaviors often assist in identifying skills, values, and interests outside of athletic participation and performance contexts. For example, student-athletes who successfully engage in exploratory behaviors tend to prioritize academic performance and find greater balance when navigating their multiple responsibilities, often feeling empowered to use athletic participation to their advantage (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Unfortunately, student-athletes frequently sacrifice participation in exploratory behaviors in pursuit of athletic participation and achievement (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). As a result, student-athletes are prone to relying on athletic participation and performance to determine self-worth, which can influence their identity development, sense of belonging, and their overall college experience (Whitehead & Senecal, 2020).

While scholars have demonstrated a significant interest in understanding the impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experience, less consideration has been given to how student-athletes' identities shape the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments. As a result, previous studies often document mixed findings regarding the relationships between student-athletes' identities and their corresponding experiences and outcomes (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Graupensperger et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2024; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018; Zvosec et al., 2023). Furthermore, despite the guidance and sup-

port of targeted interventions, disparities persist in student-athletes' cognitive and noncognitive development and their search for a sense of belonging across gender, race, and divisional association (Kroshuset al., 2023a; Kroshuset al., 2023b; NCAA, 2020). Therefore, additional investigations are needed to create a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities shape their college experiences and outcomes (Caza et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014).

In this study, I systematically review previous literature to address the research question: How does the past 10 years of academic literature suggest student-athletes' identities impact their college experience?

In doing so, I identify which college experiences and outcomes tend to be associated with student-athletes' identities. Furthermore, I utilize Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a guiding framework to better understand how student-athletes' identities may shape the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments. As a result, this seeks to build upon previous studies (Caza et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014) by incorporating multiple student-athlete identities into a single study while considering how the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison shape their college experiences and outcomes (Rees et al., 2015). Taken together, this study aims to assist in creating a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes.

Literature Review

Social Identity Theory

Over time, numerous theories have been used to investigate the impacts of identity on college students' experiences and outcomes (Renn & Reason, 2021). Dominant theories within social science identity research include Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory, which focus on how group affiliation or social roles impact identity development and behaviors (Ronkainen et al., 2016). Considering SIT as a model informing identity development, the seminal work of Tajfel (1970), Tajfel et al. (1971), and Tajfel and Turner (1979) demonstrated individuals derive a significant portion of their identity from group membership, which informs their motivations, decisions, and behaviors. Since its early conceptualization, SIT has repeatedly provided a useful framework for understanding a variety of social domains, such as leadership, crowd behavior, military participation, health and wellness, public policies, and sport psychology (Hogg, 2016; Rees et al., 2015).

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), SIT consists of three central components, which include social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. Through social categorization, individuals organize their social world by classifying themselves and others into distinct social groups, each commonly associated with norms, values, and behavioral expectations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Through social identification, individuals internalize group membership as part of their self-concept by adopting and expressing norms, values, and behaviors associated with their in-

group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Consequently, individuals develop the perceptions of being similar or different and better or worse than others. Finally, through social comparison, individuals seek to maintain or achieve a positive social identity by favorably evaluating their own groups in relation to others, which often contributes to the formation of groups of high or low prestige (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As a result, perceptions of high or low prestige tend to encourage individuals to distance themselves from or identify with a group or its membership by either enhancing the prestige of their current group or seeking affiliation with an alternative group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Taken together, these processes illustrate how group membership plays a significant role in shaping identity development and social behavior. Consequently, scholars have argued social identity approaches provide unique and powerful contributions to understanding the phenomena and behaviors that lie at the core of athletic participation and sport psychology (Rees et al., 2015). Therefore, in this study, I utilized SIT to investigate the impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experiences and outcomes.

Social identity approaches have been used by numerous scholars to understand the relationship between student-athletes' identities and their college experiences and outcomes. For example, Copeland et al. (2024) utilized SIT to investigate the foundation of student-athletes' identity by examining the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and their athletic identity. In this study, Copeland et al. (2024) surveyed 102 student-athletes currently enrolled in higher education institutions across NCAA divisions, utilizing three measures, which included the Personal Data Form, Athletic Identity Measurement Scale, and Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey. The results from Copeland et al. (2024) did not show a significant relationship between adverse childhood experiences and athletic identity. However, considering race and gender, they did report a significant correlation specific to Black male student-athletes, which suggested Black males who have been exposed to a higher number of adverse childhood experiences may develop a stronger athletic identity.

Additional studies include those of Stokowski et al. (2022) and Parker et al. (2021). In Stokowski et al.'s (2022) investigation, they examined the impact of divisional association on 332 NCAA Division III student-athletes utilizing the Athlete Identity Measurement Scale and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21. Stokowski et al. (2022) reported participants did not display a strong connection to their athletic identity and therefore did not demonstrate concerning levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. As such, it was noted these findings demonstrate how divisional association impacts student-athletes' college experience, highlighting the benefits of the NCAA Division III philosophy (NCAA, 2025), which encourages a balanced college experience for student-athletes.

Considering Parker et al.'s (2021) investigation, they examined Canadian student-athletes by conducting secondary analysis of the 2017–2018 Motivation and Academic Achievement archival database. In doing so, they investigated the relationship between student-athletes' social identity and psychosocial adjustment among first-year student-athletes. In this study, Parker et al. (2021) utilized a subsa-

sample of 331 first-year student-athletes. Results from this study suggested Canadian student-athletes' social identity was correlated to increased perceptions of control and decreased perceptions of stress and learning-related anxiety, which positively impacted academic performance and mental well-being. Therefore, similar to Stokowski et al. (2022), these findings demonstrated positive effects of social identities and group membership for student-athletes.

On the other hand, Graupensperger et al. (2018) and Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018) reported more troubling impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experience. In an investigation of NCAA Division II and III student-athletes, Graupensperger et al. (2018) surveyed 379 student-athletes to test their hypothesis that those who strongly identified with their team would demonstrate increased risk of conforming to their teammates' behaviors. As a result, Graupensperger et al. (2018) found student-athletes who strongly identified with their athletic identity tended to conform to their team's norms, values, and behaviors. These included the participation in risky behaviors, such as excessive alcohol use and hazing practices, as well as prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering or helping a stranger. However, when controlling for student-athletes' gender, Graupensperger et al. (2018) reported female student-athletes were less likely than male student-athletes to conform to risky behaviors and more likely to conform to prosocial behaviors.

Considering Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018), this investigation included 1,151 undergraduate varsity student-athletes from nine NCAA Division I institutions who completed questionnaires assessing athletic and academic identity saliency, athletic task and ego orientation, academic mastery and performance goals, and dimensions of sport conduct. In this study, Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018) found student-athletes' athletic and academic identities were significant indicators of ethical behavior during competition. For example, salient academic identities positively predicted student-athletes exhibiting ethical behavior and negatively predicted unethical behavior during competition. On the other hand, salient athletic identities negatively predicted student-athletes exhibiting ethical behavior and positively predicted unethical behavior during competition.

Athletic Identity

Investigations into student-athletes' athletic identity are typically traced to the work of Brewer et al. (1993) and their initial Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). Over time and through subsequent work, the initial AIMS has evolved into the current seven-item AIMS, incorporating aspects such as social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). The seminal work of Brewer et al. (1993) defined athletic identity as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (p. 237). However, recent studies have suggested more nuanced understandings of student-athletes' athletic identity.

Through a qualitative approach, Newton et al. (2020) examined how NCAA Division I student-athletes understand and experience their athletic identity. Participants in this study included three male and six female student-athletes participating in various sports from a southeastern university in the United States. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, Newton et al. (2020) found the participants' athletic

identity was personally internalized, reinforced through long-term commitment, and shaped by social recognition. As a result, student-athletes' athletic identity was described as an iceberg, a participant-generated metaphor that suggested an athletic identity comprises seen and unseen characteristics that are above and below the surface.

Previous studies have also suggested student-athletes may become addicted to their athletic identity. For example, Huml and Nite (2019) conducted a two-phase quantitative study with 118 current NCAA Division I and II student-athletes and 458 former student-athletes to examine whether athletic identity reflects characteristics of behavioral addiction. Using this approach, they developed and provided initial evidence for the reliability and validity of a four-factor Athletic Identity Addiction Scale. As a result, Huml and Nite (2019) suggested student-athletes may display symptoms such as withdrawal, over-commitment, and relapse in relation to both athletic participation and athletic identity.

Additional studies investigating student-athletes' athletic identities have suggested a give-and-take relationship between student-athletes and their athletic identity. For example, Zvosec et al. (2023) conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 former NCAA Division I student-athlete football players from 14 institutions to examine post-athletic career transitions. Findings from this study suggested student-athletes develop high levels of athletic mastery, which often correlate with transferable skills such as confidence, commitment, and a strong work ethic. However, the development of athletic mastery typically came at a cost, as opportunities to advance skillsets outside of athletic participation were often viewed as incompatible with the rigorous demands of athletic schedules.

Similarly, Watson et al. (2024) examined the relationships among athletic identity, motivation, satisfaction, and mental well-being. In this study, survey data were gathered from 207 student-athletes at mid-major NCAA Division I institutions during the 2020–2021 academic year. Using a 60-item questionnaire, Watson et al. (2024) found that while student-athlete motivation and satisfaction were positively associated with mental well-being, athletic identity was negatively correlated with mental well-being. As a result, it was suggested a salient athlete identity may carry psychological consequences under certain conditions.

Finally, through a cross-sectional quantitative survey of 104 former NCAA Division I student-athlete Powell et al. (2024) investigated the extent to which student-athletes' athletic identity impacts their present-day life satisfaction. Findings from this study suggested athletic identity did not significantly impact present-day life satisfaction unless the mediating effect of the search for meaning in life was included. In other words, while athletic identity did not significantly influence the presence of meaning in life, it did significantly predict engagement in the search for meaning. Therefore, it was suggested that student-athletes would benefit from integrating alternative identities outside of athletic participation before graduation to facilitate more successful transitions out of sport.

Student-Athlete Experience

The Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Learning of Students in College Study (GOALS) is one of the most comprehensive studies examining the experiences and well-being of current student-athletes and was conducted in 2006, 2010, 2015, and 2019 (NCAA, 2020). The NCAA GOALS survey used a stratified random sampling method (Fetters, 2019) to ensure the sample distribution reflects the population across all sports teams. In these studies, student-athletes are randomly selected from one to three preselected sports teams per school (Hwang & Choi, 2016). In 2019, over 22,000 student-athletes participated in the NCAA GOALS survey by completing an 84-question survey, answering questions regarding their background, social experience, academic experience, athletic experience, recruitment experience, and support received for overall health and well-being (NCAA, 2020).

Findings from the 2019 NCAA GOALS Study identified significant disparities in mental health, academic engagement, perceived support, sense of belonging, and time commitments. Considering sex, female student-athletes were more likely than male student-athletes to report feeling overwhelmed by their responsibilities and expressed lower comfort levels in discussing mental health concerns with coaches. Additionally, female respondents reported devoting more time to academic activities compared to male student-athletes. Considering race, student-athletes of Color indicated a lower sense of belonging compared to White student-athletes. Additionally, White student-athletes were more likely to perceive their coaches and teammates had created inclusive environments. Finally, considering divisional association, NCAA Division I student-athletes reported increased time spent on athletic participation, which limited their extracurricular engagement, faculty interactions, and academic participation. Conversely, NCAA Division III student-athletes reported increased likelihood of forming close relationships with faculty and higher levels of academic balance and support (NCAA, 2020).

Minority Identity Support

Considering the disparities among student-athletes, Kroshus, Ackerman, Brown, et al. (2023) and Kroshus, Coakley, Conway, et al. (2023) sought to identify ways in which student-athletes with minority identities could be better supported. During the NCAA Summit on gender identity and student-athlete participation, Kroshus et al. (2023a) utilized a modified Delphi consensus process, which included two phases to identify ways in which trans and gender nonconforming student-athletes (TGNC) could be better supported. Phase one included didactic presentations, small-group discussions, and opportunities for anonymous feedback to generate potential support strategies. Following, phase two used an asynchronous process in which participants anonymously rated and refined proposed support strategies. Participants included current or former TGNC student-athletes, academic and healthcare professionals, and intercollegiate athletic stakeholders who are actively involved in policy implementation. In this study, summit participants suggested there is a need for structural and systemic action to support TGNC student-athletes' well-being. For example, it was suggested that all individuals involved in athletic programs should receive

athlete-centered, gender-affirming healthcare. Additionally, it was suggested that role-specific education should be provided to stakeholders to address biases, myths, and misperceptions about the sexual and gender identity of LGBTQ+ student-athletes.

Similarly, Kroshus et al. (2023b), used a Delphi-informed approach to investigate ways in which student-athletes of Color could be better supported. This study began with a scoping review of literature on racial and ethnic differences in student-athlete mental health. Following, a multiday virtual meeting was held to integrate empirical findings with the lived experiences of a racially and professionally diverse group of student-athletes, clinicians, athletics administrators, DEI experts, and health educators. Through a consensus process, participants recommended implementing organizational policies and practices such as increasing staffing diversity, establishing reporting and accountability mechanisms, supporting non-sport skill development for student-athletes of Color, and providing trauma-informed education for stakeholders.

Taken together, previous studies suggest student-athletes' identities play a significant role in shaping how they experience the value of higher education, including their cognitive and noncognitive development and their search for a sense of belonging. Despite a growing body of literature, additional investigations are needed to create a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities shape their college experiences and outcomes. Therefore, in this study, I systematically reviewed previous literature to address the following research question: How does the past 10 years of academic literature suggest student-athletes' identities impact their college experience? In doing so, I utilize SIT as a framework to interpret why student-athletes' identities may be related to their college experiences and outcomes. As a result, this seeks to build upon previous studies (Caza et al., 2018; Rees et al., 2015; Steele et al., 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014) by incorporating multiple student-athlete identities into a single study while considering how the processes of social categorization, identification, and social comparison shape the decisions and motivations underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments.

Method

Search Strategy

In this systematic review, I utilized the online databases ProQuest, ERIC, and One Search. Using ProQuest, I began with the search term *NCAA student-athlete identity*. ProQuest delivered 13,678 results. I then limited results to the past 10 years. Selecting a range of 10 years reduced the results to 6,513. I continued by selecting peer-reviewed articles published in a scholarly journal. This decision resulted in lowering the total to 669 results. Following, I limited results to *full text* and the document type *articles*. This search strategy resulted in a total of 57 articles. Finally, I selected the subject *athletes*, which resulted in 23 articles for review.

Using ERIC, I began with the search term *NCAA student-athlete identity*. ERIC generated 493 results. I then limited the results to the past 10 years. Selecting a range of 10 years reduced the results to 212. I continued by selecting only peer-reviewed articles, which reduced the results to 177. I then limited the results to *full text* and the publication type *research report*. This search strategy resulted in 118 articles. Finally, I selected the descriptor *student-athletes*, which resulted in 25 articles for review.

Using One Search, I began with the search term *NCAA student-athlete identity*. Upon using the search term *NCAA student-athlete identity*, 217 results were found. I then limited my search to the past 10 years. Selecting a range of 10 years reduced the results to 163. I continued by only allowing for peer-reviewed articles published in an academic journal. This search strategy resulted in a total of 65 articles. Finally, I selected the subject *athletes*, which resulted in 32 articles for review.

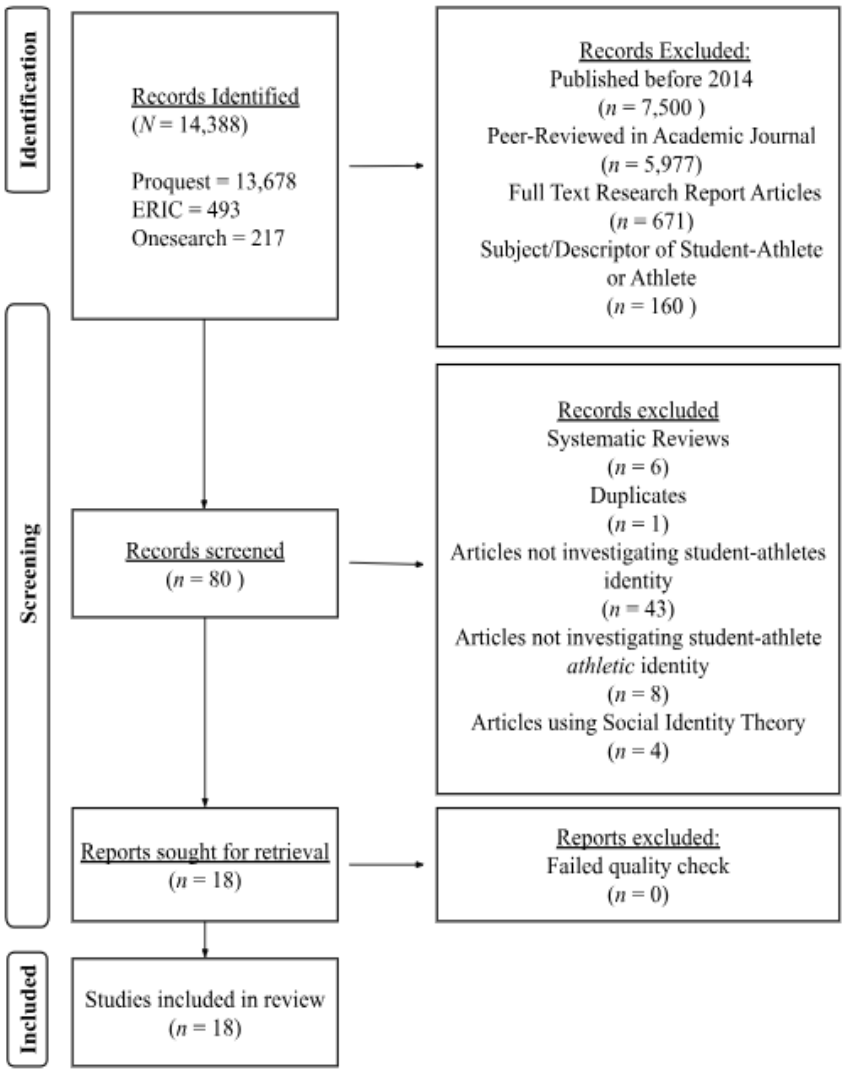
All 80 articles found using ProQuest, ERIC, and OneSearch were then downloaded and grouped into the software program EndNote 20©. EndNote 20© is a system that allows an individual to manage an extensive reference list, assisting with citation formatting, viewing abstracts, identifying keywords, and generating bibliographic data. With all the articles in EndNote 20©, I began reviewing the titles and abstracts of each publication. I started by excluding articles that were systematic or literature reviews. This removed six articles, resulting in 74 articles. I then excluded duplicate articles. This removed one article, resulting in 73 articles. I then excluded articles that did not investigate student-athletes' identities. Applying this exclusion criterion, 43 articles were removed, resulting in 30. I then excluded articles that did not incorporate student-athletes' *athletic* identity in their study. Applying this exclusion criterion, eight articles were removed, resulting in 22 articles for review. Finally, I excluded articles that utilized Social Identity Theory to investigate student-athlete identities, removing 4 articles, resulting in 18 for review. These 4 articles were instead retained for comparison in the discussion, allowing the findings identified in this study to be considered alongside existing SIT-based literature on student-athletes' identities and their college experience.

Before proceeding to the final evaluation of the 18 articles, I completed a quality check to assess the scholarship of each article. Qualitative studies were evaluated, considering the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who suggested rigorous qualitative research studies must incorporate strategies to establish trustworthiness, such as credibility, transferability, and dependability. Quantitative studies were evaluated considering the recommendations of Johnson and Christensen (2017) and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), who suggested rigorous quantitative research must display markers of robustness such as generalizability, validity, and reliability.

Reviewing the methodological rigor of each article, I assessed the methods, results, findings, and discussion sections of each article. Evaluating the methods sections of each study, I assessed how data were collected and analyzed. Assessing the results and findings sections within each article, I reviewed the extent to which the study addressed its respective research questions and the purpose of the study. Reviewing the discussion sections of each article, I examined the authors' ability to

communicate the significance of their findings within a broader scholarly context and the implications of their findings. My comprehensive review of methodological rigor did not exclude any additional articles (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2020)



Data Analysis

Analyzing the articles included in this study involved two coding cycles. First, I utilized holistic coding (Saldaña, 2021) as a preparatory method to review each article and identify the ways in which previous studies investigated and suggested student-athletes' identities impacted their college experiences and outcomes across a range of research designs. For example, I documented how and when student-athletes' identities were investigated. Additionally, I documented the ways in which previous studies suggested student-athletes' identities impacted their college experiences and outcomes. Next, I utilized pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021) to organize the holistic codes into smaller, conceptually related categories and to identify recurring patterns across studies. For example, I documented the recurring ways in which student-athletes' identities were investigated and described as impacting their college experiences and outcomes. After completing both coding cycles, I interpreted the emerging patterns through the lens of SIT. In doing so, I utilized the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison to identify the ways in which student-athletes' identities may shape the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments.

Findings

In total, 13 studies utilized a quantitative approach, five studies utilized a qualitative approach, and no studies utilized a mixed methods approach. Across the 18 articles, seven investigated the impacts of student-athletes' identities across multiple NCAA divisions, nine investigated NCAA Division I student-athletes, one investigated NCAA Division II student-athletes, and one investigated NCAA Division III student-athletes. Considering publication year, eight articles were published between 2016 and 2018, seven between 2019 and 2022, and three since 2023 (see Table 1).

Table 1
Key Characteristics of Studies Included

Reference	Methods	Sample	Purpose	Main Findings
Allen et al. (2022)	Quant	884 senior student-athletes at a private, religiously affiliated, NCAA Division I university.	Investigated the religiosity of student-athletes.	Reported student-athletes scored higher than non-athletes on religious beliefs, religious behaviors, and sense of religious identity. White student-athletes were more prone to indicate higher religious behavior.
Anderson et al. (2023)	Qual	Nine female student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Explored the experiences of NCAA female sexual minority student-athletes.	Found participants experienced a challenging climate and role negotiation. Participants discussed the challenging environment created by a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, which encouraged student-athletes to hide their sexual orientation. Participants described a fear of verbal and physical discrimination, which discouraged them from sharing their sexual orientation.
Bell et al. (2018)	Quant	44 student-athletes from various NCAA Division II institutions in the Southwest United States.	Assessed whether there is an association between athlete identity and career exploration and engagement among current student-athletes.	Results suggested there are associations between athletic identity and career exploration and engagement. Female student-athletes reported increased career exploration and engagement.
Beron & Piquero (2016)	Quant	19,000 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Investigated the connection between athletic and academic identities of student-athletes.	Results suggested student-athletes with a strong athletic identity spent more time on athletic participation and less on academic involvement, leading to lower academic achievement.
Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)	Qual	29 NCAA Division I student-athletes across sports.	Explored NCAA Division I collegiate student-athletes’ perceptions regarding their transition out of sports participation.	Found participants described negative feelings toward transition out of sport due to the loss of their athletic identity. Participants found comfort and confidence when approaching their transition when they were encouraged and supported by family members and stakeholders to develop a holistic identity.

Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Qual	Four Black female student-athletes at an NCAA Division I historically White institution (HWI).	Explored athletic identity vs. academic performance in Black female student-athletes.	Found participants tended to over-identify with their athletic identity and under-identify with their academic identity. Participants expressed their athletic role dominated their time and energy, resulting in reduced academic performance.
Fynes & Fisher (2016)	Qual	10 former NCAA Division I lesbian student-athletes.	Explored the social experiences of female LGBTQ+ student-athletes.	Found participants described the climate for LGBTQ+ athletes as relatively unsupportive. Participants felt the need to conceal their sexual orientation depending on the context.
Gabana (2020)	Quant	331 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the relationship between student-athletes' religious identity and levels of gratitude.	Reported student-athletes who identified as spiritual/religious had higher levels of dispositional gratitude than spiritual/non-religious and non-spiritual/non-religious athletes.
Gabana (2022)	Quant	596 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the relationship between student-athletes' religious identity and levels of gratitude.	Results supported their previous study (Gabana, 2020) by suggesting student-athletes who identified as spiritual/religious had higher levels of dispositional gratitude than spiritual/non-religious and non-spiritual/non-religious athletes.
Gayles et al. (2018)	Quant	7,703 NCAA Division I student-athletes.	Examined student-athletes' experiences and perceptions of campus climate in relation to perceived sense of belonging on college campuses.	Reported a negative relationship between athletic identity and sense of belonging, with students of color reporting lower belonging than their White counterparts. Positive perceptions of institutional and team climate were associated with a higher sense of belonging, particularly for student-athletes of Color.
Huml (2018)	Quant	546 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the differences related to student-athletes' athletic identity.	Identified a similarity between athletic identity scores of NCAA Division I and Division II student-athletes and the lower athletic identity scores of NCAA Division III student-athletes.

McDowell et al. (2018)	Quant	119 student-athletes across 15 NCAA Division I universities.	Investigated the impact of authentic leadership on student-athlete psychological development and team engagement.	Indicated student-athletes who perceived head coaches as authentic leaders felt they experienced a positive team climate and therefore experienced increased psychological development. Head coaches perceived as authentic leaders increased student-athletes' optimism regarding success, self-confidence, and resilience
Menke & Germany (2019)	Qual	15 former NCAA Division I male student-athletes.	Explored NCAA Division I collegiate student-athletes' perceptions regarding their transition out of sports participation.	Found participants described their feelings toward transition out of sport as negative and participants credited their negative feelings to the emotional loss of their athletic identity.
Rankin et al. (2016)	Quant	8,481 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the impact of institutional characteristics on student-athlete identity development and athletic and academic success.	Reported positive campus climate and positive interactions with faculty and athletic personnel had the most significant positive impact on identity development and athletic and academic success.
Riciputi & Erdal (2017)	Quant	60 NCAA Division III student-athletes from a single institution.	Examined the effect of priming athletic identity on academic performance with a challenging math test.	Reported athletic identity priming (saliency) reduced academic performance while multiple identity priming improved academic outcomes.
Santos & Sagas (2023)	Quant	5,042 student-athletes across NCAA divisions	Investigated the connection between athletic and academic identities of student-athletes.	Reported participants with a strong athletic identity spent more time on athletic participation and less on academic involvement, leading to lower academic achievement.

Scheidler et al. (2021)	Quant	204 NCAA student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the relationships between athletic identity, activist identity and commitment, stress control mindset, and mental toughness.	Reported low activist identity and commitment. Athletic identity and activist identity and commitment did not predict stress control mindset or mental toughness, and stress control mindset and mental toughness were positively related.
Yoon & Petrie (2023)	Quant	266 NCAA Division I student-athletes from a single university.	Investigated the barriers and facilitators for athletes seeking mental health care, as well as the impact of shared identities between athletes and sports psychologists.	Reported lack of time, stigma, and unsupportive coaches were major barriers to participants seeking mental health care, with head coaches identified as the greatest barrier.

Utilizing two coding cycles, I identified five recurring student-athlete identities that significantly impacted their college experiences and outcomes. These included gender, race, sexual orientation, divisional association, and athletic identities (see Table 2). Additionally, I identified seven common dimensions of student-athletes' college experiences and outcomes that corresponded to their identities. These included academic performance, sense of belonging, career preparation, religious behavior, activist participation, transition from college/sport, and identity integration (see Table 3).

Considering sex, female student-athletes typically experience increased academic performance (Beron & Piquero, 2016; Rankin et al., 2016), sense of belonging (Gayles et al., 2018), and career preparation (Bell et al., 2018) compared to male student-athletes. In terms of race, White student-athletes typically experience increased academic performance (Rankin et al., 2016), sense of belonging (Gayles et al., 2018), and religious behavior such as prayer, reading sacred texts, and congressional attendance (Allen et al., 2022) compared to student-athletes of Color. Concerning sexual orientation, LGBTQ+ student-athletes typically experience a reduced sense of belonging (Anderson et al., 2023; Fynes & Fisher, 2016; Rankin et al., 2016) compared to heterosexual student-athletes, which subsequently impacts academic success and career preparation. Considering divisional association, NCAA Division I student-athletes typically experience reduced academic performance (Beron & Piquero, 2016; Huml, 2018), sense of belonging (Gayles et al., 2018; Rankin et al., 2016), and career preparation (Bell et al., 2018; Huml, 2018) compared to NCAA Division II or III student-athletes. Finally, regarding student-athletes' athletic identity, student-athletes with salient athletic identities typically experience reduced academic performance (Cooper & Jackson, 2019; Riciputi & Erdal, 2017; Santos &

Sagas, 2023), mental health (Yoon & Petrie, 2023), activist participation (Scheidler et al., 2021), a negative transition out of college/sport (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Cooper & Jackson, 2019; Menke & Germany, 2019), reduced career preparation (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Cooper & Jackson, 2019; Menke & Germany, 2019), and an increase religious behavior (Allen et al., 2022; Gabana et al., 2020, 2022) compared to those without salient athletic identities.

Importantly, several studies suggested the negative impacts commonly associated with student-athletes' identities were often reduced when student-athletes integrated or acknowledged their multiple identities and embraced the intersectionality of various social groups. For example, Beron and Piquero (2016) and Gayles et al. (2018) reported student-athletes who actively engaged with their student identity through classroom participation, internships, and study-abroad experiences demonstrated increased academic performance and a greater sense of belonging. Furthermore, Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020), McDowell et al. (2018), and Rankin et al. (2016) found encouragement from faculty, staff, athletic personnel, and family members to pursue a more holistic identity was associated with improved academic outcomes, mental health, and transitions out of intercollegiate athletics. Finally, the results from Yoon and Petrie (2023) suggested the impacts of student-athletes' multiple identities are a significant factor for mental health professionals to consider to be able to contextualize and better address student-athletes' mental health concerns.

Taken together, two overarching patterns emerged across the reviewed studies. First, student-athletes without salient athletic identities and those who identified as White, female, heterosexual, or who competed in lower NCAA divisions (II or III) tended to experience more favorable academic, social, and developmental outcomes compared to student-athletes with salient athletic identities and those who identified as male, as persons of Color, as LGBTQ+, or who competed in NCAA Division I athletics. Secondly, student-athletes who integrated multiple identities by embracing the intersectionality of various social groups tended to increase their access to more favorable experiences across academic, social, and developmental outcomes. Collectively, these patterns suggest student-athletes' identities are not merely associated with collegiate experiences and outcomes but they may also play a significant role in shaping the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments.

Table 2
Identity Pattern Codes

Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Divisional Affiliation
Bell et al. (2018)	Anderson et al. (2023)	Allen et al. (2022)	Bell et al. (2018)
Beron & Piquero (2016)	Fynes & Fisher (2016)	Gayles et al. (2018)	Beron & Piquero (2016)
Gayles et al. (2018)	Rankin et al. (2016)	Rankin et al. (2016)	Gayles et al. (2018)
Rankin et al. (2016)			Huml (2018) Rankin et al. (2016)
Athletic Identity			
Allen et al. (2022)	Gabana et al. (2020)	Riciputi & Erdal (2017)	Yoon & Petrie (2023)
Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)	Gabana et al. (2022)	Scheidler et al. (2021)	
Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Menke & Germany (2019)	Santos & Sagas (2023)	

Table 3
College Experience Pattern Codes

Academic Performance	Sense of Belonging	Career Preparation	Identity Integration
Beron & Piquero (2016)	Anderson et al. (2023)	Bell et al. (2018)	Beron & Piquero (2016)
Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Fynes & Fisher (2016)	Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)	Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)
Huml (2018)	Gayles et al. (2018)	Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Gayles et al. (2018)
Rankin et al. (2016)	Rankin et al. (2016)	Gayles et al. (2018)	McDowell et al. (2018)
Riciputi & Erdal (2017)		Huml (2018)	Rankin et al. (2016)
Santos & Sagas (2023)		Menke & Germany (2019)	Yoon & Petrie (2023)
Activist Participation	College Transition	Religious Behavior	
Scheidler et al. (2021)	Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)	Allen et al. (2022)	
	Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Gabana et al. (2020)	
	Menke & Germany (2019)	Gabana et al. (2022)	
		Yoon and Petrie (2023)	

Discussion

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory consists of three central components, which include social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Taken together, these processes illustrate how group membership plays a significant role in shaping identity development and social behavior. Consequently, scholars have argued that social identity approaches provide unique and powerful contributions to understanding the phenomena and behaviors that lie at the core of athletic participation and sport psychology (Rees et al., 2015). Therefore, reviewing the patterns identified in this study through the lens of SIT provides theoretically grounded interpretations regarding the ways in which student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes.

Interpreting the patterns identified in this study through the processes of SIT, student athletes without salient athletic identities or who identified as White, female, heterosexual, or who competed in lower NCAA divisions (II or III) may represent groups who categorize themselves and others based on norms, values, and behaviors associated with increased academic, social, and developmental outcomes. Therefore, student-athletes who strongly identify with these identities may feel encouraged to adopt and express norms, values, and behaviors associated with these traditional college outcomes to be perceived as similar to those within their group and distinct from those outside their group. As a result, this group of student-athletes may come to evaluate social prestige through academic, social, and developmental experiences and outcomes. Consequently, to achieve and maintain a positively distinct social identity, student-athletes with these social identities may place greater emphasis on these achievements, as they perceive it may increase the prestige of the current social group.

On the other hand, student-athletes with salient athletic identities or who also identified as male, person of Color, LGBTQ+, or who participated in NCAA Division I athletics, these individuals may represent groups who categorize themselves and others based on norms, values, and behaviors outside of academic, social, and developmental outcomes such as athletic success or artistic abilities. Therefore, student-athletes who strongly identify with these identities may feel encouraged to adopt and express norms, values, and behaviors outside of traditional college outcomes to be perceived as similar to those within their group and distinct from those outside their group. As a result, this group of student-athletes may come to evaluate social prestige through achievements outside of academic, social, and developmental experiences and outcomes. Consequently, to achieve and maintain a positively distinct social identity, these individuals may place greater emphasis on athletic success, artistic abilities, or other alternative activities they perceive may increase the prestige of their current group.

Considering student-athletes who integrate multiple identities, these individuals may represent a group of student-athletes who navigate across social categories and the corresponding norms, values, and behavioral expectations. Therefore,

student-athletes who integrate multiple identities may feel less inclined to adopt or express the norms, values, and behaviors of any single social group or identity to develop a sense of belonging. As a result, these individuals may come to evaluate social prestige across a broader range of college experiences and outcomes rather than through more uniform pathways. For example, student-athletes who integrate multiple identities may evaluate social prestige through academic achievement in educational settings while equally valuing athletic performance in competitive environments. Consequently, to achieve and maintain a positively distinct social identity, these student-athletes may place more or less emphasis on particular forms of achievement depending on which social identity is most salient within a given context, or which is perceived as creating the most prestige. Ultimately, identity integration may provide student-athletes with greater flexibility to maintain a positive social identity if a particular group membership becomes undesirable or is perceived as being associated with low prestige.

Taken together, interpreting the patterns identified in this study through the lens of SIT suggests the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison may shape the motivations and decisions that guide how student-athletes engage across their multiple college commitments. Viewed in this way, student-athletes' academic, social, and developmental experiences and outcomes may be shaped by the norms, values, and behavioral expectations associated with the social groups with which they most strongly identify. Therefore, beyond experiencing identity-based differential outcomes, student-athletes may actively adjust how they engage with certain individuals, groups, behaviors, or activities in relation to the norms, values, and behavioral expectations associated with their social identities. On the other hand, when student-athletes integrate multiple identities by embracing the intersectionality of various social groups, they may shift between identities by adopting or expressing norms, values, and behaviors corresponding to the identity that is most salient within a given context and the one they perceive will provide the most prestige. In turn, they may prioritize norms, values, and behaviors they perceive will contribute to achieving or maintaining the most positively distinct social identity. Overall, examining the impacts of multiple student-athlete identities through the lens of SIT provides a coherent framework for better understanding how student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes.

Findings

The findings of this study affirmed disparities persist even among student populations who appear to receive significant institutional support, such as student-athletes (Gaston-Gayles, 2015; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). Additionally, the findings of this study affirmed student-athletes of Color and those who identify as LGBTQ+ remain at greater risk of experiencing reduced academic engagement, lower perceived support, diminished sense of belonging, and increased athletic commitment (Kroshus et al., 2023a; Kroshuset al., 2023b; NCAA, 2020). Furthermore, the findings from this study affirmed student-athletes who integrate multiple identities by embracing the intersectionality of various social groups tend

to find greater balance across their multiple college commitments (Brewer & Pettipas, 2017; Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Powell et al., 2024; Stokowski et al., 2022; Whitehead & Senecal, 2020) and therefore are more likely to experience the benefits of higher education, such as cognitive and noncognitive development and finding a sense of belonging (Black & Allen, 2017; Gopalan & Bready, 2020).

While the findings identified in this study affirmed many of those from previous investigations, the use of SIT provided additional insight into how these patterns may emerge. For example, beyond experiencing identity-based differential experiences and outcomes, student-athletes may actively adjust how they engage with certain individuals, groups, behaviors, or activities in relation to the norms, values, and behavioral expectations associated with their social identities. More specifically, through the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison, the findings from this study suggested student-athletes' identities may be associated with their college experiences and outcomes by shaping the motivations and decisions underlying how and why they engage across their multiple college commitments. Viewed in this way, the findings of this study support the suggestions of previous scholars who argued that social identity approaches provide unique and powerful contributions to understanding the phenomena and behaviors that lie at the core of athletic participation and sport psychology (Rees et al., 2015). Therefore, in conjunction with previous investigations that have also utilized a social identity approach (Copeland et al., 2024; Graupensperger et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2021; Stokowski et al., 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018), the findings of this study contribute to a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes.

The findings of this study also add to the existing literature by providing additional explanations as to how and why student-athletes' identities have been observed as impacting their college experiences and outcomes. For example, previous studies have suggested the rigorous schedules of student-athletes (NCAA, 2020) often encourage student-athletes to choose between multiple commitments, with athletic participation taking precedence (Chaplin & Lim, 2020; Edwards & Froehle, 2023; Grafnetterova et al., 2021; Zvosec et al., 2023). However, the findings from this study suggest student-athletes may also wrestle with expectations to adopt and express the norms, values, and behaviors associated with various social groups to develop a sense of belonging. Therefore, while student-athletes tend to struggle with balancing multiple commitments, this study suggests they may be equally challenged with balancing multiple social identities, each associated with distinct norms, values, and behavioral expectations.

Considering the investigations related to student-athletes' athletic identity, previous studies have described student-athletes' athletic identity as a give-and-take relationship (Powell et al., 2024; Watson et al., 2024; Zvosec et al., 2023) that has been likened to an iceberg (Newton et al., 2020) and that can manifest as the experience of addiction (Huml & Nite, 2019). While the findings in this study affirmed a nuanced relationship between student-athletes and athletic participation, they also offer identity-based explanations for such descriptions. For example, the give-and-take rela-

tionship often identified between student-athletes and their athletic identity suggests athletic participation offers beneficial outcomes while, at the same time, challenging student-athletes' opportunities to advance skill sets outside of athletic participation (Powell et al., 2024; Watson et al., 2024; Zvosec et al., 2023). The findings from this study add to this discussion by providing additional information related to the challenges student-athletes face. For example, the findings from this study suggest the opportunity costs facing student-athletes may also be related to social identities, expectations, and perceptions of prestige. Specifically, the opportunity costs facing student-athletes may also be related to the consequences for engaging in activities or behaviors outside of group norms, values, and behaviors, which may challenge their commitment to their social group and reduce their sense of belonging. Consequently, student-athletes may actively avoid or adopt certain behaviors to maintain their sense of belonging or protect the prestige of their social group.

The findings from this study also add to Huml and Nite's (2019) suggestion that student-athletes may become addicted to their athletic identity. Considering the findings from this study, the suggestion that student-athletes may become addicted to their athletic identity may also be understood as reflecting identity-based pressures associated with social categorization, identification, and comparison. For example, student-athletes may categorize themselves and others into various social groups that are associated with corresponding norms, values, and behaviors. Therefore, student-athletes may be encouraged to adopt or express certain norms, values, or behaviors to be perceived as similar to those within their social group. Consequently, student-athletes' demonstrations of withdrawal, overcommitment, and relapse, commonly associated with addiction (Huml & Nite, 2019), could also be understood as manifestations of the stress or fear associated with being perceived as different from those within their social groups or reducing their prestige.

Finally, considering Newton et al.'s (2020) participant-generated iceberg metaphor, the findings from this study also identified above and below the surface impacts of student-athletes' identities, which may contribute to the recommendations of Kroshuset al. (2023a) and Kroshuset al. (2023b) on how to better support student-athletes with minority identities. For example, the impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experiences and outcomes are often visible and therefore exist above the surface. Consequently, these visible characteristics are frequently used to create policies or design practices to support student-athletes. Considering the findings of this study, below the surface lie norms, values, and behaviors corresponding to social groups that appeared to impact student-athletes' decisions for engaging in their multiple college commitments. Therefore, supporting student-athletes with minority identities may require creating team cultures that increase the perceived value of academic, social, and developmental opportunities, thereby increasing the likelihood they choose to pursue these outcomes.

Taken together, the findings from this study support the argument that social identity approaches provide unique and powerful contributions to understanding the phenomena and behaviors that lie at the core of athletic participation and sport psychology (Rees et al., 2015). In conjunction, the findings of this study affirmed and

expanded upon existing literature by incorporating multiple student-athlete identities into a single study and creating a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes (Caza et al., 2018; Rees et al., 2015; Steele et al., 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). Specifically, beyond viewing the impacts of student-athletes' identities as leading to fixed experiences and outcomes, the findings from this study suggest student-athletes' motivations and decisions for engaging across multiple college commitments may also be understood through their identification with various social groups. Consequently, student-athletes' perceptions of group norms, values, and behavioral expectations, along with the relative prestige associated with different identities and activities, may shape how they prioritize commitments and determine where they seek belonging. In this way, student-athletes' identities may be understood not only as personal characteristics but also as socially constructed influences that guide how they engage across multiple college commitments.

Implications

The findings from this study suggest important implications for athletic coaches and athletics staff, such as advisors and development coordinators. For example, the findings from this study suggested norms, values, and behaviors associated with student-athletes' identities play a role in shaping their engagement across multiple college commitments. Therefore, coaches and athletics staff should work together to create team cultures that adopt and express norms, values, and behaviors that promote engagement with the broader campus community and reflect more holistic developmental experiences and outcomes. Specifically, these individuals should consider providing opportunities for student-athletes to participate in non-sport skill-building activities alongside teammates or non-athlete peers during regularly scheduled athletic programming. As a result, student-athletes may be better positioned to integrate multiple identities and engage with various social groups through a broader sense of belonging and perceptions of prestige tied to a wider range of activities and relationships.

Additionally, coaches and athletics staff should consider elevating the significance of holistic identity development to increase student-athletes' perceptions of prestige related to non-athletic accomplishments and relationships. For example, similar to highlighting athletes' contributions within athletic competitions during team meetings, coaches and athletics staff should also consider publicly acknowledging a variety of achievements and campus relationships. Overall, coaches and athletics staff should strive to create team cultures that value diverse forms of engagement and strengthen connections with the broader campus community, thereby fostering identity integration through shared norms of belonging and prestige that do not rely exclusively on athletic participation and success.

Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusions

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, this study exclusively relied on the results or findings from previous literature, which limited

this study to how student-athletes' identities and college experiences and outcomes were measured and interpreted within existing studies. Second, the search strategy of this study utilized specific search terms and inclusion criteria, which limited the incorporation of additional relevant studies that used alternative terminology to describe student-athlete identities and their college experiences. Similarly, this study was limited to peer-reviewed academic literature published within the past ten years, which limited the scope of the study and may have excluded earlier studies that could provide additional context for understanding long-term trends in student-athlete identity research.

Considering the findings from this study and the recommendations of previous scholars (Rees et al., 2015), future research would benefit from additional studies utilizing a social identity approach to investigate the impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experience. For example, given the limited number of qualitative studies included in this review, future investigations should include qualitative case studies using interviews and observations to more fully examine how student-athletes perceive and navigate the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison across athletic and institutional contexts. Similarly, comparative case studies may also provide additional insight into how these identity processes operate differently across student-athlete populations based on factors such as sport, gender, race, divisional level, or institutional context.

Future research should also consider mixed methods designs that integrate qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys drawn from the same participant sample to more fully understand the processes of social identification, categorization, and comparison among student-athletes. In such studies, quantitative surveys could be used to document patterns in identity salience and associated academic, social, and developmental outcomes. Following, qualitative interviews could provide additional insight into how student-athletes interpret these identities and navigate group expectations across multiple college commitments. In conjunction, these recommendations would support future research in moving beyond documenting identity-based differential outcomes and toward more fully understanding the ways in which student-athletes' identities shape motivations, decisions, and patterns of engagement across multiple college commitments.

In this study, I systematically reviewed previous literature to address the research question: How does the past 10 years of academic literature suggest student-athletes' identities impact their college experience? In doing so, I found student-athletes without salient athletic identities and those who identified as White, female, heterosexual, or who competed in lower NCAA divisions (II or III) tended to experience more favorable academic, social, and developmental outcomes compared to student-athletes with salient athletic identities and those who identified as male, as persons of Color, as LGBTQ+, or who competed in NCAA Division I athletics. However, I also found student-athletes who integrated multiple identities by embracing the intersectionality of various social groups tended to increase their access to more favorable experiences across academic, social, and developmental outcomes. Interpreting these patterns through the lens of SIT, I found that beyond

experiencing identity-based differential outcomes, student-athletes may actively adjust how they engage with certain individuals, groups, behaviors, or activities in relation to the norms, values, and behavioral expectations associated with their social identities. Consequently, coaches and athletics staff should work together to create a team culture that demonstrates norms, values, and behaviors that elevate and support student-athletes' holistic identity development.

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“It’s Not Just About Competition – It’s Ceremony”: Introducing the Embedded Indigeneity Framework for Understanding Identity, Mission, and Practice in TCU and NASNTI Athletics

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This study introduces the Embedded Indigeneity Framework to examine how Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs) integrate Indigenous identity into athletics operations. Sport management scholarship often centers Power Five institutions and market logics, marginalizing Special Mission Institutions and their cultural foundations. As a result, institutionally specific nuances are often not considered when exploring the experiences and approaches of practitioners within these spaces. Using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Naeem et al., 2023), this study analyzes practitioner narratives to develop a framework grounded in five interconnected themes: *Cultural Representation and Recognition*, *Community Connection and Engagement*, *Educational Opportunity and Structural Support*, *Personal and Historical Identity Integration*, and *Navigating Organizational Tensions*. Guided by decolonial and social justice lenses, the framework highlights how indigeneity is not merely acknowledged but embedded across organizational life. By illuminating the relationship between identity, mission, and practice, this study expands the boundaries of sport organization scholarship and affirms the value of culturally grounded and justice-oriented approaches to intercollegiate athletics.

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In February of 2025, Haskell Indian Nations University women's basketball Coach Adam Strom was laid off due to President Donald Trump's federal workforce cuts. Instead of accepting this decision and leaving the team, he continued to coach voluntarily. Despite the adversity, Strom led the team to a conference championship. Strom exemplified for his student-athletes what it means to rise above whatever unfairness life may throw your way. Strom also emphasized how important Haskell's mission to serve Native students was to him noting 'We play for Indian Country. Indian country has endured many challenges' (Kraske & Marvine, 2025, para. 8). For Strom and many others affiliated with special mission institutions, sport and culture exceeds other higher education conventions. The context of the institution and the cultural underpinnings expressed by Strom presents the ideal opportunity and landscape to understand the relationship between indigeneity and athletics – specifically at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Native American Serving Non-Tribal Institutions (NASNTIs).

Kettle (2019) provides a much-needed explanation on the impact and importance of identity salience, also understood as the importance/centrality of identity, within the broader scope of society – often leading to grand gestures of both 'good and evil' (e.g. war, social justice movements, and similar). He argues that mainstream identity research focuses on racial and gender-based differences, often leaning towards dominant discourses, typically reinforcing predominant typologies such as men versus women or racialized groups versus whiteness. Kettle (2019) further explains that while consumption - the everyday engagement with cultural norms, practices, and symbols - is far less impactful than major social movements/disruption, identity salience is a noteworthy factor to investigate and consider within an organization. With particular attention to the impact of identity and community in the broader scope of sport and sport organizations, research should consider the broader context of identity saliency within their operations, culture, and practice. This study actively places focus solely on the salience and integration of Indigenous identity on organizational operations. In doing so, this manuscript addresses the longstanding orientation of neoliberal monoculturalism: an idea that aversion/removal of identity contributes to effectiveness, efficiency, and reflections of market driven logics (Hudson-Miles & Broadey, 2019).

Contrary to dominant discourse, the college sport landscape consists of more than the Power Five conferences – which are largely comprised of Historically and Predominantly White Institutions (HPWIs). The power conferences, also referred to as the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), consist of mostly state flagship institutions and are considered the highest levels of athletic and economic output within the college sport landscape. Framing these institutions as the normative benchmark for organizational and athletic success limits the scope and understanding of institutional types across college athletics. Consequently, this framing obscures the breadth of institutional types, missions, and community-salient operations of the remaining participating NCAA and NAIA institutions, e.g. HBCUs, HSIs, same-gender institutions, work colleges, and more. Given the social and cultural underpinnings within these institutional types, there is a considerable gap in the framing and un-

derstanding of these athletics spaces as conduits and contributors to campus culture (Foster, 2024). Within this group of institutions are Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Native American Non-Tribal Serving Institutions (NASNTIs) – which are considerably underrepresented within sport management/organization literature. The lack of consideration for institutional type and mission limits the understanding, contributions, and institutionally specific operations of these spaces. This reiterates the deficit-based framing of institutions existing outside of the Power Five norms.

As explained by Newman (2014), the broader scope of (intercollegiate) sport management/organization favors market-driven logics that often reduce or remove the impact of identity, resulting in a diminished sociocultural understanding of sport. Singer (2005) has challenged sport management/organization researchers to actively consider and center the role of race/racialized identity in their understanding, assessment, and communication of sport. Aligning with Rodrigues and colleagues (2025) who echoed a similar demand for organizational scholarship to engage in decolonial practices. This study accomplishes this by 1) amplifying Indigenous voices and perspectives, 2) centering TCUs and NASNTIs in sport organization research, and 3) engaging in a decolonial practice by implementing an inductive thematic analysis to build theory and understanding through Indigenous-centered voices. The exploration and communication of institutional type and identity through social justice and decolonial lenses are integral to expanding the scope of sport organization research.

Most of the sport research that includes Native American or Indigenous Peoples debates their presence as mascots or team names, often reducing Native Peoples to symbols and not dynamic communities (Hofman, 2005; McLean et al., 2017; Tsosie, 2016). When content is centered around Indigenous Peoples, it is often from a deficit perspective, focusing on what Native communities do not have - rather than the positives they have built for centuries (Ali-Christie, 2013; Bartolome, 1994; Faber, 2016; Paraschak & Thompson, 2014). The interconnectedness of community, resilience, strength, relationality, and abundance underscores the fundamental aspects that shape the sociological, cultural, and political identity of the Indigenous sporting experience (Ali-Joseph et al., 2023). With community and relationality being emphasized, the lack of organizational insight into athletics operations and culture is a missed opportunity.

Understanding the role of identity in the operation of organizations requires heightened attention, particularly as more institutions are built and designed around identities, communities, and deeply embedded value systems. Higher education management literature has consistently addressed the sociocultural influences on the operations and management of special mission institutions (SMIs), notably HBCUs, same gender institutions, and other Minority-Serving Institutions. These nuances impact admissions and recruitment (Lott et al. 2023; Wong et al. 2021), employee onboarding (Bingham 2018; Villarreal 2022; Wideman, 2025), community engagement (Morales, 2020), marketing and communications (Carter & Patterson, 2019; Garcia, 2019; Hudson, 2018), and other organizational areas. Conversely, college sport literature is relatively shallow when exploring and communicating the nuances

of operating within SMIs – largely due to the monolithic understanding and framing of college athletics.

To address the dearth of sociocultural nuance and understanding within college sport operations and management, the researchers seek to answer the research questions: how is Indigenous identity (i.e., indigeneity) and TCU/NASNTI status embedded within athletics operations? How do athletics operations contribute to and extend the missions of their adjoining educational institution? The contributions of this study offer a more contextualized and culturally aware understanding of how practitioners' perception and operation of these athletic spaces reflect and serve Indigenous communities through policies, practices, and sports culture. This study further asserts the relationship between the academic institution, TCU/NASNTI status, and the subsequent impact on campus culture and identity. Undergirded by the critical argument that identity is not peripheral, but an integral component of organizational practice, the findings continue to challenge the notion that athletics are largely separate from educational institutions (see Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Harry & Springer, 2025). A call for similar scholarly approaches can provide similar contributions across the wider range of SMIs. This manuscript adds to the growing body of scholarship on values and identity-based organizations, akin to Black-centric and women-led spaces, where identity and culture are foundational components of organizational identity and operations.

Literature Review

Indigenous Identity in Education

The history of Indigenous communities in the United States is a long, complicated battle between tribal sovereignty and settler colonial advancement that continues to infect current-day issues from climate change to mental health. Similarly, the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and education is also one fraught with complications, as the boarding school system enacted an ethos to “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” (Pember, 2007, p. 25). The federal government established these boarding schools, “as a part of a crusade by a coalition of reformers who aimed to assimilate Native Americans into dominant Anglo-Protestant society through education” (Bloom, 2000, p. 1). While it may not have been a physical war on Native Americans, this battle was against Native American identity and culture to achieve “mass cultural conversion” (Bloom, 2000, p. 1). Carlisle Indian School was the first off-reservation boarding school opened in 1879. These off-reservation boarding schools have become notorious for abuse and deaths, with schools commonly having cemeteries on school property. Young people were targeted as prospects to be civilized; adults were considered lost causes (Adams, 1995). An important component of boarding schools was the cultural genocide of Indigenous ways of life, resulting in historical and intergenerational trauma (Pember, 2007).

Sport and athletics, like other aspects of boarding school life, were intended to be used as another tool to “civilize” Native children. Unlike the banning of cultural traditions, sport was used by Native youth as a form of agency and identity confir-

mation (Bloom, 2000). It also provided opportunities for students to become a part of internationally recognized athletics programs that traveled to play predominantly white institutions in major cities. To note, Carlisle was a national powerhouse football program in the early twentieth century, competing against Ivy League, as well as the Army and Naval academies (Oxendine, 1995). The athletic success was overshadowed by the inhumane indoctrination of Native students and by the 1980s most Native American boarding schools were closed (Archuleta et al., 2004).

Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) were established in the late 1960s, the first being Navajo Community College in 1968 (Robbins, 2002). TCUs were developed with unique missions connected to their tribal nation's culture, language, and history (Benham & Stein, 2003). These institutions were founded to help combat cultural erasure as a response to the systematic decimation of Native communities by boarding schools and assimilation policies (*History and Continued Contributions of Tribal Colleges and Universities*, 2022). TCUs provide more than just an education; they play a critical role in protecting and preserving culture while supporting Native American students who aim to contribute to their communities. These institutions provide an affordable and culturally driven education and essential community resources.

These institutions have promoted the perspective of survivance, perseverance, and resilience, rather than one of deficit and despair – emphasizing the importance of abundance over adversity. Runner and Marshall (2003) have defined resilience as ‘the natural, human capacity to navigate life well’ (p. 2). They note, ‘tribal colleges have been providing resilience-based retention strategies for years’ in the form of ‘spirituality, family strength, elders, ceremonial rituals, oral traditions, tribal identity, and support networks’ (Runner & Marshall 2003, p. 4).

In addition to TCUs, there are also Native American Serving-Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs). These institutions gain this designation based on the demographics of their undergraduate student enrollment and not on institutional mission. As the Higher Education Act amendments of 2008 outline, public or private nonprofit institutions can apply for federal NASNTI designation and funding through Title III if the college or university meets specified enrollment and financial requirements. As of 2025, NASNTI funding requires that undergraduate students who identify as Native American make up at least 10% of total enrollment. Funding can be used for various purposes, such as developing faculty and improving student support services and academic programs – which assist in developing an unspoken culture and mission akin to TCUs. Geographically, these institutions are usually rural, remote, or small cities. Many are also located adjacent to Native communities and appeal to Native students who want to be close to home (Benally et al., 2020). In 2020, 37 institutions qualified as NASNTI. Most were public and a mix of two- and four-year institutions. Of those NASNTIs, it was estimated that 19% of students were Native American (Benally et al. 2020).

Like TCUs, NASNTIs work to create culturally responsive programs and integrate understanding of Native student identities. Both work towards new methods that are proactive and responsive to the unique social needs of Native students. Some

examples of high-impact practices for these institutions include community-based learning and internships, special learning communities, and holistic diversity learning (Benally, 2020). Ultimately, these institutions succeed by putting a culture in focus, not in a footnote.

Sport in Indigenous Communities

For Indigenous Peoples and Nations, physical activity is inherently tied to land, language, ceremony, and knowledge systems. Sports have historically been prevalent within Native American communities through creation stories, community leadership and abundance, cultural knowledge systems, the boarding school experience, and in contemporary secondary educational school settings. Physical activity and sporting practices are not only present in health and wellness but also act as protective factors and acts of generational healing for Indigenous Peoples. Running had a purpose beyond winning a race, it was a tool for survival. In addition to its importance to warfare, running assisted in hunting, gathering, trading, and delivering messages (Oxendine, 1995). Contemporary lacrosse is traced back to Indigenous stickball games that could be played between and within tribal communities for both practical and ceremonial purposes (Vennum, 2007).

Indigenous Peoples have an inherent responsibility and right to “exercising” sovereignty, which is the practice of sport and physical activity in alignment to cultural, political, and spiritual citizenship (Ali-Joseph, 2018). While sovereignty is typically referred to or connected with an inherent right to govern ourselves within our own land base, we are expanding the assertion of “exercising” sovereignty as a physical movement. Sport and physical activity have long provided a means for people to “exercise” sovereignty, both individually and collectively (Ali-Joseph, 2018). Sport is inherently tied to culture, and for Indigenous communities, physical movement, exercise, and sport have also been a protective factor in ensuring Indigenous leadership and futures. The relationship between Indigenous communities and sport within the education context is more complicated. Sport was a part of the process of dispossession of land and culture. At Carlisle Indian School and other boarding schools, sport and physical activity were intended to conform students. Along with spirituality, language, and other colonizing practices, sport was used as a subjugating force. Due to the inherent connection between mind, body, and movement for Indigenous individuals and communities, sport could provide “a context for the celebration of intertribal cooperation and identity” (Bloom, 2000, p. 37).

Like their SMI peers - HBCUs - TCUs and NASNTIs operate within similar institutional contexts hallmarked by smaller size, geographically diverse fan bases, and limited media representation despite meaningful local-to-national fandom (Blackwell, 2025; Gasman et al., 2008). While institutions like Haskell Indian Nations University and United Tribes Technical College have had successful athletic programs, they still suffer from a lack of widespread promotion and support outside of their communities and fanbases. Within a college sports landscape that emphasizes media visibility, larger institutional resources, and general fandom (e.g. KU basketball, Ohio State University football, and similar), TCUs and NASNTIs are

structurally disadvantaged relative to larger-platform institutions. This limits their ability to translate fan support into sustainable revenue generation models (Elliot & Kellison, 2019; NCAA, 2023; Snapp, 2022).

A Needed Shift in Understanding

Grounded in whiteness and the white gaze (Donnor, 2021), the U.S. higher education and college athletics landscape continues to marginalize TCUs and NASNTIs (along with other SMIs) through the actions of administrators, policy makers, and cultural gatekeepers. These actions benefit a large proportion of HPWIs through the allocation of resources, media narratives, and general market influence that continues the persistence of neoliberal monoculturalism in both higher education and college athletics (Alonso, 2025; Cooper & Hawkins, 2016; Foster et al., 2022; Hudson-Miles & Broadey, 2019; Newman, 2014). To combat the growing presence of neoliberal monoculturalism, a critical constructivist lens of organizational understanding is applied towards athletic spaces, their operations, and relationship to their adjoining educational institution – specifically at TCUs and NASNTIs (Bentley, 2003). Through this lens, we argue that while the field of college athletics is underpinned by neoliberal lenses that prioritize normative whiteness, economic gains, and industry similarity – the centrality of indigeneity within the athletics operations at TCUs and NASNTIs offers a different pathway to understanding. This pathway challenges the existing notions of competing logics or traditional approaches towards organizational hybridity – resulting in a more culturally grounded understanding of athletics operations within these institutions.

Method

Positionality Statement

The first author, who identifies as a Black man, grew up in the Midwestern region of the United States and experienced formal education of the Indigenous communities throughout his region. In conjunction with education during his formative years, the first author also attended two separate Special Mission Institutions (SMIs) - specifically a Historically Black College /University (HBCU) and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Being that his research centers on liberatory approaches to better understand and present SMIs in the broader body of sport management/organization scholarship, his central focus was to illuminate this institutional space that has been excluded from the broader body of knowledge.

The second author, who identifies as a Native woman, grew up in her Native community surrounded by other members of her tribe. She has always viewed sports as another cultural expression and opportunity for growth, both individually and collectively. She is also passionate about higher education and participated in her tribes' college financial aid assistance program. While she did not attend a TCU or NASNTI, she is familiar with the institutions through family and friends who have attended them. The second author constantly asked herself, 'whose interests are being served throughout this work?' As we answered that question, the second author sought to

situate herself as both a member of the research team and as a Cherokee, aiming to prioritize the Indigenous voices involved. The unique lenses and motivations of both scholars undergird the design and operation of this study by ensuring that 1) the appropriate communities are served and 2) the contribution to scholarship amplifies the collective body of TCUs and NASNTIs.

Being that the central goal of the study is to uncover and explain how indigeneity is integrated into organizational operations, the researchers implemented an inductive thematic analysis of participant responses to an online survey. As explained by Naeem and colleagues (2023), inductive thematic analyses assist in the development of conceptual frameworks contributing to the understanding of spaces and phenomena. The centering of indigeneity reflects Silva and colleagues' (2025) call for decolonial practices within organizational scholarship.

Research Design

This study was approved by the University of Kansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) and meets the necessary requirements for human subject-based research. The study is grounded in the qualitative tradition of centering voice, narrative, and perspective to develop a deeper understanding of space and condition. The research design is further developed and grounded within the critical constructivist lens (Bentley, 2003). Although primarily presented through pedagogical perspectives, critical constructivism (CritCon) challenges the roles of *reification* or presenting socially constructed knowledge as immovable and unchanging; *decontextualization* or stripping sociocultural context and nuances away from bodies of knowledge; and *technocratization* or the overreliance on applying knowledge into bureaucratic structures as opposed to seeing the full spectrum of science in action (Bentley, 2003).

Survey Instrument

Following informed consent, the participants completed a seven-item questionnaire that narrowed focus as they completed the questions. The first two items explored participant understandings of Special Mission Institutions (SMIs) and their awareness of their respective institutions being classified as such, respectively. The third and fourth items requested participants to discuss how their university and athletics department reflects the SMI status through programming, language, traditions, and similar actions. This high-level approach explores how these two institutions (the university and the athletics space) are either aligned or misaligned in their approaches towards reflecting culture and identity. This mirrors Schein's (1985) explanation of organizational culture consisting of assumptions, values, and artifacts where noting (mis)alignment is essential in further assessing athletics culture at these institutions. Continuing to narrow, the fifth and sixth questions requested that participants communicate how SMI status is reflected within their specific units/departments and their personal approach to their professional role. The seventh and final item was a reflection prompt that allowed for deeper insights into their responses and overall understanding of their institution.

Data Collection

We used Qualtrics software to create and disseminate surveys to athletics staff members at all classified TCUs and NASNTIs. Anonymous online surveys were used to give participants the freedom to communicate their perspectives without detection. Surveys were sent to all athletics staff members at National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) institutions that are designated as TCUs or NASNTIs via a database made available by the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions (MSI Directory, 2025). Self-selection was a key factor in the participant selection process due to the increased likelihood for participants to demonstrate (a) a noticeable interest in the topic, (b) willingness to contribute to the goals of the study, and (c) a higher likelihood of expertise/understanding of the topic (Khazaal et al. 2014).

The survey was delivered to 516 listed emails across the TCU/NASNTI athletics departments. Of those listed emails, 112 were undeliverable, 85 no longer worked at the institution or requested removal from the listserv, and 8 were removed due to incompleteness. As seen within Table 1, the study yielded 14 participants across eight TCU/NASNTI athletics departments - resulting in a 2.7% response rate and a 4.5% response rate when considering the aforementioned elements. The low response rate must be understood within a sociopolitical climate marked by increased tension for TCUs, NASNTIs, and other Special Mission Institutions (Alonso, 2025), which may have discouraged survey participation. These institutions encompass NCAA Division I, Division II, Division III, and NAIA institutions showing a wider range of athletic contexts.

From a practitioner perspective, the participants ranged from Directors of Athletics to Faculty Athletics Representatives to coaches across various sports. Roles include ADs, FARs, coaches, staff, and academic support personnel. As argued by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the diversity in participant profile allows the findings and language presented by the participants to extend beyond institutional or role contexts. The combination of institutional and role diversity assists in developing a framework to better understand and explore the integration of indigeneity within sport organizations.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step thematic analysis process to develop a conceptual framework (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022). *Selection of statements* required a unit-by-unit and line-by-line reviews of participant responses in alignment with the RQs. *Keywords* were highlighted to consistent words and phrases across responses and supported through memoing to emphasize salient participant language (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Naeem et al., 2023). *Coding* consisted of sorting keywords based on logic, operationalization, and structure of the survey to illuminate shared meanings. The *theme development* process grouped codes into categories that addressed the RQs (Naeem et al., 2023). *Conceptualization* emphasized

defining and operationalizing the developed themes, patterns, and relational processes (Arar, 2017; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Finally, *conceptual framework development* resulted in the design of a visual model that assists in better understanding the phenomena discovered within the data (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023).

TABLE 1.
Participant Details

Institution	Professional Area
Fort Lewis College	Administration & Leadership
Fort Lewis College	Coaching
Fort Lewis College	Coaching
Fort Lewis College	Coaching
Haskell Indian Nations University	Administration & Leadership
Montana State University-Northern	Coaching
Rogers State University	Academic
University of Alaska Fairbanks	Academic
University of Alaska Fairbanks	Coaching
University of Minnesota Morris	Health & Training
University of North Carolina at Pembroke	Academics
University of North Carolina at Pembroke	Administration & Leadership
University of North Carolina at Pembroke	Branding & Development
Utah State University	Support Services

Findings

Theme 1: Cultural Representation and Recognition

One of the more prominent themes that emerged in our review was the connection made between institutions and Indigenous cultures – notably the connection made between visual and symbolic representations. Native American mascots have historically been controversial, but in this sense, they were/are reminders of the institution’s association with the Indigenous community. Two of the institutions have straightforward Native American names, the Haskell Indians and the UNC-Pembroke (UNC-P) Braves. For these institutions, their imagery could hold a deeper, historical context that prompted administrators to reflect on their purpose. One participant (Haskell Indian Nations University) acknowledged the complexity, ‘Culture permeates throughout all aspects of the department from the admittedly dated team name and mascot to our game day experience, we always seek to emphasize cultural identity.’ In addition to Haskell and UNC-P, the University of Alaska Fairbanks athletics uses the name Nanook, a derivation of the Inupiaq word for polar bear.

Additionally, five of the eight institutions held special events to honor Native American heritage. Some of those were in conjunction with brands like Nike N7, Nike's initiative that celebrates Indigenous identity through sport, style, and self-expression (Nike, n.d.). Nike N7 games feature special, turquoise-colored uniforms for all athletes, honoring the brand and the importance of the color amongst Native communities. Turquoise is ceremonial and represents creation and hope (Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, n.d.). Beyond sports, these institutions also integrated ceremonies. One participant remarked, 'all formal ceremonies include representatives from the tribe in ceremonial dress and a flutist.' There was also a critique of certain ceremonies, which could be perceived as performative. Land acknowledgements have become commonplace at many institutions and public events, these formal statements highlight Indigenous communities' rights to territories seized by colonial powers (Veltman, 2023). One participant noted, 'We have land acknowledgements before every game, but I'm not sure it always goes beyond performance.' Others noted the need to add more substance to these token designations that do not implement a deeper cultural understanding. It was common to see more support for the opportunities that create space for integrating Native communities and actual tribal members.

Theme 2: Community Connection and Engagement

Sport and physical activity have been integral in Indigenous culture, as a leisure activity but also as a continuation of cultural expression (Oxendine, 1995). Native communities are and have been active participants in traditional sports like stickball but also modern sports like basketball. These communities are famously known for their passion and fandom, supporting their athletes, driving hours, and packing gyms. This passion can also be found at Tribal Colleges, as one participant (Haskell Indian Nations University) explained, "Haskell becomes a tight-knit community... it's not just a school—it's family." The unique blend of culture and passion for sports creates a deep sense of belonging that can permeate beyond a student's time on campus. The Haskell participant noted that many of their employees are alumni, longing to stay connected to the tight-knit community.

Another important element to the community engagement of these institutions is their inclusion of tribal communities. A Tribal Chairman stated that, "Collaborations between the Lumbee Tribe and UNC Pembroke play a crucial role in supporting our community and region with grant opportunities as well as student engagement and cultural enrichment." This quote was reinforced by other participants as well. One participant from UNC Pembroke stated the 'local tribe's culture is woven into all aspects of our campus'. So much that, 'you cannot separate our school from the Lumbee tribe'. Another participant from UNC Pembroke spoke about how all their institutional ceremonies include tribal leaders, including pre-game rituals. Institutions like Fort Lewis College also share their athletics with the community, facilitating bike and cycling workshops led by their student-athletes.

The interplay between institution and indigeneity assist in contributing to deeply-embedded relationships with the community members. These bonds enhance the

ability to recruit and maintain relationships with alumni. As one participant (UNC Pembroke) noted “we use our community outreach in recruiting. Perhaps more than other institutions, you see alumni return to serve as staff, longing to return to a space of belonging.” Building upon UNC-Pembroke, a participant from Rogers State University highlighted the integration of the local Cherokee Nation into their softball game experience; while Fort Lewis College has emphasized the communal nature of cycling as a space to bridge gaps across the Colorado Plateau region. Community connection and engagement is actively integrated across the athletics space - from in-game entertainment, donor networks, and establishing relationships across the region through sport.

Theme 3: Educational Opportunity and Structural Support

An essential component of higher education, even more so within Special Mission Institutions, is embedding the mission of the institution across a myriad of support structures and systems (Lane & Brown, II 2005). Understanding this point is essential in further unpacking the narratives of the participants, largely due to the history and context of TCUs and NASNTIs within the broader scope of US-based higher education (Stein, 2022). While support and educational opportunity are synonymous within the broader scope of higher education, especially SMIs like TCUs and NASNTIs, the athletics domain is often forgotten when discussing. The participants shift that narrative to highlight how their athletics spaces understand, promote, and integrate institutional mission into their practices.

To note, one participant (Fort Lewis College) highlighted their institutions’ Native American Tuition Waiver and celebrated the opportunity to ‘allow any tribal member to come to school at zero cost.’ The emphasis on bridging educational opportunity gaps, as supported by three other participants across different institutions, shows the explicit connection between the educational and athletics institutions of their respective campuses – leading to counter the existing narrative that higher education and athletics operate in separate silos (Stokowski et al., 2020). The interplay between athletics and the broader mission of their institution was further communicated by another participant (Haskell Indian Nations University), where they explained:

Like the university as a whole, athletics attempts to weave cultural experiences into our programs and operations. Some of our student athletes are not only the first in their families to attend college, but also may be the first of their families to live away from the communities in which they grew up. We understand the power of athletics to provide our athletes the opportunity to receive an education and to positively impact their lives, their families’ lives, and the lives of those in their communities.

The sentiments regarding the broader impact of athletics being a pathway to educational opportunity and community uplift were communicated across the participants. A common misconception is that all Native American students receive higher education funding from the government, this is simply not the case. The opportunity to obtain athletic scholarships can offset the prohibitive cost of college. The exemplary

statement provides deeper detail into how these athletics spaces are framed around a broader understanding of the institution, which further communicates how TCU/NASNTI (indigeneity) status is embedded within athletics operations. Building upon educational opportunity, the connection between the sporting space and the university is further reflected in the educational experience. To note, a participant from (UNC-Pembroke) communicated:

I teach a class called Recreation and Sport in Indigenous Cultures. My goal for students in the class (many of which are SAs) is to see how what we call “sport and recreation” is a spiritual practice in many tribes, whether Stickball with the Cherokees and Haudenosaunee, or running for the Hopi. Sport can actually serve to connect to the Creator.

Tapping directly into the classroom space to signify the role of sport within the broader Indigenous community reflects a deeper level of intentionality within the athletics department. The broader scope of these athletics spaces being integrated within academic realms reiterates the connection between the two institutions, while also setting the foundation for indigeneity reflection in other areas.

Extending beyond the scope of educational opportunities, the participants also illustrated multiple forms of structural support enacted by their athletics departments. In particular, the participants stressed a consistent culture of providing support and a thorough understanding of their students’ needs. A participant (Fort Lewis College) noted the dual approach applied when serving their college athletes by providing resources for both seamless athletic and academic transitions. Along with support for seamless transitions, participants (Utah State University) noted the strong relationship between athletics and the counseling center, a departmental culture centered on inclusivity, and full-time professionals whose primary focus is ensuring inclusive practices. In fact, they mentioned, ‘USU does a great job of being intentional with programing and culturally sensitive practices. For example, the routines/schedules of practices consider the unique needs of each [tribal] population.’ For example, students may need to follow special routines due to their tribal traditions, such as dietary restrictions or the need to forego practice to attend special ceremonies. This is particularly impactful given the presence of time constraints and conformity within Division I college sport where athletes are expected to forego non-sport elements to maintain uniformity and dedication to the team (Adams et al.,2024). The combination of educational opportunity and structural support displays a unique culture where athletics operates as a true component of the institution as opposed to being an adjacent element of the university.

Theme 4: Personal and Historical Identity Integration

Perhaps the most prominent of the themes is *Personal and Historical Identity Integration*. Although we are not quantifying the data, it is important to note that of the 14 participants, only one could not attest to knowing that their institution was a SMI, and more specifically, a TCU or NASNTI. The understanding of SMI designation was essential in communicating an awareness of the overall campus culture and community. An inherent element of this theme is the participants’ connection to the Indigenous community. As communicated by a participant from UNC-Pembroke:

As a Native American woman who graduated from this diverse university while being a former student-athlete, I am honored that members from my tribe created this university to help individuals like me. I give honor to my heritage and when I describe UNCP athletics to others, I mention how athletics has helped grow our institution from what it was once to what it is now.

Identity of self is paramount and often leads to a greater connection and commitment to the institution when there is identity alignment, with particular attention to race and ethnicity (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018). Interestingly, misalignment along racial and ethnic lines did not create a schism or gap. In fact, multiple non-Indigenous participants communicated that the culture and history of the institution shaped their approaches towards their role, often represented through continued education, community embeddedness, and culturally-responsive practices. A practitioner at Utah State University stated:

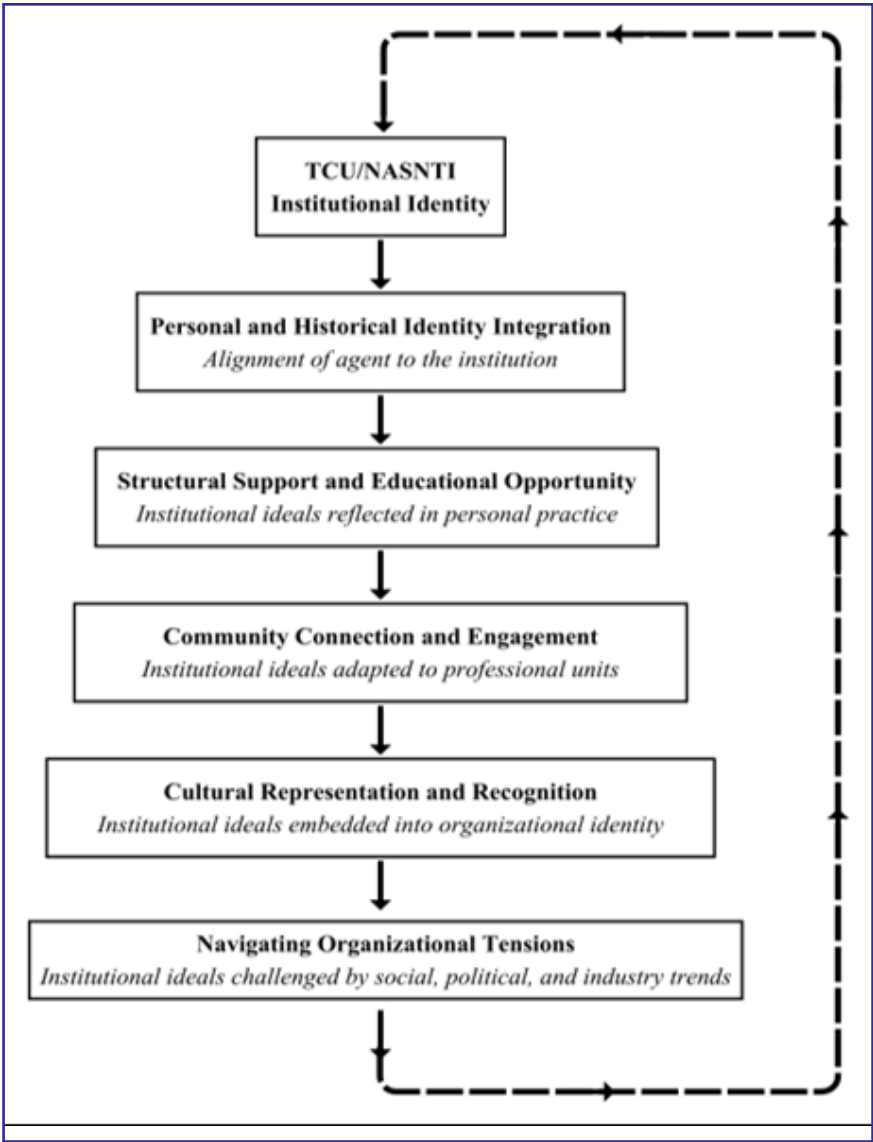
Cultural humility and competence are absolutely at the forefront of my work. I recognize that each of my clients and team all have unique micro-cultures within the culture of the entire athletic department. It is imperative to ensure quality care to each population I serve.

Culturally responsive practice also exists in the awareness and addressing injustice, two elements not consistently seen within college sport (Kluch, 2023). Participants at Fort Lewis College highlighted the institution's efforts in addressing the injustices committed while FLC operated as a boarding school. Another participant at Utah State mentioned that while anti-DEI legislation presented limitations to the practices and language used on campus, there was still an emphasis on overcoming those challenges and remaining true to the TCU/NASNTI designation. This awareness of self and history is foundational in shaping the operation and culture of these athletics spaces – further asserting that the relationship between sport, university, and indigeneity is robust and tightly interwoven.

Theme 5: Navigating Organizational Tensions

An interesting component within the data is the presence of noteworthy tensions, primarily with the role of dominant (and hegemonic) ideologies impacting the operation of these spaces. To note, a participant at a public institution noted the recent passing of anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) legislation that placed limitations on programming, discourse, and other campus activities. Similarly, another participant at a public institution noted the overwhelming presence of Christianity within their department, which limited the presence and integration of Indigenous spirituality within their programming and practices. These challenges reflect the shortcomings of leaning towards organizational hybridity and cultural reproduction – with emphasis on the presence and maintenance of dominant ideologies (Bourdieu, 1986). The combination of anti-DEI legislation and normative Christian values both center a predominant logic of anti-Indigenous sentiments (Mackay & Feagin, 2022). Although only present across two institutions, the continued challenges faced by TCUs and NASNTIs will present a unique positioning for the future operation of these athletics spaces.

Figure 1
The Embedded Indigeneity Framework



Discussion

Introducing the Embedded Indigeneity Framework

The EIF directly counters the assumed macro-to-micro process the researchers expected from the participants. In detail, the assumption when designing the study was that the overall identity of the institution would have a trickle-down effect into the athletics space, largely due to the status of most TCUs and NASNTIs being smaller institutions (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Conversely, the TCU and NASNTI status was communicated to have a direct impact on the personnel within the athletics departments who then integrated that understanding of institutional identity across athletics. Even further, the linear-circular design of the EIF reflects the consistently evolving nature of the TCU/NASNTI context and illustrates the necessity for change and development as a method for persistence.

As seen within the EIF, the core component is the *Personal and Historical Identity Integration* which reflects a foundational understanding of the institutional context - or being aware that while they are athletics professionals, they are athletics professionals **at** TCUs and NASNTIs. While this macro-level understanding of the institution is communicated, the participants explicitly communicated a deep level understanding of their institutional context and importance to integrate that understanding into their operations as sport professionals. This essential understanding shapes the way professionals show up in their respective roles, which further impacts the operation of their units and the broader organizational space. The foundation and operationalization of the EIF reflects the *micro-foundations of institutional theory* or the process where organizational actors are impacted by overarching institutional forces like values, norms, and beliefs – which are then implemented into their practices and ultimately impacting the operation of the organization (Powell & Colyvas, 2008).

The impact of the *Personal and Historical Identity Integration* then transitions from the individual agent to a common and shared understanding of *Structural Support and Educational Opportunity* despite the communicated responsibilities within their athletics roles. The consistency of each participant communicating an understanding and desire to promote structural support and educational opportunities for athletes reflects early integration of TCU/NASNTI identity into the athletics. Building upon this shared understanding of support and educational opportunity beyond formal role requirements, a deeper unit and organizational culture emerged, centered on *Engagement and Community Connection*. This is seen through the integration of community members with in-game entertainment, community service programming, early college access programming through sport, and expanding the understanding of sport through classroom curriculum. Akin to Smalls and colleagues (2007), these elements promote a sense of shared racial identity and serves as a promotive factor - which positively impacts access, matriculation, and completion. *Cultural Representation and Recognition* reflects the overarching operation of the athletics space as an arena for institutional identity reflection. As communicated by the participants,

their respective athletics departments each reflected the institutional identity and the broader scope of indigeneity. This institutional embeddedness and identity reflection is operationalized through logos, branding, sporting traditions, and engagement with Indigenous-serving initiatives. Given the visibility and communal nature of inter-collegiate sport, the athletics department serves as a front-facing space to amplify institutional mission and identity through a unique, sport-centric lens.

As noted by Alonso (2025), MSIs like TCUs and NASNTIs are facing increasing pressures and norms that impact campuses and their adjoining athletics spaces. The final theme, *Navigating Organizational Tensions*, serves as a final filter that continuously shapes the EIF process. As policy, practice, and social norms shift - the framework displays how indigeneity evolves and persists across organizational life. A key example of this evolution is that despite challenges faced by public institutions (Utah State University and UNC-Pembroke), participants communicated that organizational goals and culture remained aligned to the TCU/NASNTI identity of the institution through shifts in language and external presentation.

Resistance, Innovation, and Cultural Praxis in Practice

Centering indigenous identity and the processes in which this identity is embedded and operationalized in organizations is paramount in crafting a larger counternarrative and understanding of athletics spaces outside of the typical HWPI/Power conference lens. Counternarrative, as explained by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), amplifies and centers voices of those who are often excluded or forgotten in larger discourse. Emphasizing the alignment between individual agents and the institutional identity is essential in illustrating the communicated impact of special mission institutions – in both the university and athletics domains. The development of mentoring programs, intensive community engagement initiatives, and establishing a deeper understanding of athletics in relation to the Indigenous community reflects both innovation and resistance. While the commercialized nature of college athletics cannot be fully removed, the ethos of these spaces is still grounded within sovereignty, self-determination, and collective uplift (Belarde-Lewis & Kostecky, 2021).

Implications

Sociocultural Implications

In alignment with the researchers' decolonial and social justice lenses, this study first serves as a disruption to deficit-based narratives surrounding TCUs and NASNTIs in sport. As explained by Gasman and colleagues (2008), these institutions are severely under-resourced and structurally restrained and face extreme constraints despite their history, tradition, and outcomes to their student communities. Aligning with the broader body of sport organization scholarship, the market-driven logics of the field often leave smaller institutional types understudied or positioned against HPWIs (Historically and Predominantly White Institutions) (Foster et al., 2022; Newman 2014). Illuminating the unique culture and approach implemented by TCUs and NASNTIs explains how the broader concepts of indigeneity are oper-

ationalized through a sporting context and serve to continue the mission of the institution. Even further, the development from this study presents an alternative outlook into Indigenous-based sport organizations, where an agent-to-organization process amplifies the mission of the institution. This stark contrast from traditionalist institutionalization discourse within sport organizations further asserts that decolonial praxis expands the scope of understanding and application.

Theoretical Implications

The selected methodology was implemented due to the end results that 1) presented a novel conceptual framework and 2) serves as a contextually specific extension of existing theory/theories (Naeem et al., 2023). When reviewing the EIF, the primary development is a unique adaptation to college athletics research that has continuously positioned the educational and athletics institutions as inherently separate due to their competing logics (Buer, 2009; Sperber, 2001). The micro-foundations of institutionalization support the agent-to-organization process of embedding institutional logics within an organizational space through developing a personal alignment, then operationalizing that alignment in their roles, units, and then across the organization. Indigeneity, which is the culturally-embedded logic, provides the necessary nuance and understanding of how Indigenous-based organizations engage in culturally-reflective praxis. The EIF and support from the aligning frameworks further communicate that athletics at TCUs and NASNTIs are not separate, competing, or hybridized – but operate as intertwined entities working to continue the mission of their institutional identifier.

Practical Implications

From an organizational operations perspective, the developments from this study expand the understanding of organizational identity, indigeneity, and practice. To note, the EIF provides an alternative approach for understanding how institutional values are embedded across levels of the organization. While organizational hybridity can explain how competing spaces like TCU/NASNTI institutions and college athletics can coexist in a hybrid organization model, the development of the EIF reflects a clear alignment to the internal institutional field (Delmestri & Brumana, 2017). The internal institutional field posits that while different components of the same organization can vary by guiding logics (athletics vs academics), the overarching institutional logic (indigeneity) guides the operations of both areas. When reviewing the narratives of the practitioners and the design of the EIF, the foundational role of connecting oneself with the broader identity of being a TCU/NASNTI is integral. This micro-to-macro process within the EIF reflects the impactful role of the individual agent in sustaining and altering their organizational fields (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). The unique combination of internal institutional fields and the micro-foundations of institutionalization further supports the argument that the underpinning logic of indigeneity creates an interaction between the educational and sporting spaces that is not commonly seen or discussed within the broader body of sport organization scholarship.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

The scope of Special Mission Institutions continues to expand as more educational institutions reflect specific values and operations unique to their histories, locations, and communities (Lane & Brown, 2005). Future research should continue to reflect the appropriate nuance and cultural understanding to address and counter dominant and hegemonic ideologies. With attention to the CritCon tradition (Bentley, 2003), organizational research should actively challenge the reification and decontextualization processes often exhibited within research. Knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by socially-embedded power structures, however, as seen within the TribalCrit tradition, shifting focus and centering voice/narrative is necessary to understanding how communities adapt and operate within their context (Brayboy, 2005). Even further, the decontextualization process continues to perpetuate hegemonic structures as normative and acceptable, e.g. whiteness and Christo-nationalism.

Being that the primary limitation of the study is the small population of TCUs and NASNTIs, which contributed to a smaller participant pool, future scholarship should engage in methods that result in larger participant pools. Additionally, insights from athlete and student experiences are necessary in expanding the body of knowledge surrounding athletics at TCUs and NASNTIs. Even further, as with any framework, the EIF would benefit from tests and replications to further develop and expand the framework to include a wider range of perspective and insight, namely college athletes. The college athlete perspective can provide much-needed insights into athletic development, educational and professional development, and the broader social implications of matriculating through an athletics space that is grounded in indigeneity. Similar research should shift the institutional context to better understand how HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), HSIs (Hispanic Serving Institutions), WCU (Women's Colleges and Universities), Rural/Urban Serving Institutions, and many more integrate institutional identity into their athletics spaces and how athletics works to amplify the mission of the institution.

Conclusion

The researchers sought to understand how indigeneity is embedded within the athletics departments within TCUs and NASNTIs. Extending beyond gauging embeddedness, the study also explored how these athletic spaces continue and amplify the missions of their adjoining educational institutions. The findings and subsequent analysis present a well-integrated space that artfully blends the Indigenous tradition and sport. Although understanding that identity is integrated into sport and amplified through the operations of the athletics space, the EIF provided a culturally grounded extension of two underutilized concepts within organizational research: internal organizational fields and micro-foundations of institutionalization. By understanding how the guiding logic of indigeneity is grounded through personnel and passed through the organization in a bottom-up manner, we see how tribal philosophies are operationalized.

As stated by our participant, ‘you cannot separate our school from the Lumbee tribe.’ The researchers would like to extend this message and argue that you cannot separate any participating institutions from their TCU and NASNTI identity/identities. As seen within the narratives, indigeneity is the driving force in both the academics and athletics spaces. With attention to their athletics spaces, the role of the individual agent is powerful due to their personal connection and understanding of TCU/NASNTI status. This understanding shapes their personal approach to practice, which holds considerable implications for their respective units. As indigeneity embeddedness extends beyond the agent and their unit, the athletics department experiences a deeper alignment to the TCU/NASNTI identity. While prevailing literature often frames intercollegiate athletics departments as separate, predominantly commercially-driven, and hierarchical – this study challenges those notions. The agent is impactful, community engagement is paramount, and athletics seeks to embody indigeneity within operations. In fact, one could argue that athletics departments at TCUs and NASNTIs actively reject dominant narratives surrounding college sport by reshaping them through culturally grounded and community-aligned practice. In sum, indigeneity must be viewed as central to the athletics mission, not a symbolic add-on.

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Beyond the Jersey: Black Male College Athletes and the Construction of Self-Identity at Historically White Colleges and Universities

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Drawing on the master narrative framework and strategic responsiveness to interest convergence, this qualitative study examines how Black male college athletes (BMCAs) understand and define their Black identity as male college athletes, and how intersecting identities (race, gender, class, and role status) shape *self-awareness* and day-to-day decisions in historically White colleges and universities (HWCUs). We conducted interviews with six Division I BMCAs at an HWCU and complemented these data with an archival analysis of a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) forum featuring two additional BMCAs. Findings illuminate identity work as the central mechanism linking institutional context to outcomes along two pathways: (1) identity work → academic engagement, performance, and persistence, as identity negotiation organizes time allocation, helpseeking, and interpretation of classroom feedback; and (2) identity work → athletic role demands, performance pressures, and wellbeing, as racialized expectations and revenuesport logics intensify surveillance, role engulfment, and stress management. Although the nomenclature (e.g., NCAA; HWCUs) is U.S.-specific, these mechanisms map onto university sport systems internationally where racialized climates, classed opportunity structures, and commercialization shape athletes' identities and choices. The study offers theoretically integrated, practice-relevant implications for scholars and practitioners.

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Introduction

Since 2020, Black men have continued to encounter entrenched systemic barriers across the United States (U.S.) higher education and remain the least likely student group to earn a degree (Hye et al., 2024; Wiltz, 2025). Sport can provide an entry point into college, yet Black male college athletes (BMCAs) are disproportionately represented in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) profit-generating sports such as men's football and men's basketball relative to their non-athlete peers (Harper, 2018; Harper & Davis, 2012). Although, the NCAA's Graduation Success Rate (GSR) for BMCAs has increased from 51% to 79% over the past two decades, it still trails that of other racial groups (e.g., Hispanic or Latino men increased from 56% to 86%, and White men increased from 76% to 92%) and has only recently surpassed the graduation rate of White male athletes from twenty years ago by three percentage points (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2024). Racial disparities also persist in psychosocial development and readiness for life after sport, as most BMCAs will not play professionally and are less likely than their non-athlete peers to develop key life skills during college (Brown, 2016; Charleston et al., 2015). Scholarship has consequently characterized big-time college sport as exploitative, particularly for BMCAs who generate substantial revenue while receiving limited returns in personal, academic, and career development (Bimper, 2014; Harper, 2018; Harper & Davis, 2012; Howe, 2023; Keaton & Cooper, 2022; Kidd et al., 2018; Singer, 2016). Popular media portrayals such as *All American* (The CW), *Swagger* (Apple TV+), *Last Chance U* (Netflix), and *Student-Athlete* (HBO) illustrate many of these sociocultural constraints, yet they often understate how exploitative values shape BMCAs well before college (Hawkins, 1995). This contradiction is evident in the 2022-2023 NCAA men's basketball tournament (March Madness), which generated more than \$1 billion in revenue while holistically athletes saw no share of that income (Parker & Brown, 2024).

To better support BMCAs, it is essential to examine how collegiate experiences, especially within historically White colleges and universities (HWCUs), shape identity development and *self*-awareness (Cooper, 2019; Harrison et al., 2017). Research on Black boys in U.S. K-12 contexts reveals how (counter)narrative frameworks are central to strengthen academic outcomes and disrupting deficit-based expectations (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Harper, 2018; Howard & Howard, 2021; Johnson, 2022). Similarly, designing meaningful support programs for BMCAs requires attention to how institutional and cultural contexts influence holistic development and everyday decision-making (Adler et al., 2017; Cooper, 2016). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how BMCAs at HWCU narrate Black male identity and develop *self*-awareness through day-to-day decisions in academic, athletic, and campus life.

Literature Review

BMCAs develop within a broader social order that, Edwards (1979) argued, has long "denied the benefits of vital Black skill development" while urging Black

communities to “deal with sport more intelligently and as the essentially political phenomenon that it is” (p. 126). This study is conceptualized through the Narrative, Identity, and Liminality Model (NILM), which frames BMCA development as a narratively mediated process shaped by racialized institutions, developmental transition, and everyday negotiations of belonging. From this perspective, the athletic industrial complex (AIC) is not merely the backdrop to athletes’ lives but a formative structure linking youth sport pipelines, media infrastructures, NCAA governance, and profit-producing college athletics across the transition from boyhood to emerging adulthood (Cooper, 2016; Runstedtler, 2018; Smith, 2007). Within this system, athletic potential is often commodified while educational development is subordinated to performance imperatives. The trajectories of Lenny Cooke (who became a national celebrity before 18) and Maurice Clarett (standout BMCA during Ohio State football’s 2002 champion season) illustrate how early promise can be publicized, marketed, and disciplined through institutional control, even as athletes are celebrated for their value to programs (Safdie & Safdie, 2016; Zimbalist & Zimbalist, 2014). Accordingly, BMCA identity work involves constructing a coherent sense of *self* as Black men and athletes while navigating race, masculinity, classed opportunity structures, and institutional role expectations in HWCUs. NILM is useful as it treats these decisions not as isolated acts, but as part of an evolving narrative of *self* formed under conditions of scrutiny, uncertainty, and institutional asymmetry.

Educational settings powerfully shape identity during emerging adulthood, a period marked by exploration, expanding autonomy, and consolidating independence (Arnett, 1998). Dumas and Nelson (2016) called for a “critical reimagining of Black boyhood” that affirms self-determination and vulnerability in spaces where adultification and surveillance are common (p. 27), while Nigrescence theory emphasizes how racial identity development can be shaped by societal devaluation and exploitation (Cross Jr., 1971, 1978). Worrell (2008) similarly notes the salience of the “pre-encounter” stage can involve “self-denigration” and exploitation that can disrupt self-acceptance and well-being (p. 158). NILM extends these insights by emphasizing how identity development is also a narrative process, especially during liminal periods when individuals must integrate past experiences, present constraints, and future possibilities into a coherent sense of *self* (McAdams, 2008). Within predominantly White institutional spaces, Black adolescents and young adults often adopt code-switching as a coping strategy in response to racial stereotyping and discrimination (Mik-Meyer, 2020; Whaley, 2016). These processes can intersect with identity status processes to produce constrained trajectories when Black male flourishing is unsupported (Marcia, 1966). For BMCAs, sport can both provide a site for asserting humanity and intensify scrutiny, as dominant U.S. imaginaries have historically cast Black men as threatening, “inferior”, and hypersexual, rendering them acceptable only when perceived as controllable and “nonthreatening” (Ferber, 2007, pp. 12, 22; Coakley, 2021; Cooper, 2019). Contemporary scholarship therefore shows that BMCAs’ socio-identities shape leadership, engagement, and belonging even as microaggressions and pathologizing discourses erode their legitimacy beyond athletics, particularly within liminal HWCU contexts where racialized scripts

of belonging remain powerful (Bonner, 2011; McAulay, 2025; Sims et al., 2021; Syed & McLean, 2023).

Black Male College Athlete Identity Work in Historically White Colleges and Universities

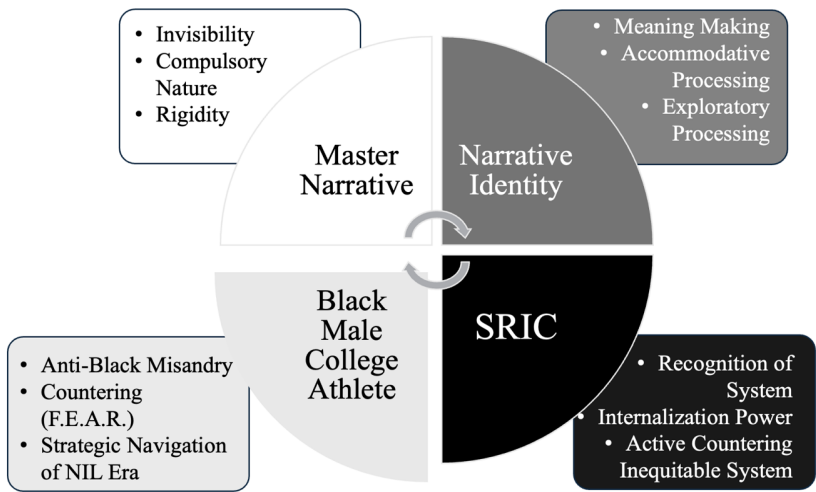
The modern ideal of the college athlete assumes commitment to “high-level achievement” in both their “academic and sport endeavors” (Cross & Fouke, 2019, p. 1), but for BMCAs this ideal is filtered through the realities of historically White, profit-driven environments. Du Bois’ (1903) concept of double consciousness remains instructive here, as Black men must continually negotiate *self*-understanding alongside constant awareness of how they are viewed by others in a racialized hierarchical order. In such settings, BMCAs often calibrate *self*-presentation across classrooms, team spaces, campus life, and media contexts, including through code-switching and “unrepresentative” presentations of *self* to manage surveillance and competing expectations (Dexter et al., 2021, p. 206; Howe, 2023; Okuwobi et al., 2023). Although the scholar-baller paradigm seeks to integrate academic and athletic identities and disrupt narrow public narratives (Dexter et al., 2021; Harrison, 2002), that integration remains difficult within structures that privilege performance and revenue generation over holistic development (Adler & Adler, 1989; Bimper & Harrison, 2011). Scholars have therefore described the AIC as producing forms of (mis)education that steer athletes toward athletics-first priorities and narrow future possibilities, especially for Black men (Bimper et al., 2013; Edwards, 1979; Harrison et al., 2017; Howe 2020, 2023; Runstedtler, 2018; Singer, 2008; Smith, 2007; Turner II, 2018). In this context, narratives and (counter)narratives are essential as BMCAs *self*-awareness is not merely an internal trait but a socially produced and narratively sustained orientation shaped by institutional contexts, cultural scripts, and everyday negotiations of power. Narrative identity, understood as an “internalized, evolving, and integrative story of *self*”, helps clarify this process (McAdams, 2008, p. 242; 2011), while related identity scholarship highlights the importance of struggle, *self* narration, anti-identity, and the limits of available identifications (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). As an extension of Cross Jr.’s (1971, 1978) reinterpretation of Goffman’s (1959) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, NILM provides the conceptual root of the present study by showing how BMCA identities are narratively composed and recomposed within liminal spaces where race, gender, sport, and institutional power intersect. Although this work does not claim to be first, it rearticulates identity frameworks for today’s collegiate context, paying special attention to the name, image, and likeness (NIL) implementation era – that is, the policy changes enabling college athletes to earn income from their names, images, and likenesses.

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in the NILM, which serves as the overarching framework for examining how BMCAs make sense of themselves within big-time collegiate sport. NILM integrates narrative identity theory with Critical Race Theory (CRT)

and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) to explain identity development as a narratively mediated process shaped by racialized institutional environments rather than as an individual process detached from context (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2021; Bell, 1995; Yosso, 2005; See Figure 1). Within this framework, CRT frames how race, intersectionality, interest convergence, and counter-storytelling structure collegiate sport and the conditions under which Black male identity is recognized, constrained, or marginalized (Delgado, 1989; Yosso et al., 2022). CCW complements this analysis by identifying the linguistic, social, and navigational forms of capital racially minoritized communities cultivate to survive and move through exclusionary spaces (Yosso, 2005). NILM therefore provides the broader explanatory logic for understanding BMCA identity development as shaped by dominant institutional narratives and by the community-based resources athletes draw upon in responding to these narratives.

Figure 1
Conceptual Frameworks

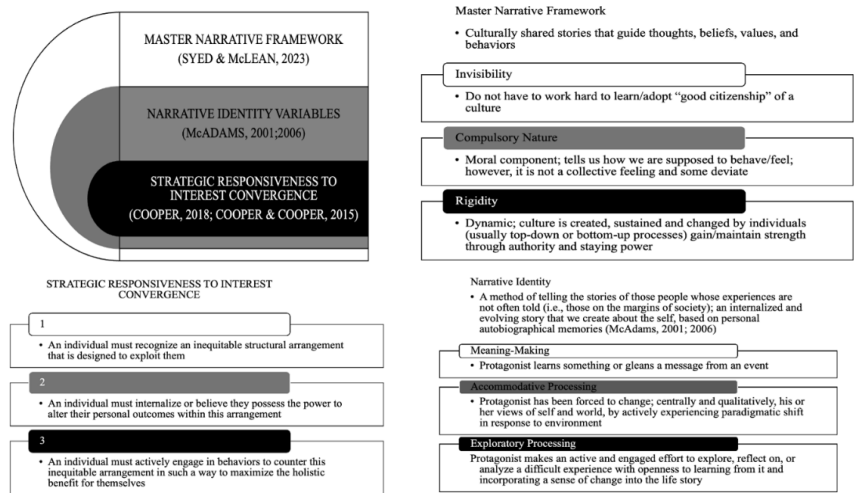


Within NILM, the master narrative framework (MNF) explains how culturally shared stories define what is normal, valuable, and possible within HWCUs (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Syed et al., 2020). Master narratives guide how individuals interpret past experiences and “imagined futures”, while also delimiting which identities and life paths appear legitimate (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 234; Syed et al., 2020). Be that MNF centers the interplay between “*self* and society” through the principles of ubiquity, utility, invisibility, rigidity, and compulsory nature, it is well suited for analyzing how scripts about Black masculinity, athletic success, and campus belonging become taken for granted in HWCUs (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 318). MNF also clarifies how (counter)narratives contest those scripts and articulate more agentic

and humane possibilities, particularly during liminal periods when individuals are actively interpreting who they have been, who they are becoming, and what futures remain available to them (Bauer et al., 2022; Schwab, 2020; Syed & McLean, 2023).

Strategic responsiveness to interest convergence (SRIC) extends CRT by focusing on how BMCAs recognize and respond to exploitative practices within the AIC and big-time collegiate sport (Cooper, 2018; Cooper & Cooper, 2015). SRIC is organized around three criteria: (1) recognizing inequitable structural arrangements that exploit labor and constrain outcomes, (2) internalizing a belief in one's capacity to alter personal outcomes within those arrangements, and (3) engaging in behaviors that challenge inequity in ways that maximize holistic well-being (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). In this study, SRIC frames *self*-awareness as an applied strategic orientation that develops through repeated daily decisions in academic, athletic, and campus life, especially when institutional messages about support, belonging, and opportunity remain aligned with athletics-first priorities (see Figure 2; Oseguera, 2010). Within NILM, these decisions are understood as part of an ongoing narrative process through which athletes interpret institutional conditions and reposition themselves within them. CCW adds further clarity by showing that such strategic responses are often enabled by linguistic, social, and navigational capital accumulated across racially minoritized communities (Yosso, 2005).

Figure 2
Frameworks Operationalized



In unison, MNF and SRIC allow this study to analyze both structure and response. MNF identifies the dominant cultural scripts that shape what BMCAs are expected to do and who they are expected to be whereas SRIC explains how they strategically accept, revise, or resist those scripts through everyday choices in aca-

demic, athletic, and campus life at HWCUs (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015). NILM provides coherence across these lenses by locating narrative negotiation and strategic action within liminal developmental spaces, while CCW clarifies the cultural assets that support such action (Yosso, 2005). Guided by this integrated framework, the study examines how BMCAs at a HWCU narrate Black male identity and develop *self*-awareness through day-to-day decisions. Using these lenses, the analysis of interviews with six Division I BMCAs from one HWCU and an NCAA forum featuring two additional BMCAs illuminates how race, gender, class, and athlete status shape *self*-understanding and strategies for navigating historically White institutional environments in ways that support holistic well-being.

Methodology

This study was designed to afford BMCAs' accounts of their pre-collegiate and collegiate experiences and to examine how those experiences shape *self*-awareness in day-to-day decisions within HWCUs. Although prior scholarship documents many ways BMCAs navigate HWCU environments, less is known about how athletes connect their earlier life stories to their present identity work and routine choices across academic, athletic, and social settings (Herman II, 2023; Howe, 2023). To address this gap, we employed a multi method qualitative approach using narrative inquiry to treat experience how meaning-making unfolds through lived events (Clandinin, 2006; Mik-Meyer, 2020).

Grounded in constructivist (qualitative) approaches (Bliss, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Mik-Meyer, 2020), the study created space for participants to describe and critique dominant campus discourses and institutional logics that organize higher education and big-time sport (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Frisby, 2005). Strategic responsiveness to interest convergence further guided our focus on how athletes recognized inequitable structures, interpreted institutional incentives, and enacted strategies to protect holistic well-being in historically White settings (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Together, MNF and SRIC sensitized our design to the ways Black male identity is narrated and enacted through everyday decisions across HWCU contexts (Adler et al., 2017; Bimper, 2014; Syed & McLean, 2023).

Data collection

The interview protocol comprised two sections. The first explored participants' *self* identity awareness, including how they understood their racial, gendered, academic, and athlete identities (e.g., "Does your ethnic identity impact your experience as a college student?" and "What have been your most positive and most negative experiences as a BMCA?"). The second assessed how the HWCU sociocultural environment shaped identity work and day-to-day navigation of academic and athletic spaces (e.g., "What do you feel are some major issues Black athletes face on campuses at HWCUs?"). Questions were adapted from narrative identity and MNF scholarship to prompt meaning-making about formative events, cultural expectations, and

personal agency (e.g., “Do you act differently than you would in the presence of those who are Black? If so how?”; Adler et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2023).

To strengthen the study’s attention to narrative context and to incorporate contemporaneous accounts of racialized collegiate sport climates, we also conducted an archival analysis of a publicly available NCAA-hosted forum on student-athletes’ experiences with racial inequities and racial justice (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020). Consistent with MNF’s emphasis on how narratives circulate across social contexts, this source provided an institutional and cultural backdrop for interpreting how BMCAs publicity articulated experience and hope during the COVID-19-era (McAdams, 2008; Syed & McLean, 2023).

Interview data were collected from six BMCAs affiliated with sport programs at an NCAA D-I Power 4 institution identified as an HWCU. Three participated in men’s football and three participated in track and field. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes and 39 seconds to 1 hour, 25 minutes, and 47 seconds, with an average length of 51 minutes and 23 seconds. Since the institution was anonymized, identifying details beyond sport affiliation, year in college, and hometown zip code were minimized to protect confidentiality.

The NCAA-hosted forum included five student-athletes. For this study, only comments from the two Black male Division I athletes were included in the analysis because they met the study’s inclusion criteria (Black, male, Division I) and provided a contemporaneous account that helped triangulate themes from the interviews during a distinct historical period in college sport (Carter et al., 2014; Saedi & Amini Farsani, 2026; Syed et al., 2020). One forum participant played football at an NCAA Division I Group of Six (G6) institution. The second competed in track for two years at an NCAA Division I G6 institution and later transferred to play basketball at an HBCU. Since these statements were delivered in a publicly accessible NCAA recording, their names were retained as they appear in the public source. Additional participant details are provided in Table 1.

Data Analysis

All interview recordings and the NCAA forum video were transcribed prior to analysis. Analytical procedures aligned with a multi-method qualitative approach that integrates interview and observational or archival data (Mik-Meyer, 2020). We used narrative inquiry within a critical constructivist orientation and conducted a combined narrative and structural analysis to examine both what was said and how experiences were organized into stories of identity, constraint, and agency (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kincheloe, 2005).

Analysis proceeded deductively by using MNF and SRIC as sensitizing frameworks. First, we examined how participants’ accounts reflected engagement with master narratives, including culturally dominant expectations about Black male athletes and the perceived boundaries of belonging in historically White settings (Syed & McLean, 2023). Second, we analyzed how participants narrated *self*-awareness in routine decisions across campus and team contexts, attending to meaning-making

Table 1.
Collaborators Sociocultural Origin

Pseudonym	Sport participated	High school zip code	Private or public high school	Year in college as of 2019-20 season
Curtis	MFB	282**	Public	Redshirt sophomore
Chad	MT&F	INT	n/a	Redshirt junior
Dorian	MT&F	322**	Private	Redshirt sophomore
Boone	MFB	352**	Public	Redshirt junior
Christopher	MT&F	326**	Private	Freshman
Kenneth	MFB	330**	Public	Redshirt sophomore
*Josiah Hall	MFB	808**	Public	Graduate 2019
*Devin Norwood	MT&F and MBB	283**	Private	Junior

Note: *denotes real name of BMCA

processes that linked life events to evolving understandings of *self* (Adler et al., 2017). Third, we used SRIC to interpret how athletes described recognizing inequitable structures, believing in their capacity to shape outcomes, and enacting strategies to navigate interest convergence in ways that supported academic engagement, athletic performance, and holistic well-being (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Finally, we compared themes across interview narratives and the NCAA forum contributions to identify convergences and tensions between personal stories and broader public discourse, strengthening interpretive depth through triangulation across data sources (Carter et al., 2014).

Positionality

The research team included three individuals who differ in racial identity, life-course stage, and proximity to intercollegiate sport, which supported ongoing reflexivity regarding power, proximity, and interpretation throughout the research process. The lead author is a research assistant professor at University of South Carolina, a predominately White NCAA Division I institution. He identifies as a Black, cisgender male of Creole lineage and a former scholar-athlete who lettered in football at an HBCU. His experiences earning early academic recognition and later navigating imposter syndrome, depression, illness, and reduced playing time inform his attention to the intersecting pressures that shape BMCAs' well-being, persistence, and day-to-day decision-making.

The second author is an assistant professor at University of Alabama, a historically White NCAA Division I institution. He identifies as a White, middle-aged man and was not a student-athlete or collegiate football player. Although he has professional experience working with and around college football programs, he acknowledges limited shared identity with the participants and approaches interpretation with deliberate reflexivity. The third author is an assistant professor at Quinnipiac University, a historically White NCAA Division I institution. He identifies as a Black man whose scholarship centers Black male college athletes and interrogates systems that reproduce dominant narratives about their identities and experiences. As a former four-year Division I football letterman, and a prior practitioner in Division I physical training, he contributed sport-specific and structural insight to the analysis.

Findings

Across both aims, participants' narratives indicate that *self*-awareness operated as an applied strategic orientation developed through repeated daily decisions about speech, movement, community, academic engagement, and public visibility within HWCUs. Interpreted through NILM, the findings show BMCAs did not simply describe hardship. They narrated how they recognized inequitable arrangements, interpreted what those arrangements meant for Black male identity, and selected responses that protected dignity, belonging, and long-term possibility (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed et al., 2020; Yosso, 2005). Consistent with scholarship on the AIC and historically White environments, the accounts also show how BMCAs moved through campus as simultaneously celebrated and constrained, highly visible for athletic labor yet less fully affirmed as students, intellectuals, and developing Black men (Bonner, 2011; Cooper, 2016; Harrison et al., 2017; McAulay, 2025; Runstedtler, 2018; Sims et al., 2021).

Aim 1: Factors Influencing Black Male College Athletes' Narration of Self Identity Awareness

Theme 1: Hyper/(In)visibility on Campus

Aim 1 examined factors that shaped BMCAs' narration of *self*-identity awareness through meaning-making and accommodative processing of major challenges on campus. A central pattern across participants' accounts was hyper/(in)visibility: they were highly visible as Black athletes yet often rendered invisible as full persons in academic and social life. Rather than treating this pattern as a series of separate criterion-specific moments, the findings below show how participants first recognized constrained belonging, then counter positioned themselves against deficit scripts, and finally used voice, vigilance, and community to preserve dignity and well-being (Bonner, 2011; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; McAulay, 2025; McLean & Syed, 2015).

SRIC Criterion 1: Inequitable Arrangements Constraining Belonging and Legitimacy. Kenneth illustrated racial isolation in academic spaces as both routine and consequential: "It sucked sometimes", and "I don't know, it's weird sometimes,

just I'm the only Black kid in the class." He explicitly stated, "I can count on one hand, maybe two fingers, how many classes I've had where there were other Black people or there were other Black professors." As a freshman, Curtis "was really intimidated" engaging with others in social settings, a (self)perception that impeded efforts to find a community. Over time, however, he identified an affirming counter-space through a Black Student Union event, noting, "Hanging around brothers and sisters definitely made it a lot easier for me adapting into my freshman year because there were times where it was like, 'I don't know if I'm ready for this'." Boone similarly described the racialized structure of campus life and the dual role of athletics as refuge and reminder of marginality:

I'd say the majority, shoot, 90% of the team is Black... walking around campus, I feel like I don't see an abundant amount of Black people. So, I feel like I am – and Black people – are definitely the minority here.

Collectively, these excerpts show how participants first developed *self*-awareness through recognizing how HWCU spaces unevenly distributed belonging and legitimacy. Classroom isolation, social intimidation, and minority status made Black presence hyper noticed yet insufficiently affirmed, while Black student and athlete counter spaces functioned as social and navigational capital that made campus life more livable. In this sense, recognition of inequity was not passive awareness, but the opening stage of strategic identity negotiation (Brown, 2016; Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2015; Yosso, 2005).

SRIC Criterion 2: Internalizing Capacity Through Counter-Positioning. Participants also described how campus and fan perceptions reduced them to athletic role status while constraining fuller *self*-expression. Curtis described feeling dehumanized by such perceptions: "(They) look at us as just athletes. They don't look at us as human beings." Christopher narrated routine phenotyping: "If you see an African American, he's an athlete." Dorian similarly described how visible markers of athlete status invite stereotyped interpretations and constrain authenticity:

Once you see the shirts or the book bags ... they kind of give you this negative depiction of where you think you're better than everyone else ... We get labelled athletes so much that we don't get to express like our real selves.

Kenneth's most directly narrated refusal to accept that deficit framing:

I had several instances in classes where a professor would randomly call on me to answer a question and then not ask another for the rest of the session. I never addressed it directly – I'd just take mental notes and move on. For me, it became more about proving them wrong. Yes, I'm Black, but I'm knowledgeable and educated. I know the material, and if you want to pick on me, I'm gon show you in front of the class, I belong here.

Together, these accounts show how participants did not simply absorb dominant scripts about Black masculinity and athlete status. Instead, they engaged in accommodative meaning-making and counter positioning, reframing stereotype and surveillance as conditions to be read, resisted, and strategically managed. Within the

MNF, these excerpts show how culturally dominant stories organized legitimacy; within SRIC, they show how participants internalized agency by insisting on intellectual competence, authenticity, and belonging despite biased settings (Cooper, 2019; Dexter et al., 2021; Du Bois, 1903; Ferber, 2007; Howe, 2023; McAulay, 2025; McAdams & McLean, 2013).

SRIC Criterion 3: Strategic Behaviors Challenging Inequity and Protecting Holistic Well-being. Participants further described responses that ranged from public voice and activism to vigilant everyday navigation under conditions of racial threat. In the NCAA forum, Josiah Hall described anger and grief alongside guarded hope in response to racial injustice:

As a young Black man in this country, who maybe thinks about having some kids someday, you don't want your kids to grow up in a world like this ... Most momentum I think I've seen in my entire lifetime, as far as the discussion and the actions that are being taken ... little bit encouraging, but at the same time, it's inexcusable and it's just upsetting. (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 9:55-10:22)

Devin Norwood echoed these sentiments while foregrounding the heightened surveillance and vulnerability tied to being a Black student-athlete:

I'm in disbelief. I'm disgusted. It's sad and it's sickening that it has to come to this point where we have to realize that Blacks need rights too. However, I have to watch myself, especially as a Black student-athlete. I just got a message from a godfather of mine telling me that the KKK are starting rallies in these certain states ... Any of my Black student-athletes, Black students, or any Black people that are out there, just watch your back... we're starting to realize that this is bigger than us. (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 8:19-9:28)

Josiah attributed his willingness to speak up to familial socialization and role modeling:

My parents always really encouraged me when I was growing up to be a leader ... you see something wrong then just speak up about it. ... That's kind of where I found my voice. My dad is a football coach ... high school counsellor ... everybody looks to for, you know, encouragement. So, I've always tried to be like him. (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 13:18-13:49)

Devin similarly described activism as a deliberate strategy enabled in part by institutional allies while requiring constant role negotiation:

Commissioner McWilliams, she has implemented diversity within her shows Mac Attack. ... However, we're taking it to our phones ... to the streets. And we're protesting, we're making sure our voices are heard some way, somehow. ... Still finding time to separate being a student-athlete and being an activist in our community. (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 24:49-25:35)

He also narrated hope through a recognition of structural exclusion and a belief in the possibility of navigating within it: “We’re not the only ones that are facing [backlash] ... The system wasn’t even really built for you. But I beat the system, obviously, with athletics” (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 54:05-53:43). Kenneth articulated the vigilance required to navigate campus interactions shaped by racialized fear and assumptions:

I think a lot of it has to do with just misunderstanding people in general. Some are afraid to approach or talk to me because of stereotypes about how Black people – especially Black men – are supposed to be. It’s been tough, connecting with students from different backgrounds. With other athletes, it’s different because; we understand each other’s lifestyle, so it’s easier to connect. But students, it’s like, “He’s Black, always angry”, or “He looks like he’s going to curse me out”, or “Why is he looking at me?” I’ve had moments where I was walking up a staircase behind a group, and they noticeably sped up once they saw me. I’m like, “What did I do to make them act that way?”

Altogether, these excerpts show how a strategic response involved both public and quiet forms of action. Participants used voice, protest, role negotiation, and familial modeling to contest compulsory scripts of silence, but they also relied on vigilance, movement management, and situational assessment in campus spaces shaped by anti-Black misandry and threat perceptions (McAulay, 2025; Curry, 2019; Smith et al., 2007). Interpreted through CRT and CCW, these responses function as (counter) storytelling supported by social, familial, aspirational, and navigational capital. In addition, narrative identity implies they also reflect redemption-oriented movement, or what the findings frame as countering False Evidence Appearing Real (F.E.A.R.), in which stigmatizing experiences are reworked into opportunities for affirmation, persistence, and future possibility without erasing structural harm (Brown, 2016; Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Delgado, 1989; Du Bois, 1903; Yosso, 2005; Yosso et al., 2017).

Aim 2: Challenging Factors to Black Male College Athletes’ Self Exploratory Processing

Theme 2: Mirror Manipulation

Aim 2 examined factors that constrained *self*-identity awareness through exploratory processing, including pessimism about navigating HWCU environments, suppressed feelings of being undervalued, and limited access to holistic development, sociohistorical knowledge, and culturally relevant pedagogy. *Mirror manipulation* captures the pressure participants felt to monitor, alter, or withhold parts of themselves in order to remain acceptable and safe within historically White settings. Rather than restating each criterion separately, the synthesis below clusters participants’ accounts around two broader dynamics: recognizing the mismatch between institutional benefit and holistic support and navigating that mismatch through future orientation, code-switching, impression management, and movement toward affirming spaces (Dexter et al., 2021; Howe, 2023; McLean & Syed, 2015; Mik-Meyer, 2020; Whaley, 2016).

SRIC Criterion 1: Recognizing the Mismatch Between Institutional Benefit and Holistic Support. Chad reflected a racially marked moment in COVID-19-era online coursework that sharpened awareness of how he and other BMCAs are read in academic settings (Comeaux, 2012; McAulay, 2025): “In the breakout room, you could see her expression change. I think she underestimated us. I don’t think there was any bad intent behind it, but it kind of hurt a little bit.” Echoing Chad’s account of being visibly underestimated in the breakout room, Curtis connected that moment to a broader pattern of interest convergence in which athletes are valued for entertainment but expected to remain politically quiet and socially contained:

We entertain you on Saturdays, but we’re people outside of our sport. One thing I wish would change about some of [University fanbase] is the way they respond online. I’ll see comments on Twitter like the infamous, “Shut up and dribble”, or “Stick to football and leave politics out of it.” But it’s like – No, you don’t understand. We’re educated – obviously on the field, but we’re educated on this thing called life. The least you can do is acknowledge that we do more than just sports.

Chad summarized the weight of these expectations succinctly: “It’s just the expectations, a lot of expectations that come with being a Black student-athlete.” Kenneth added a parallel recognition of uneven institutional care (e.g., injury, lack of playing, homesickness) during periods of vulnerability: “Definitely, my mental health support was non-existent, but at the same time I was learning myself at that time.”

Together, these excerpts show that participants clearly recognized the contradiction at the center of the AIC: their labor and visibility were celebrated, while their intellectual legitimacy, emotional safety, and developmental needs were inconsistently supported. In that sense, *self*-awareness emerged not only as reflection, but as structural literacy. Participants learned to identify when institutional messages about support and belonging remained aligned with athletics-first priorities rather than holistic development (Comeaux, 2012; Cooper, 2016; Harrison et al., 2017; Runstedtler, 2018; Smith, 2007).

SRIC Criterion 2: Internalizing Capacity Through Exploratory Processing and Future Orientation. Even within constrained settings, participants narrated a future-oriented capacity to revise purpose and navigate risk strategically. Boone framed *self*-awareness as developmental and tied to learning oneself beyond immediate athletic demands:

I would probably really figure out what I want to do with my life. I mean, when you come to college and you’re 17, 18 years old, you’re going to be completely different than what you are when you’re 21.

SRIC Criterion 3: Strategic Navigation Through Assimilation, Code-switching, and Selective Resistance. Dorian described code-switching as a long-term, routine practice shaped by both external feedback and internalized habit:

I remember people used to tell me, “You know your voice changes when you’re around certain people. When you’re talking to a certain race, it gets higher, but when you talk to us, it slows down and sounds different.” I never

noticed it until they pointed it out. I've done it so often that it's become second nature – I don't even realize I'm doing it. Lord knows, what else I've been doing unconsciously. Code-switching was big part of my existence, specifically from high school through college.

Kenneth similarly framed strategic *self*-monitoring and academic excellence as a way to disrupt stereotypes and secure legitimacy:

I've pushed those buttons, and when I showed professors that I wasn't who they assumed I was, it made them pause – some even felt dumb. I often feel like I have to be perfect, like it's my responsibility to change how people perceive the Black community – people who look like me. My first thought – I don't want anyone thinking I'm just some dumb Black jock. I'm going to let them know I'm educated and have every right to be in this class.

Christopher described impression management as a protective strategy that prevents early stereotyping from becoming permanent:

My dad once told me, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." Some expect me to come in speaking slang, sagging my pants, and walking a certain way. But when I approach them speaking proper English, it catches them off guard. If I walk into a room and act the way they expect, I'll later regret it and think, "That's not who I am." But by then, it's too late – that's how they'll always see me.

Christopher's description of his track and field "family" added an important counterpoint. He emphasized "anybody anywhere" could "fit in" because "everyone is welcoming and wants to see everybody succeed." He also narrated his identity as effort-based and representational, explaining he goes out there and "gives it my all; my best", while echoing perceived expectations from the Black community to "Try, succeed, and push for the best possible."

As a whole, these excerpts show that constrained exploratory processing did not eliminate agency. Participants maintained a future-oriented sense of *self* while adopting context-specific strategies to protect access, legitimacy, and well-being. Boone's reflection demonstrates exploratory processing and developmental revision, whereas Dorian, Kenneth, and Christopher show how code-switching and impression management were not merely interpersonal adjustments, but strategic responses to institutional surveillance and racial expectation. Christopher's account of team "family" also clarifies that strategic navigation was not limited to defensive *self*-monitoring. It included movement toward affirming environments where fuller expressions of *self* felt possible. Interpreted through CCW, these strategies reflect the use of linguistic and navigational capital; deciphered through narrative identity, they show how BMCAs linked present constraint to future possibility during a liminal period of identity revision (Arnett, 1998; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean & Syed, 2015; Mik-Meyer, 2020; Whaley, 2016; Yosso, 2005).

Discussion

Across both aims, the findings position *self*-awareness as a narratively constructed and strategically enacted orientation shaped by culturally dominant scripts,

institutional conditions, and the uneven distribution of belonging within historically White environments. Narrative identity helps explain how BMCAs interpreted challenging experiences through accommodative meaning-making and exploratory processing, while the MNF clarifies how hypervisibility, invisibility, rigidity, and compulsory expectations shaped what participants believed they could safely say, do, and become within HWCUs (McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed et al., 2020). SRIC, in turn, connects these interpretive processes to daily decision-making by showing how BMCAs recognized inequity, internalized agency, and engaged in behaviors that challenged inequity or reduced its harm in pursuit of holistic well-being (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). These findings reinforce scholarship on the commodification of Black male athletic labor within the AIC and on racialized surveillance, anti-Black misandry, and double consciousness by showing participants often understood when institutional interest in them was tied more to performance than to their full development, and that everyday campus navigation required ongoing assessment of safety, legitimacy, and *self*-presentation (Cooper, 2016; Curry, 2019; Du Bois, 1993; Harrison et al., 2017; McAulay, 2025; Runstedtler, 2018; Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2007). Collectively, hyper/(in)visibility on campus and mirror manipulation reveal how institutions benefited from athletes' performance while leaving them to navigate racially organized classrooms, fan expectations, and limited psychosocial care, a pattern consistent with SRIC criterion 1.

At the same time, the findings complicate deficit-oriented readings of BMCAs by showing how participants did not merely absorb institutional narratives. Rather, consistent with SRIC criterion 1, they interpreted, revised, and strategically moved within and against them through voice, community-building, code-switching, activism, and future-oriented *self*-definition. They engaged in accommodative meaning-making and exploratory processing that enabled them to reinterpret stereotype, surveillance, and exclusion as sites of self-defense and resolve (McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean & Syed, 2015). Kenneth's academic counter positioning, Boone's future orientation, and participants' insistence that they were more than "just athletes" indicate an internalized sense of capacity to shape outcomes even within constrained environments. In that respect, the findings align with NILM by showing how BMCA identity is neither purely intrapsychic nor reducible to institutional constraint. Rather, it is a liminal, narrative, and strategic process through which athletes read the environment, make sense of themselves, and decide how to act. At the same time, the study complicates any straightforward reading of internalized agency as stable empowerment. Participants' sense of capacity was often situational, defensive, and costly. They described having to prove legitimacy, monitor tone, and manage first impressions in order to secure recognition that should not have required performance in the first place. This nuance extends scholarship on code-switching and identity negotiation by suggesting that agency in historically White settings often takes the form of conditional self-management rather than unconstrained *self*-expression (Dexter et al., 2021; Howe, 2023; Mik-Meyer, 2020; Whaley, 2016).

Criterion 3 is also strongly supported, although the findings broaden what counts as strategic action. Participants described public forms of response, including voice,

activism, protest, and role negotiation, which align closely with SRIC's emphasis on behaviors that challenge inequity or reduce its harms in pursuit of holistic well-being (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Yet the findings also show that criterion 3 includes less visible strategies such as moving toward Black student and athlete (counter)spaces, regulating emotion, code-switching, impression management, and choosing when to speak and when to withhold. These actions did not always confront inequity directly, but they functioned as forms of harm reduction, survival, and future protection within racially stratified environments. CCW further clarifies how these responses were not improvised in a vacuum; they were often supported by familial guidance, peer networks, culturally affirming spaces, and accumulated forms of linguistic, social, navigational, and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). In this regard, the findings align with scholarship, including the Blathlete framework, that emphasizes the importance of educational, racial, and sociocultural support for Black athletes' development, while extending that literature by showing how these resources inform micro-level decision-making across classrooms, teams, and campus life (Brown, 2016; Carter-Francique et al., 2015).

A final contribution of the findings is they clarify the relationship among NILM, MNF, and SRIC without overstating coherence. The data supports the argument that BMCA identity development in HWCUs is liminal, narrative, and strategic, but they also show that the three SRIC criteria are not always linear or evenly distributed. Recognition of inequity was often quite clear, whereas internalized agency and strategic response varied by context, perceived risk, and access to affirming support. Mirror manipulation is especially significant because it offers an important qualification to any celebratory account of strategic responsiveness: some strategies preserved access and dignity, yet they also narrowed the range of acceptable *self*-expression and made *self*-awareness labor intensive. Thus, the findings reinforce scholarship showing how BMCAs are highly visible for athletic labor. Yet, they are insufficiently affirmed as students, intellectuals, and developing Black men. While also complicating deficit-oriented readings by demonstrating participants continuously interpreted, revised, and at times resisted the narratives imposed on them (Smith, 2007). Overall, the study suggests Black male identity in HWCUs is narrated through ongoing negotiation between master narratives and (counter)narratives and enacted through strategic responses designed to preserve dignity, belonging, and long-term possibility (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Syed et al., 2020).

Limitations

The study contributes to scholarship on BMCAs' lived experiences at HWCUs, particularly by highlighting how visibility, meaning-making, and accommodative and exploratory narrative processing shape *self*-awareness in everyday decisions (Adler et al., 2017; McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2023). However, the study relies on retrospective narratives in which former athletes reconstructed past experiences from memory, which introduces the possibility of recall bias and post hoc interpretation (Syed & McLean, 2023). This limitation is conceptually consequen-

tial within the MNF, which treats accounts of the past not as neutral reproductions of events, but as situated reconstructions shaped by culturally available scripts and the narrator's current standpoint (McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2023). Accordingly, the narratives analyzed here should be interpreted as evidence of how participants currently organize meaning and *self*-awareness in relation to Black male identity and athlete status, rather than as comprehensive documentation of historical campus climates or institutional practices.

Additional limitations stem from the study's scope and timing. Since interviews occurred after earlier collegiate periods had concluded, the protocol could not consistently probe when participants recognized specific master narratives, how they weighed the costs of compliance, or how their strategic responses shifted across contexts and time. Time constraints also restricted the sociohistorical contextualization needed to fully situate participants' accounts within the AIC and the specific institutional conditions of their HWCU. In addition, although SRIC highlights how strategic action is shaped by institutional arrangements, the study did not systematically examine how athletics leadership, academic affairs, counseling services, faculty, and compliance or student success units coordinate or conflict in supporting BMCAs' holistic development. Future research would therefore benefit from longitudinal and multi-stakeholder designs that trace how self-awareness develops across repeated decisions and clarify how institutional structures expand or constrain the strategies BMCAs can safely employ.

Implications

The findings suggest improving outcomes requires changing the narrative and structural conditions that shape routine decisions rather than relying on generic support initiatives. Since master narratives influence what is perceived as legitimate, safe, and attainable on HWCU campuses, and SRIC clarifies how athletes respond to institutional incentives tied to athletic labor, athletic departments and academic units should more systematically document BMCAs' life stories and identity trajectories. Doing so can improve cross-unit understanding of how visibility, stereotype threat, and authenticity costs shape daily choices; make master narratives and emerging (counter)narratives more visible in advising and transition programming; and clarify how athletes interpret institutional signals as they navigate classrooms, teams, and campus life (Cooper & Cooper, 2015).

These efforts should be paired with greater institutional transparency about under-resourcing, expanded access to culturally responsive personnel and mentors, and supports that directly address *self*-awareness and strategic agency. Such supports include mental health services attuned to the strain of code-switching, double consciousness, and public scrutiny, as well as education on financial planning and labor dynamics in profit-generating sport (Du Bois, 1903; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Myers, 2020; Whaley, 2016). Institutions should also rebalance performance cultures by rewarding academic exploration, leadership, and civic engagement as credible forms

of excellence, and by training coaches, advisors, and faculty to avoid reproducing athletics-first narratives that narrow Black male identity to entertainment value (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Future research should extend this work through longitudinal and multi-stakeholder designs, repeated interviews, focus groups, and institutional document analysis that clarify how strategic responses shift across seasons and contexts and how institutional messaging may pressure athletes to distance themselves from Blackness or treat sport as the primary horizon of possibility (Edwards, 1979).

Conclusion

This study displayed that BMCAs navigate the sociocultural contexts of HWCUs through identity work that is simultaneously narrative, racialized, and strategic. Across participants' accounts, SRIC captured the daily calculations required to secure resources, safety, and recognition in environments where their value was often most translatable through athletic performance, even as their racialized experiences were routinely rendered invisible. In these contexts, positionality and (counter)stories functioned as critical tools for contesting White normative assumptions at the individual, institutional, societal, and epistemological levels, aligning with calls for "anti-racist leadership" in higher education (Capper, 2019, p. 117).

As Howard Bryant argued, "The Black athlete is the most visible, most important, most influential Black employee [the U.S.] has ever produced" (Vanderbilt University, 2018, para. 2). That visibility can create opportunity, but it also intensifies commodification and narrows institutional understandings of Black male potential, echoing Edwards' (1979) call to cultivate pathways to success beyond sport. Consistent with scholarship on Black male identity formation at the intersections of race, class, and gender, the findings show BMCAs repeatedly confronted master narratives that positioned them as *just athletes* or as academically deficient, and that they responded through *self-improvement* practices, emotional regulation, and peer-based support networks that disrupted stereotypes without eliminating structural barriers (Dickerson, 2018; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Herman II, 2023; Howe & Cooper, 2024; McAulay, 2025). Although this analysis centers U.S. HWCUs, the broader mechanisms identified here, including racialized institutional climates, classed opportunity structures, and the commercial logics of high-performance sport, are not exclusive to the United States. Centering intersecting identities such as race, gender, class, and athlete status therefore clarifies how macro-level sport structures and campus climates become the micro-level decisions through which BMCAs engage, perform, persist, and sustain well-being.

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From Learner to Leader: Exploring the Influence of a Multi-Year Leadership Development Program on Student-Athletes

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This study explored how student-athletes in a multi-year leadership development academy constructed and reconstructed their understandings of leadership across four years of participation. Using a qualitative design grounded in a social construction of leadership framework, we examined how 13 Division III student-athletes, first as participants and later as facilitators, articulated, interpreted, and constructed their leadership development experiences. Semi-structured interviews captured how student-athletes described the evolution of their leadership identities, skills, and applications across athletic, academic, and personal contexts. Thematic analysis led to the development of four interrelated themes: (1) leadership identity development; (2) confidence and competence building; (3) facilitation as a transformative catalyst; and (4) the application of leadership skills beyond sport. Findings highlight the dynamic and adaptive nature of leadership as co-constructed through ongoing reflection, peer interaction, and role transitions. By demonstrating how facilitation deepens identity development and expands leadership application, this study contributes to scholarship on sport leadership by emphasizing temporal, experiential, and socially constructed dimensions of student-athlete leadership development. Implications for practice underscore the value of longitudinal, scaffolded programming that integrates peer-led facilitation and supports holistic preparation for leadership across life domains.

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Leadership in sport management has traditionally been framed through leader-centric models that emphasize the traits or behaviors of individuals in formal roles such as captains, coaches or athletic directors (Ferkins et al., 2018; Welty Peachey et al., 2015). More recent scholarship challenges this view, suggesting leadership is not the product of a single authority figure but instead emerges through interactions among multiple stakeholders (Billsberry et al., 2018; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). In collegiate sport environments, these interactions occur constantly as student-athletes navigate team dynamics, negotiate roles, and make sense of leadership through daily practice. As a result, leadership becomes shaped through shared experiences, evolving relationships, and the norms of the sport context rather than defined solely by positional status. This shift reflects a broader movement toward viewing leadership as a meaning-making process that unfolds between people, rather than a set of traits individuals possess. Within this social construction lens, leadership is seen as dynamic, context-dependent, and collectively shaped by designated leaders, emergent leaders, and followers alike (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Observer-centric research, which emphasizes how followers interpret and make meaning of leadership rather than focusing solely on leader behaviors, reinforces this perspective by highlighting how student-athletes and other participants co-create leadership through everyday interactions and “micro” moments of peer-to-peer meaning-making (Damon et al., 2024).

In collegiate athletics, formal leadership development programs have proliferated to cultivate student-athletes’ leadership skills intentionally (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015; O’Brien et al., 2021), even as research on their impact continues to lag behind practice (Wright & Cote, 2003). Leadership development programs provide fertile ground for these processes by creating structured spaces where participants can test, debate, and reframe leadership concepts. Rather than emphasizing rigid or technical skill instruction, these programs develop leadership skills through dialogue, reflection, and experience, allowing participants to make meaning of leadership and reconstruct their leadership identities over time. For example, Rubin and Nwosu (2021) found student-athletes often entered leadership academies unsure of their leadership capacity but developed stronger leadership identities and confidence as they progressed through the program. In multi-year formats, the transition from learner to facilitator becomes especially significant, as it challenges participants to consolidate prior lessons, guide peers, and reconsider their own influence within institutional and team contexts. This progression underscores the value of peer mentorship in leadership training, as experienced student-athletes reinforce their own development by mentoring newer teammates (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015).

It is also important to consider who is participating in such leadership programs. Women, in particular, remain underrepresented in sport leadership positions across all levels (Burton, 2015). Sport leadership has historically been associated with masculine norms often casting female leaders as “others” in a male-dominated arena (Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). These gendered dynamics contribute to stereotypes that leaders require traditionally masculine traits, which can lead to women being viewed as less fit for leadership roles. Such realities underscore the value of targeted

leadership development initiatives for female student-athletes, as these programs can provide opportunities to build leadership identity and confidence in an environment that challenges exclusionary norms (Burton, 2015; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). These dynamics also illustrate how leadership identity is socially constructed within gendered sport environments, reinforcing the need to examine how women make meaning of leadership through their experiences.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III (DIII) athletics model provides a distinct environment for leadership development, characterized by a high degree of “participation density” and a structural commitment to the holistic student identity (Swim et al, 2022). As the NCAA’s largest classification, comprising 445 predominantly private institutions, DIII schools support nearly 40% of the total student-athlete population, with a median undergraduate enrollment of only 1,740 (NCAA, 2025; 2020a). This scale creates a unique sociological ecosystem where athletes represent anywhere from 1% - 94% of the student body with an average of 31% (NCAA, 2025), necessitating a level of campus integration rarely seen in the more siloed environments of Division I. Because NCAA DIII regulations prohibit athletic scholarships and mandate shorter seasons and regional travel, the “opportunity cost” of participation is lowered, theoretically allowing athletes to engage in high-impact leadership practices such as faculty-led research, study abroad, student government and more (Swim et al., 2022). While research confirms this model fosters high levels of academic achievement and collegiate satisfaction (Burgin, 2011), the specific mechanisms by which these athletes translate their “amateur” competitive experiences into formal leadership competencies remain under-theorized. Consequently, understanding the NCAA DIII experience is essential for evaluating how resource-constrained athletic departments can intentionally design leadership programming that aligns with a mission of holistic student development rather than mere athletic output.

Guided by the social construction of leadership, the present study explores how student-athletes in a DIII leadership academy negotiated and reshaped their leadership identities across four years of participation. Using a social constructionist approach, this study examines student-athletes’ experiences to understand how leadership perspectives evolved through both participation and facilitation. Specifically, this study asks: (1) How have student-athletes’ perceptions of leadership changed throughout a multi-year leadership development program? and (2) How have these experiences shaped their understanding of leadership across athletic, academic, and personal contexts?

Theoretical Framework

Early leadership research in sport tended to center on individual leaders and the personal qualities or behaviors that defined their effectiveness (Ferkins et al., 2018; Welty Peachey et al., 2015). More recent work shifts this focus by emphasizing how leadership emerges through social interaction and shared meaning-making among various members of the sport environment (Billsberry et al., 2018). This shift

challenges hierarchical conceptions of leadership by drawing attention to how participants, whether designated leaders, emergent leaders, or “followers”, collectively construct leadership phenomena through ongoing meaning-making processes (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

Within this paradigm, the social construction of leadership highlights that there is no singular, universal definition of what it means to lead (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Instead, leadership is multifaceted, shifting across contexts and cultures based on the perspectives and lived experiences of those involved. Scholars adopting this framework underscore the existence of multiple “truths” that coexist within a given environment (Grint & Jackson, 2010). They seek to illuminate how individuals negotiate roles, interpret behaviors, and respond to various situations, an interplay that guides both personal and collective action (Ferkins et al., 2018). As a result, leadership is viewed as dynamic, context-dependent, and inextricably bound to the relational exchanges among participants (Damon et al., 2022).

A small but growing body of observer-centric leadership research in sport management has reinforced this view, focusing on the perspectives of those who witness, experience, and evaluate leadership firsthand (Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins et al., 2018). Rather than centering on leaders’ behaviors or traits, these studies highlight how followers (e.g., student-athletes), co-create leadership understandings through everyday interactions. For instance, Kihl et al. (2010) illustrated how collegiate stakeholders’ constructions of leadership were shaped by daily organizational practices during a major departmental transition, challenging simplistic notions of top-down authority. More recent work demonstrates how leadership itself can develop through “micro” moments and peer-to-peer sense-making (Damon et al., 2024), reinforcing the idea that no single individual holds exclusive power to define or perform leadership.

In the realm of intercollegiate student-athletes, observer-centric approaches have similarly revealed how factors such as relational dynamics, authenticity, and team cohesion shape perceptions of leadership (White & Rezania, 2019). By focusing on those traditionally cast as followers, these studies showcase that leadership in sport is largely emergent and context-bound, forged in ongoing dialogue among multiple parties. From a social construction perspective, leadership is neither static nor exclusively top-down. Instead, it is a fluid, collectively constructed process shaped by social, cultural, and institutional forces (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

Leadership Development and the Role of Training

Building on these observer-centric insights, the present study explores leadership in the structured environment of a multi-year leadership development program. Such programs, which often feature workshops, seminars, and peer-led sessions, can serve as crucibles for leadership to be socially constructed because they explicitly invite participants to discuss, debate, and test leadership ideas (Damon et al., 2024). In these “micro” interactions (e.g., group reflections, role-play activities, mentor-mentee conversations), participants negotiate the meaning of leadership, incorporate and reject certain definitions, and ultimately reconstruct their own leadership identities.

Additionally, student-athlete participation in formal leadership academy programs has been associated with increases in leadership confidence and skill development, reinforcing the value of these interactive learning experiences (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021).

From a social construction standpoint, leadership trainings or workshops do not merely “teach” a fixed set of attributes; instead, they create dialogical spaces where participants co-create a shared understanding of leadership concepts. For student-athletes, these workshop settings can be particularly formative because they merge athletic experiences (e.g., teamwork, communication, performance pressure) with structured opportunities to reflect on personal growth. However, it is important to note not all student-athletes value leadership programming. Previous research has found student-athletes can develop negative perceptions of leadership programming particularly when it is not aligned with their own desired educational or performance outcomes (DiPaolo, 2017) or if programs lack experiential learning or real-life application (Pierce et al., 2020). At the same time, these developmental settings can hold particular importance for female student-athletes, who often navigate gendered expectations in sport environments. Leadership academies may provide spaces where their contributions are validated and where confidence can be strengthened in contexts traditionally shaped by masculine leadership norms (Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). Over time, as participants move from learners to facilitators of such workshops, they gain new vantage points to observe how peers respond to leadership stimuli, challenge their own assumptions, and reformulate leadership concepts in ways that align with their evolving roles (Duguay et al., 2022).

Temporal Shifts in Leadership Identities

Within leadership research, social construction perspectives emphasize that leadership identities develop over time through iterative social processes (Grint & Jackson, 2010). This temporal element is highly relevant in a four-year leadership academy where participants’ roles transform each year. Early in the program, they may observe and absorb foundational leadership notions from facilitators, coaches, and teammates. Later, as they apply these concepts, test out new behaviors, and guide younger peers, they begin to see themselves - and be seen by others - as emergent leaders. Consequently, the shared understandings of leadership continue to evolve. The act of facilitating for incoming student-athletes, in particular, becomes a powerful catalyst for reframing one’s capacity to influence and persuading them to consider how institutional structure or group norms shape that influence (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015).

Such role transitions exemplify the fluid nature of leadership in sport contexts: leadership is not an innate trait that can be uniformly “transmitted”; rather, it is iteratively constructed and continuously reimagined. By examining how individuals adopt, adapt, or even resist leadership ideas within a training program, scholars can better understand how leadership frameworks shift to accommodate new responsibilities, relationships, and personal experiences (Billsberry, 2009).

Relevance to the Current Study

By situating leadership development within a social construction lens, we focus on the student-athlete's journey of changing leadership perspectives across the program's four-year arc. This approach explicitly acknowledges that leadership cannot be reduced to a set of universally "correct" principles imparted by an instructor. Instead, we recognize how leadership emerges through collective sense-making, trial and error, and shifting social dynamics within the academy. The intensive, multi-year design of the program under study, coupled with participant interviews and reflections, uniquely captures those "micro-moments" (Damon et al., 2024) and broader institutional influences that shape how individuals interpret what it means to lead. This focus is particularly warranted given many student-athletes describe the transition out of sport as difficult, often citing feelings of unpreparedness for life beyond athletics (Stokowski et al., 2019). By cultivating leadership competencies and transferable skills during college, multi-year programs like the one we examined may help athletes navigate post-sport challenges more effectively (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Positioning our research within social constructionist traditions (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Patton, 2015) allows us to treat the student-athletes as experts of their own experiences. Through their narratives, we illuminate the ways they collectively negotiate leadership identities in diverse contexts (e.g., athletic, academic, personal). In doing so, we contribute to a growing body of sport management scholarship that sees leadership as dynamic, context-dependent, and shaped by stakeholder interactions (Ferkins et al., 2018). This expanding scholarship now encompasses investigations into student-athlete leadership across various contexts. For example, comparing domestic and international athletes' leadership capacities (Jolly et al., 2025) and examining how involvement in Student-Athlete Advisory Committees contributes to leadership and career development (Heim et al., 2022). The present study addresses calls for more research on the influence of formal leadership development initiatives in college athletics over time (O'Brien et al., 2021). Furthermore, this study offers insight into women's leadership development in sport. With the majority of participants identifying as female, our findings shed light on how female student-athletes navigate, reimagine, and enact leadership in the collegiate sport environment. These insights respond to calls for more inclusive leadership pathways and gender equity in sport leadership (Burton, 2015; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019).

Drawing from the social construction of leadership, the current study investigates how four years of participation, culminating in a facilitation role, influence student-athletes' perceptions and practices of leadership within an NCAA DIII context. Specifically, we aim to capture how these participants collaboratively reimagine, refine, and enact leadership on and off the field. According to our guiding research questions are: 1) How have student-athletes' perceptions of leadership changed throughout participation and facilitation in a multi-year leadership development program? 2) How have these experiences shaped their understanding of leadership within athletic, academic, and personal contexts?

Method

This qualitative study was informed by a social construction of leadership framework, positioning leadership as a co-constructed phenomenon shaped by social interactions and individual meaning-making (Billsberry et al., 2018; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Following institutional ethics board approval, we used a qualitative design grounded in a social constructionist paradigm, focusing on how participants constructed meaning around their leadership experiences and how four years of involvement, culminating in facilitation, shaped their evolving views on leadership (Patton, 2015). This approach aligned with our interest in understanding how student-athletes interpret and define leadership over time in a specific context.

Participants and Setting

Thirteen student-athletes (9 female, 4 male) from a single NCAA DIII university in the Northeastern United States participated in this study. Given the predominance of female participants, this project provides a valuable opportunity to explore female student-athletes’ leadership development, a perspective often neglected in sport leadership research (Burton, 2015; Sotiradiou & De Haan, 2019). Participants were drawn from varying sport programs (e.g., basketball, volleyball, golf, skiing) and had completed at least three years in the university’s leadership academy program prior to this final year acting as a program facilitator to first-year student-athletes. Ages ranged from 21-23 years old. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym reflecting general age, gender, and ethnic background (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Additional identifying details were selectively modified or omitted to protect confidentiality. Table 1 below shows participant demographics.

Table 1.
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Sport Participation
Harper	21	Female	Volleyball
Dominic	22	Male	Golf/Ski
Madison	21	Female	Ski
Ally	22	Female	Ski
Lauren	21	Female	Ski
Riley	22	Male	Golf
Emma	21	Female	Ski/Lacrosse
Sydney	21	Female	Volleyball
Dylan	23	Male	Track and Field
Trent	23	Male	Track and Field
Jennifer	22	Female	Lacrosse
Maren	22	Female	Volleyball
Addison	22	Female	Volleyball

Participation in the leadership academy has four levels. The first level is Essentials of Leadership in which all incoming freshman athletes are expected to participate. The second level is the Emerging Leadership level, which is open to those who have completed the first level and have interest in continuing. The third level is Engaging Leadership and is open to student-athletes who have completed the first two levels and want to continue their growth. The final level is the Empowering Leadership level for student athletes who have completed the first three levels and who would like to complete the experience by spending their last year facilitating sessions for the first-year cohort.

The student-athletes in this study served as facilitators for the first-year student athlete Essentials of Leadership program. This entailed modifying and delivering six one-hour workshops. The topics of the workshops had been pre-determined by the program directors, and an outline lesson plan and slide show had been provided but each facilitator was encouraged to make the session their own. Sessions included a variety of interactive activities, group discussion, think-pair-share exercises, and peer teaching. The breadth of athletic and programmatic experience allowed for an in-depth exploration of perceptions of leadership in different contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2015) conducted via Zoom. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes, ranging between 27 and 45 minutes. The interview guide was developed with reference to research on socially constructed leadership (i.e., Billsberry et al., 2018; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Grint & Jackson, 2010), emphasizing participants' perceptions of leadership and the influence of attending and facilitating the academy on their conceptions. Sample interview questions include: 1) How would you define effective leadership now, and has this changed since the beginning of the program?; 2) Reflecting on your overall experience, how have you incorporated lessons from the leadership program into your daily life?; 3) How has participation in and facilitation of the academy influenced your leadership growth and perspective?

Probing questions were used to elicit expanded reflections regarding the influence of role models, team interactions, and experiences leading peers. I conducted ten interviews and was not affiliated with the leadership academy, providing an 'outsider' perspective and mitigating potential bias (Olson et al., 2016). The remaining three interviews were conducted by my coauthor, who oversees the leadership program (an 'insider'), offering deep contextual knowledge. Combining insider and outsider approaches afforded a nuanced and holistic view of participant experiences, as inside knowledge can provide meaningful context while outside perspectives can help mitigate blind spots associated with researcher familiarity (Hall et al., 2005). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by our research team.

We also took steps to reduce potential response bias connected to the insider interviewer. The majority of the interviews were conducted by me, as the lead author unaffiliated with the leadership development program. My co-author and I ana-

lyzed the data alongside a third researcher, a graduate student and student-athlete at a university separate from the institutions where the leadership academy took place. Together, these external perspectives helped reduce social desirability pressures and supported honest and open reflections.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using an iterative, collaborative approach consistent with thematic analysis and the constant comparative method (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). First, we engaged in preliminary organization by compiling all transcripts and meeting to confirm project aims, theoretical orientation, and an initial timeline. We then performed open coding (Miles et al., 2015), carefully reading through the transcripts and annotating sections that described perceptions of leadership and the influence of participation/facilitation on leadership development. During this step, short memos highlighted emerging categories and patterns. Next, these categories were refined through axial coding, in which connections were made across codes to form higher-level themes (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). For example, initial codes such as “shifts in leadership definition”, “followership”, and “applying leadership skills in academics” were linked to broader categories to capture growth over time. Following this phase, we created a preliminary codebook of generative themes (Lincoln et al., 2011).

To enhance consistency in coding and interpretation, the research team pilot tested the codebook on a subset of transcripts, with each coder analyzing the same transcript (Richards & Hemphill, 2011). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, resulting in minor refinements of code definitions. The finalized codebook was then applied to the entire dataset using a split-coding procedure (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Weekly debriefs ensured codes were consistently applied and any new findings were discussed. Finally, we reviewed the aggregated codes, finalized themes, and organized these into a cohesive thematic framework capturing participants’ experiences (Olson et al., 2016).

Trustworthiness and Researcher Positionality

We employed multiple strategies to bolster the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln et al., 2011). Researcher triangulation was achieved by involving multiple analysts in coding discussions and by comparing insights from insider (i.e., program director) and outsider (i.e., non-affiliated scholar) perspectives, which served as a form of collaborative peer debriefing to validate and refine the development of the themes. This process allowed us to critically analyze coding decisions, interpretations of the data, and alignment with the theoretical framework. Additionally, we maintained a detailed researcher journal throughout data collection and analysis. This journal included reflections on evolving interpretations, decisions regarding codebook revisions, and personal assumptions about leadership. Such reflexivity was intended to render our analytic process more transparent, consistent with guidelines for enhancing the confirmability of qualitative findings (Miles et al., 2015).

Finally, researcher positionality was acknowledged via regular reflective discussions wherein we examined how our own conceptualizations of leadership (e.g., influenced by prior educational, coaching, and professional experiences) shaped our analytical lens (Rovegno, 1995). In particular, my co-author's direct role in the leadership academy provided critical insider context but also introduced potential bias in evaluating program effectiveness. To counterbalance this, I, as the author unaffiliated with the leadership development academy, conducted the majority of the interviews and participated in data analysis, providing an external perspective. A third researcher, a current student-athlete at a different university, served as an additional coder, further broadening the perspective guiding data analysis. By embedding these practices and explicit processes into the design, we sought to provide a robust and credible account of how student-athletes constructed and made meaning of their leadership development and facilitation experiences.

Findings

Data analysis led to the development of four themes (Table 2) that illustrate how participants' leadership identities evolved through sustained engagement in the academy and eventual facilitation.

Table 2.
Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Sub-themes
1. Leadership Identity Development	1a. Evolving Concept of Leadership 1b. Style and Adaptability 1c. Followership and Shared Responsibility
2. Confidence and Competence	2a. Growth and Self-Efficacy 2b. Communication and Public Speaking
3. Facilitation as a Tool for Development	
4. Contextual Application of Leadership	

First, student-athletes described a process of leadership identity development, in which their definitions of leadership broadened, their styles became more adaptable, and they came to value the role of followership and shared responsibility. Second, participants emphasized confidence and competence building, noting how their growth in self-efficacy, communication, and public speaking enhanced their ability to lead in athletic, academic, and personal contexts. Third, they reflected on facilitation as a tool for development, highlighting how teaching and mentoring first-year students reinforced their own learning and deepened their leadership practice. Finally, participants described the contextual application of leadership, where lessons from the academy were extended into sport, academic, and personal domains. Across

all four themes, participants' reflections highlighted ongoing meaning-making processes through which leadership was interpreted, negotiated, and reconstructed over time. Together, these themes provide insight into the dynamic and socially constructed nature of leadership within the academy, emphasizing how participants' perceptions and practices of leadership were influenced across multiple contexts.

Leadership Identity Development

Across their four years of participation in the leadership academy, culminating in a facilitation role, participants described notable changes in how they understood and enacted leadership. These shifts reflected a developmental process in which student-athletes redefined leadership identity, experimented with different leadership styles, and embraced the importance of both followership and shared leadership. Importantly, these identity shifts were described not as sudden realizations but as emerging through repeated dialogue, peer interaction, and reflection, illustrating how leadership meaning was co-constructed within the academy's social environment.

Evolving Conceptions of Leadership

Many of the participants entered college with narrow, almost rigid, conceptions of leadership, shaped by experiences in high school or cultural assumptions about captains and authority figures. As Dominic explained, "In high school, I would have said that a good leader is the oldest person out there, the senior who's been around the longest and who seemed to have the most wisdom." His reflection illustrates how early views of leadership were tied to age and positional authority. Yet through participation in the academy, he expanded his thinking concluding "Leaders can come from all ages." This shift demonstrates how interactions with peers, facilitated discussions, and exposure to alternative perspectives reshaped his understanding of what leadership could mean.

For others, early self-doubt stemmed from personality. Madison described how her introversion initially made leadership feel unattainable: "I thought I would never be a good leader because I'm just not comfortable sharing my thoughts or being that person in front." Over time, however, she discovered leadership could take quieter forms: "I'm learning that it's okay to not be that person and lead by example." Her evolving narrative illustrates the socially constructed nature of leadership identity, as she reinterpreted her role in relation to team norms, feedback, and collective discussions about leadership.

Lauren, like Dominic, emphasized the importance of recognizing others' abilities, noting, "I can really, see now where people have strengths and how to use them as a leader...it's not age that defines leadership. It could be anybody." Similarly, Jennifer underscored how leadership was not dependent on captaincy: "Even without that title, you can still be a leader on the team...there are still people that will turn to you." These comments suggest participants came to value leadership as influence rather than authority, expanding their definitions to include diverse roles and contexts. Such redefinitions emerged through social comparison and shared dialogue

within the program, reinforcing participants' understandings of leadership were continuously constructed through interaction.

Several participants also linked effective leadership to empathy, accountability, and sacrifice. For example, Addison described a leader as someone "Willing to make sacrifices and protect the people they are leading...even if it means taking the fall for others." Her meaning-making reflects how leadership was reframed not as a privilege but as a responsibility, with leaders sometimes bearing the weight of collective outcomes.

Not all participants framed this evolution purely in terms of their own growth; some also contrasted themselves with peers who had not engaged as deeply in the program. Riley observed how those who invested in the academy "Work through the situation and maybe there's other ways around it," while those who disengaged often became "frustrated and angry and a little bit more confrontational." This distinction suggests a participant's leadership identity was not only evolving individually but was also shaped in relation to others' choices, reinforcing that development was contingent on participation and reflection.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how leadership was no longer seen as a static trait tied to age, personality, or title. Instead, participants came to view it as fluid, context-dependent, and rooted in responsibility for others. Their evolving conceptions highlight the beginning of a broader adaptive capacity that would carry into how they later described leadership styles, followership, and facilitation.

Style and Adaptability

As participants' understandings of leadership broadened, they increasingly emphasized adaptability as central to effective leadership. Rather than relying on a single style, they described learning to read the needs of teammates and adjust their approach accordingly. Their responsiveness reflects a socially constructed process, as participants drew on team norms, peer feedback, and situational cues to interpret what leadership required in each moment. This shift highlights how leadership identity matured from a reliance on positional authority to a skillset grounded in flexibility, situational awareness, and relational sensitivity.

Emma offered one of the clearest examples of this process. She explained how her team's personality required a nuanced approach to accountability:

My team was a very unique group of people...not a group that likes to get called out...so I felt confident enough to build the relationships with my teammates so that when I did inevitably have to say, "Okay, you're not doing the right thing here", it didn't tear the team apart. I learned to do this strategically, privately, one-on-one.

Her account demonstrates not only adaptability in practice but also how confidence was built through trial, reflection, and careful management of relationships. By learning when to confront publicly and when to address issues privately, Emma developed a more situationally attuned leadership style that protected team cohesion while still holding peers accountable.

Others described adaptability as an ongoing negotiation of communication styles. Lauren recalled working with another goalie during a leadership academy session, noting, “Just because we’re yelling something doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re yelling at the person ... communication can be seen in different forms.” For Lauren, adaptability meant not only adjusting her own style but also helping teammates reframe how they interpreted communication under pressure.

Adaptability also emerged through modeling behaviors rather than relying on vocal leadership. Addison explained how she embraced a quieter but still influential role: “Being kind of like a role model in the classroom ... at practice, doing extra things, being a role model in the weight room.” Her approach provides an example of how leadership could be enacted through consistency and example, particularly for teammates who responded more to actions than words.

Confidence and adaptability were often intertwined. Sydney pointed to nonverbal presence as an important leadership tool, saying, “For me it’s just kind of maybe like mannerisms, keeping my chest up tall, maintaining eye contact when I’m talking to people.” What might appear as subtle physical cues were, for her, conscious strategies to project confidence and credibility in interactions with peers. Similarly, Maren highlighted the importance of relational engagement, sharing how her leadership influence stemmed from “Talking to people on my team more and even outside of practice.”

Participants also recognized differences between those who engaged fully with the leadership academy and those who did not. Dominic explained how student-athletes who invested effort in the program “developed the tools” to manage conflict and navigate challenges constructively, while those who disengaged became “frustrated or angry” and “confrontational” more easily. His observation reinforces how adaptability was not a given but a product of practice, reflection, and commitment.

Across these accounts, adaptability was a hallmark of participants’ leadership growth. Whether through shifting communication styles, modeling consistency, or managing accountability strategically, student-athletes learned leadership required responsiveness to context and attentiveness to relationships. This situational flexibility marked a departure from earlier fixed views of leadership and foreshadowed the more collective, relational orientations participants described in later stages of their development.

Followership & Shared Leadership

As participants’ views of leadership expanded, many emphasized how learning to follow was just as important as learning to lead. They recognized leadership is inherently collective, requiring contributions from multiple individuals rather than being concentrated in a single person. This reframing of followership, from passive to active and essential, was a key component of their evolving leadership identities.

Madison described this shift directly: “Through the leadership academy, I feel like I’ve learned everything I need to know to be a follower.” What might initially seem like a diminished role was, in her reflection, actually a sign of growth. For Madison, followership became a deliberate choice to support others and contribute

to team success, not a lack of leadership ability. Participants' reflections repeatedly highlighted followership as a meaning-making process in which they interpreted when to step back and how their support shaped collective leadership.

Ally also highlighted the interdependence between leading and following: "To truly succeed you have to be able to lean on others and know when to ask for help because you can't do everything yourself." Her words show how followership was framed as an act of humility and trust, reinforcing how effective teams required shared responsibility. By acknowledging personal limitations, she positioned followership as an active and empowering practice.

Several participants reflected on the value of explicitly studying followership, noting it is rarely discussed in sport contexts. Trent explained, "You hear about leadership all the time, but you never really talk about the individuals that are following the leaders." His insight illustrates how the academy created a space for student-athletes to see leadership as a two-way process, where followers contribute meaning and direction just as leaders do.

Lauren extended this understanding into team settings, recognizing the importance of supportive roles: "Even if you're not the biggest leader, being a good follower to your other leaders is very important." Her comment underscores how following was not about silence or passivity but about actively reinforcing and enabling others' leadership. Jennifer echoed this sentiment, reframing the role of followers as leaders in their own right: "Not having to have the title of a leader, but being able to still lead as the follower ... I can still help others."

These reflections provide insight into how participants shifted from seeing leadership and followership as opposites. Instead, they framed both as complementary, fluid roles teammates shifted between depending on context. This perspective reinforced the idea that leadership is distributed across the team and constructed through relationships. For many, embracing followership not only deepened their appreciation of collective leadership but also marked a departure from earlier, more individualistic assumptions.

Confidence and Competence Building

Participants described how their involvement in the leadership academy built both confidence and competence over time. Early hesitations about speaking, leading, or intervening gave way to a stronger self-belief as student-athletes accumulated practice and feedback. These experiences also sharpened specific skills such as communication, relational awareness, and public speaking. The interplay of growing confidence and developing competence helped participants see themselves as capable leaders across multiple contexts.

Growth & Self-Efficacy

Confidence often developed when participants realized they could influence outcomes rather than simply participate in them. Dylan explained how guiding younger athletes made him capable of shaping team culture: "Being able to share my experiences as an athlete with others who are younger ... It just gave me the confidence

to take those skills and apply it to my actual team and my actual team culture.” For Dylan, confidence was less about self-perception and more about seeing tangible effects on his peers. Harper described confidence as the ability to handle pivotal moments without hesitation:

There’s always a point in the team where you’re at a line. You can either go up or down ... now that I’ve gone through a few of them, I’m like, okay, I know what we need now. I know how to help us go up instead of down.

Her reflection shows how confidence was built through repeated exposure to high-pressure situations, which transformed uncertainty into clarity about what the team required.

Others framed confidence as the culmination of multiple years of learning. Dominic described the transition from learner to teacher: “I’ve had these years to learn ... We get to teach it back ... and it’s really come full circle.” Madison contrasted her experience with those who had not been through the academy, noting, “There are things we’ve learned ... if you were to experience this situation, go about it this way. Where the people who haven’t experienced it would go about it differently.” Both reflections emphasize how accumulated knowledge became a foundation for self-assurance in leadership roles.

Several participants also spoke about how confidence revealed itself in their behavior. Ally expressed it directly: “I think the program has made me a much more confident leader.” Lauren pointed to her own sense of proof: “Over time, I feel like I’ve kind of like in a way proved to myself that I can do it.” Jennifer traced her development from quiet observer to active leader:

For the first few years being here, very introverted, not vocal at all ... but now I feel like I have the confidence and the ability to go out of my way to say something to someone when I see something that can be adjusted.

These accounts suggest confidence was not abstract but visible in new actions, interactions, and willingness to speak. The participants not only felt growth in their confidence, but also in their self-efficacy as a leader and willingness to lead others.

Communication and Public Speaking

Alongside growing confidence, participants emphasized the development of concrete communication skills. Ally described a profound change in her comfort with public speaking:

It has made an incredible change in my confidence ... I hated public speaking ... but my confidence skyrocketed as a result of doing the program. I was able to kind of find my voice and be able to advocate for things.

Her reflection illustrates how competence was not only built through repeated practice but also through a shift in self-concept.

For some, presentations were viewed as leadership practice in disguise. Trent explained, “Any opportunity that you can get to present topics to a class is strengthening one of your leadership skills in communication, public speaking, or anything like that.” Harper added how the lessons carried into more personal interactions: “It’s helped me when I’ve had to have hard one-on-one conversations.” These comments

suggest competence grew by applying skills across different settings, from classrooms to individual conversations, reinforcing the sense that communication was a transferable leadership tool.

Maren described the value of consistency and connection: “I talk to the people on my team more and even outside.” Madison summed up the barcode influence as a comfort shift: “The whole confidence thing being able to talk to different people, being more comfortable with that.” Finally, participants highlighted the transferability of these communication skills beyond athletics. Addison captured this clearly: “It’s also taught me how to ... be a better presenter and how to talk to my peers better.” For her and others, competence gained in the leadership academy was not confined to sport but extended into academic and professional preparation, reinforcing leadership as an identity carried across domains.

Facilitating as a Tool for Development

Facilitation marked a pivotal shift for participants, moving from learners to teachers and requiring them to assume a new level of responsibility. After several years of receiving guidance, they were in charge of delivering it, and this transition forced them to consolidate what they had learned, adapt in the moment, and reflect on their own leadership identity.

For Dylan, facilitation highlighted the difference between passively absorbing lessons and actively shaping them for others. He explained that his prior experiences as a participant informed what he emphasized when leading sessions:

My experiences shaped the way I instructed the program because being a participant opened my eyes to the topics that related more to me and the topics I felt the students would receive better. You know, there are certain activities that were great and some that needed to be revised.

His reflection underscores how facilitation was not solely about repeating lessons but about discerning what worked and what needed to change, adding a layer of critical evaluation to his leadership practice. Lauren emphasized how facilitation forced her to be more organized and intentional:

As a facilitator, I’ve had to have a lot more organization and to be prepared for leadership prior to being a facilitator. I had to bring my playbook and pen and show up and do what I needed to do. To plan what I’m going to say, how I’m going to approach it. I need to know what I’m talking about. They [faculty facilitators] already know what they are talking about, so I had this perspective of how they’re communicating to us. Sometimes it felt like there wasn’t much format to it, but now I realize that there is a lot of format.

Her reflection highlights the shift from participant to planner, underscoring how facilitation required advanced preparation and heightened awareness of structure.

For others, facilitation helped make sense of the broader learning arc. Sydney noted: “You have a better understanding of why you’re doing what you’re doing ... after going through the process everything starts to make sense ... it’s like you’re using the resources that you were given and it just completed the circle for me.” The language of completion and clarity shows how facilitation tied together their three years of cumulative experience, turning practice into perspective.

Harper described facilitation as a process of building on earlier lessons and applying them in new ways:

You learn it and you use it, and then as you progress, it's like building off of previous lessons. You don't remember the things you first touched on, but you know the bigger stuff and how it correlates to other things. It has been really fun to come back and teach it."

Her experience suggests facilitation required not only recall but also synthesis, demonstrating how leadership learning evolved into a deeper, interconnected understanding.

However, the transition into facilitation was not without challenge. Emma described the initial transition as being "thrown into the deep end," admitting that it was a "a bit rocky at times" and the group later decided more structure was needed to support the process. These tensions illustrate how facilitation was developmental because it was imperfect; the responsibility to lead sessions demanded adaptability and reflection. Overall, facilitation represented more than a capstone to the leadership academy experience. It was a transformative experience that required participants to shift from consuming knowledge to producing and delivering it for others. In doing so, they developed a clearer sense of responsibility, intentionality, and synthesis that marked an important stage in their leadership development.

Contextual Application of Leadership

Participants emphasized the lessons and skills developed through the leadership academy were not confined to athletics. Instead, they found themselves applying what they had practiced (e.g., communication, organization, adaptability, confidence) across academic, professional, and campus leadership opportunities. In this way, the leadership academy functioned as a training ground, preparing student-athletes to take on leadership roles beyond their teams.

For Dylan, connections between the academy and graduate course work were immediate: "As an MBA student ... I can relate a lot of those course materials to the lessons [learned] in the leadership academy." The program provided him with a conceptual and practical foundation, allowing him to engage more fully with academic material. Similarly, Ally noted how facilitating academy sessions reinforced lessons that carried over into other settings: "Being able to facilitate ... it reinforced everything that I had learned prior, and then it was reinforced in one room, but then also in another, and in a completely different context." Her reflection highlights how practicing leadership repeatedly, in different contexts, strengthened her ability to transform those lessons beyond athletics.

This transfer was also evident in professional preparation. Alyssa anticipated presenting frequently in her career and described facilitation as a rehearsal for those challenges: "I know for my professional career I'll have to present ... and understand that things can be switched around and it doesn't always go as planned ... [facilitation] helps me transfer that to a professional career." What might once have been an intimidating task became more manageable through skills built and tested during the leadership academy.

Harper provided a clear example of how leadership academy lessons supported leadership outside of sport when she unexpectedly assumed a major campus role:

I was student government president ... not something that I ran for or was prepared for. I was kind of thrown into it, but it [leadership academy] helped me ... know how I want to communicate with my team but also how I want to communicate with my board.

Her experience shows an example of how communication and organizational tools developed in the academy became beneficial for navigating responsibilities in a new and unanticipated leadership position.

Others emphasized the long-term applicability of these skills. Emma reflected on how the academy equipped her for graduate school and beyond: "I cannot lose in this situation because I'm going to gain skills that will be helpful for my whole life. I'm in grad school now and still use these skills." Riley explained this transfer more concretely, noting that leadership from the academy meant "Being a role model in the classroom, at practices and even in the weight room." For most of the participants, application looked like daily actions that demonstrated consistency and accountability across settings.

Finally, participants noted how confidence built through facilitation carried into academic life, including the ability to speak up or take initiative on group projects. For example, Dominic said, "I used to stay quiet, but now I feel comfortable raising my hand in class or leading when a project needs direction." These reflections show how confidence was not abstract but directly connected to behaviors developed in the academy. Collectively, these accounts demonstrate the academy did more than influence how participants thought about leadership, but also equipped them with practical skills and experiences they actively applied in academic, professional, and campus contexts. By practicing and refining these competencies across multiple years, student-athletes were able to step into new leadership opportunities with preparation and confidence.

Discussion

This study explored how student-athletes in a multi-year leadership academy came to understand leadership as a dynamic, evolving process shaped by context, reflection, and social interaction. Rather than describing leadership as fixed, participants emphasized adaptability, the influence of facilitation, and the transferability of skills beyond sport. These insights extend existing scholarship (e.g., Billsberry et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2024) on the social construction of leadership and point to meaningful implications for theory and practice in sport leadership development. It is important to note these experiences reflect the views of student-athletes who remained engaged in the academy; leadership development programs can be experienced differently by athletes who feel overextended or who are less intrinsically motivated to participate.

Theoretically, this study contributes by reinforcing social constructionist views of leadership as emergent, contextually bound, and shaped by interaction. It adds nu-

ance by demonstrating how leadership identities evolve temporally within structured programs, underscoring how leadership is not merely practiced in the moment but continuously reconstructed across years of reflection, facilitation, and application. It also strengthens observer-centric approaches (Billsberry et al., 2018), showing leadership is co-created in dialogical spaces where students both learn and teach. By documenting facilitation as a transformative moment, our findings extend existing theory to highlight the developmental ability of peer-led teaching. This insight challenges top-down assumptions of leadership education and advances more relational, collective models suited to intercollegiate sport.

Leadership as Evolving and Adaptive

A central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how leadership identities develop over time. Early conceptions of leadership often mirrored traditional, authority-based models, but through sustained participation, student-athletes reframed leadership as fluid, relational, and contextually responsive. This evolution illustrates how adaptive leadership emerges from ongoing practice and reflection, rather than static definitions. Consistent with calls to view leadership as socially constructive and collectively shaped (Billsberry et al., 2018; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), participants came to see leadership as knowing when to lead, when to follow, and how to respond to the needs of a group.

By highlighting this developmental trajectory, the findings extend adaptive leadership frameworks within intercollegiate sport (Cotterill et al., 2022). The data suggest leadership identity is not acquired once but is iteratively redefined as experiences accumulate. This study therefore reinforces the importance of temporal and experiential dimensions of leadership development (Grint & Jackson, 2010), illustrating that growth emerges through multiple years of engagement, peer interaction, and self-reflection.

Facilitation as a Transformative Catalyst

Another novel insight is the transformative power of facilitation. Serving as a facilitator required student-athletes to consolidate prior lessons, apply them in real time, and assume responsibility for the learning of others. This role proved more than a culmination; it was a catalyst that deepened leadership identity and solidified skills. In line with experiential learning theory (Kolb et al., 2014), facilitation created conditions for active experimentation, critical reflection, and accountability, amplifying lessons learned during earlier years.

This finding extends prior work that has underscored the value of peer-led components in leadership development (Duguay et al., 2022). Whereas previous research has often described facilitation as supportive, the present study shows how it can serve as a high-impact turning point. Consistent with Fuller et al.'s (2018) argument that layered programming promotes reflection and authenticity, the facilitation year required student-athletes to step outside their comfort zones and reimagine their role as both leaders and teachers. By emphasizing this transition, the study demonstrates

that facilitation should be intentionally designed into leadership curricula, not treated as an ancillary activity.

Confidence and Application to Other Domains

This study also underscores the relationship between leadership development and self-efficacy. As participants gained communication skills, practiced leadership in diverse contexts, and assumed facilitation roles, they reported greater confidence to lead both within and outside sport. This growth in self-belief relates to research on leadership self-efficacy, which emphasizes that confidence develops through mastery experiences and social validation (Bandura, 1997; Cotterill et al., 2022).

Importantly, the study identified confidence as not confined solely to athletic environments. Student-athletes described transferring skills into academic group projects, professional preparation, and campus leadership roles. These outcomes highlight how leadership academies can extend their influence beyond sport by equipping participants with tools applicable across multiple life domains. Such findings strengthen arguments for viewing leadership education as holistic development, preparing student-athletes for success in varied contexts (Beard & Weese, 2020).

Implications for Leadership Program Design

Together, these findings have important implications for how leadership programs in intercollegiate sport are designed and delivered. First, they reinforce the need for longitudinal structures. One-off workshops may introduce leadership concepts, but they lack the sustained engagement necessary for identity transformation. By contrast, multi-year, scaffolded approaches create space for iterative meaning-making, skill testing, and reflection, ultimately enabling student-athletes to develop more adaptive and authentic leadership identities (Blanton et al., 2014; Mertens et al., 2020). This approach aligns with broader leadership education principles in higher education, where high-quality programs are characterized by intentional sequencing, active learning, and structured reflection across time (Eich, 2008).

Second, the facilitation year stands out as a particularly high-impact practice. Program designers should consider building structured peer-led teaching opportunities into their models, recognizing how guiding others can be as developmentally powerful as receiving instruction. Such practices align with broader higher education literature on high-impact practices, which emphasize active engagement, reflection, and responsibility for others' learning (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022). As Eich (2008) emphasizes, experiential learning, small-group interaction, and developmental feedback are central to effective leadership programming. The academy's facilitation model reflects established best practices in student leadership development by providing opportunities for students to make meaning of their experiences and develop transferable leadership skills.

Third, the findings highlight that program design must account for the financial realities of intercollegiate athletics, especially in DIII settings where resources are consistently tight. The leadership academy in this study is supported by the athletic department but does not receive funding from the university. Instead, it is sustained

through the voluntary service and professional commitment of faculty members and coaches. This model illustrates how meaningful leadership development can occur without substantial financial investment when departments intentionally create structured opportunities for reflection, discussion, and student ownership (Croft et al., 2024).

Since the academy operates through service rather than dedicated funding, demonstrating the value and usefulness of the program becomes essential. When student-athletes show growth in confidence, communication, and real-world application, these outcomes strengthen buy-in among coaches, administrators, and faculty. Increased visibility and demonstrated impact can also enhance participation and encourage additional staff members to contribute their time and expertise. In resource-limited environments, evidence of value can motivate continued or expanded service from personnel who already manage significant workloads (Navarro et al., 2020).

Taken together, the findings suggest that athletic departments seeking to build or sustain leadership programming do not need extensive budgets. They do, however, need structures that promote continuity, intentionality, and collaboration. When faculty and coaches see their service directly contributes to student-athlete growth, engagement tends to grow, and leadership programming becomes more sustainable even without formal financial support (Brauenstein-Minkove et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Research

As with all qualitative research, the findings of this study should be understood within the context of its design. The study was conducted with student-athletes from a single DIII institution, which provided rich, context-specific insights but also limits transferability. Leadership development may manifest differently in other institutional settings, particularly within Division I environments where athletic, academic, and social pressures are heightened. Future research should therefore examine similar programs across diverse institutional types to consider how structural and cultural contexts shape leadership development.

Future projects would also benefit from incorporating additional forms of data collection (e.g., observations, reflective journals, longitudinal tracking), to provide a more layered understanding of leadership development over time. Researcher positionality also shaped this study, as one team member was directly involved with the leadership academy. This insider perspective enriched contextual understanding, and steps such as collaborative analysis with external researchers were taken to mitigate bias, though future studies may continue to build confirmability through independent replication.

The gender composition of the participants also warrants further exploration. Female student-athletes were more likely to complete all four years of the program, pointing to potential differences in engagement that deserve closer examination. While the current study does not explain why these patterns occurred, previous research on gender and sport leadership has consistently highlighted structural and cultural challenges (Burton, 2015). Finally, while facilitation was deemed to be a

powerful developmental experience, this study cannot disentangle the specific mechanisms that made it so influential. Future research should investigate how facilitation interacts with other program components and whether similar outcomes can be replicated in alternative leadership education contexts. Another area for future exploration is how program design might support equitable engagement across genders.

Finally, all participants in this study expressed largely positive perceptions of the leadership academy, which may not reflect the experiences of student-athletes who do not find structured leadership programming valuable. Future research should therefore examine the perspectives of athletes who opt out or feel disconnected from leadership development initiatives to better understand variability in engagement and perceived benefit.

Conclusion

This study examined how student-athletes in a multi-year leadership development academy constructed and reconstructed their understandings of leadership over time. The findings suggest leadership is not a fixed trait, but a dynamic, adaptive process shaped by experience, reflection, and context. The transition from participant to facilitator was identified as a transformative catalyst, consolidating leadership identities and fostering confidence to apply skills across athletic, academic, and personal domains. By documenting these processes, the study advances social constructionist perspectives on leadership and underscores the importance of longitudinal, scaffolded program designs.

For practitioners, the findings reinforce that high-impact leadership development requires sustained engagement, structured opportunities for peer facilitation, and intentional attention to gender and coach influence. Ultimately, the study highlights how leadership in intercollegiate sport is best cultivated not through static instruction but through iterative, relational, and contextually grounded experiences that extend well beyond the playing field.

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