NCAA Athlete Development and Retention: Administrators' Perspectives

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While greater consideration has been given to college athlete well-being, understanding effective social support practices carried out by athletic administrators is limited despite its clear relevance. Using a sport development framework, specifically the retention stage, as a lens to understand elite athlete development, how athletic department leadership and staff facilitate socially supportive cultures at their universities was empirically examined. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 athletic administrators at 10 universities. We identified the themes Developing Trusting Relationships, Intentional Support, Reprioritizing Athlete Well-Being, and Adapting to Athlete Needs as vital best practices to supporting and retaining college athletes. Based on the results, we put forth several practical recommendations, focused largely on how human resources are utilized and the organizational culture in athletic departments. By highlighting the benefits of social well-being, this study draws attention to the importance of holistic athlete development that must be deliberately sought to support the modern high-level athlete.

Keywords: college athletes; athletic administrators; social support; athlete well-being; sport development; college athletics

T he holistic development (e.g., academic, mental, physical, social) of college athletes continues to receive ample consideration from both athletic department administrators and researchers, regardless of resource capabilities or expertise (National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Sport Science Institute, 2021; Warner, 2016; Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010). Healthy college athlete development is not guaranteed, however. To adequately support such development, research and practice have confirmed that deliberate efforts must be made by athletic department leadership and staff (Berg & Warner, 2019). While there are a multitude of components that facilitate athlete retention in various sport contexts, social support, or a sense of community, has been repeatedly recognized as a critical factor that must be effectively managed (Baker et al., 2003; Berg et al., 2018; Imbrogno et al., 2021; Kidd et al., 2018; Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013).

How a socially supportive culture is fostered in athletic departments necessitates further attention given the intentional efforts required and the significant influence this issue can have on college athlete retention experiences (Berg & Warner, 2019; Sartore-Baldwin & Warner, 2012). For athlete retention and satisfaction, athletes perceiving that individualized support is available to them is fundamental. Across university campuses there is a recognition of the compelling need and benefits for all students, which includes college athletes, to be assimilated into healthy communities (Warner & Dixon, 2013; Warner et al., 2017). The benefits of a healthy community have been well established in the research literature. A strong sense of community for students is associated with improvements in academic performance and campus participation (Albanesi et al., 2007; McCarthy et al., 1990; Townley et al., 2013) and enhanced overall well-being (Albanesi et al., 2007; Pretty et al., 1996). Additionally, experiencing a sense of community has resulted in lowered occurrences of student substance abuse (Mayberry et al., 2009), delinquency (Battistich & Hom, 1997), and burnout (Olds & Schwartz, 2010). Despite the centrality of social well-being, a sense of community is not created or sustained across many university campuses and cases of reported loneliness are now being viewed as a public health concern (Gerst-Emerson & Jayawardhana, 2015; Low, 2018). Social isolation and a lack of social well-being have contributed to escalating mental health issues on college campuses and increased requests for services at university counseling centers (Prince, 2015).

Although college athletes may have various supporting stakeholders, the athletic department under which they compete and train has a distinct and significant effect on their social well-being and development (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Berg & Warner, 2019; Czekanski & Turner, 2015; Sartore-Baldwin & Warner, 2012). When college athletic administrators promote a socially supportive culture, they are meeting an innate and indispensable need for their athletes (Warner, 2016). This does not assure competitive success, but researchers have corroborated that it is vital to the overall well-being and retention of college athletes (Berg & Warner, 2019; Berg et al., 2015; Warner et al., 2013; Warner & Leierer, 2015).

An Issue of Increasing Importance

Athletic administrators providing effective social support is essential to college athlete development, especially when they have higher stress levels because of their participation in college sports (Beauchemin, 2014; Cranmer, 2018). Due to their sport participation, college athletes experience different demands and unique stressors, such as coaching changes, the

unknown implications of an injury, or travel to competitions that results in frequent time away from campus. Compared to other college students, however, college athletes have been shown to be less likely to seek help to manage numerous causes of stress or address mental health challenges they may experience (Birky, 2007; Delenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2012). For example, Watson and Kissinger (2007) demonstrated that compared to 8% to 9% of university students, 10% to 15% of college athletes would be justified in working with professional counselors due to the psychological challenges they encounter. Among athletes, mental health risk is further intensified when adjusting to unaccustomed surroundings and low social support is present (Dean & Reynolds, 2017; Gouttebarge et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2016). Social support heavily influences mental health, and thus overall well-being in college athletes. Therefore, understanding effective approaches administrators can use to produce and preserve a supportive culture in athletics has become more imperative. Increasingly, mental health has been recognized across the NCAA, including by conferences and athletic departments, as a critical topic that affects athletes overall well-being. For instance, the NCAA (2021) and its Sport Science Institute (2021) regularly conducts research and distributes educational information on mental health and overall athlete well-being. Likewise, multiple conferences fund research to understand and improve issues impacting college athlete welfare. Though job titles and initiatives vary at each university, it also has become common for athletic departments to employ individuals to fully focus on supporting their athletes' mental health and well-being.

Continued attentiveness is needed by stakeholders (e.g., athletic department leadership and staff) to assist college athlete well-being, which is crucial to sport performance. For example, researchers have confirmed that social support is vital to reducing stress that leaves athletes more susceptible to experiencing an injury or recuperating from an injury at a slower pace (De Groot et al., 2018; Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010; Williams & Andersen, 1998). In addition to injury, social support has been indicated to help college athletes' ability to manage new circumstances and adversity that may arise (e.g., academic struggles, unhealthy relationships; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). This adaptability not only improves the prospect of success in athletics but can also assist college athletes once they bring their competitive careers to a close, as Morgan and Giacobbi noted. Important social influences can affect college athletes' social health, particularly individuals who have frequent interaction with the athletes (Berg et al., 2018; Cranmer, 2017; Dixon et al., 2008). For each athlete important social influences will vary, but examples include parents, previous coaches, teammates, siblings, and friends. In college athletics, significant social influences with whom athletes regularly interact with also include athletic department staff at their university, such as academic support personnel, coaches, and administrative leaders (Berg & Warner, 2019). For each athlete to be effectively supported, it is important for athletic department administrators to understand the vital role they play in college athletes lives and their overall well-being.

The central role of social support in the context of college athletics has been limited thus far (Berg & Warner, 2019; Sotiriadou et al., 2008), particularly utilizing a sport development framework, and effective administrator methods to carry out this duty have lacked clear explanation. This study builds off the previous work of Berg and Warner, which collected data from college athletes to identify the primary athletic department characteristics that are critical to their well-being and perceptions of being socially supported while at their university. These characteristics included an athletic department culture in which athletes had opportunities for open and honest communication with administrators and coaches, equal treatment and value of all athletes, programs or events that fostered a sense of community in the athletic department,

and an environment that encouraged regular informal interactions among all athletes and administrators (Berg & Warner, 2019). The specific best practices, or challenges to best practices, to develop these factors and better retain college athletes from the administrators perspective, however, are not well established through empirical research. To address this issue, it is critical to collect data from athletic department leadership and staff who are tasked with implementing these practices. For example, while the college athletes in Berg and Warner's study clearly indicated that having an open and honest relationship with athletic department staff was valued, it is not clear how athletic department staff ensure that such a supportive environment is cultivated. Likewise, it is not evident what factors may inhibit athletic department staff from effectively supporting college athletes. For this study, we collected data from athletic administrators, which are essential to fully comprehend the role of social support in college athlete well-being and retention. For many sport development issues, the views of athletes and supporting stakeholders can often differ (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Therefore, the purpose of this inquiry was to offer a better understanding of how athletic department leadership and staff foster environments in which college athletes feel socially supported, and bridge research and practice by providing applicable recommendations for retaining and developing athletes based on empirical findings.

A Sport Development Lens for College Athletics

The central focus of sport development research and practice is to identify the factors that support sport participation and the best procedures to promote the opportunities and constructive outcomes of participation (Shilbury et al., 2008). For purposes of this study in the context of college athletics, the retention stage of the sport development frameworks is the principal focus because it is the most applicable stage athletes are experiencing while competing for their universities. Retention signifies participants progressing from simply sampling a sport and transforming into consistently engaged athletes committed to their sport (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008). To increase the likelihood more college athletes will be retained, multiple benefits of sport participation must be repeatedly highlighted and experienced while competing for an organization or program (Chambliss, 1989; Gould & Carson, 2004; Green, 2005). For example, Stevenson (1990) described how elite athletes commitment to a sport was fundamentally determined by their prospects for success in the sport and continuing to have constructive relationships with their most important social influences. This permitted desirable social identities and self-identities to be more likely formed. Similarly, the antitheses of these benefits, along with such issues as burnout, feelings of incompetency, injury, and pressure to excel, are key reasons for individuals halting their involvement in a sport (Butcher et al., 2002). With intense attention given to success in competition and requisite training methods, social support and opportunities to develop a sense of belonging through sport participation can often be overlooked as critical components of athletic administrators efforts and purpose (Sotiriadou et al., 2014).

To become effective members of their organization or team, members with more experience or expertise will teach incoming athletes the norms, values, knowledge, and skills that are deemed essential to functioning in that organization or team (Berg & Warner, 2019; Cranmer, 2017; Marx et al., 2008; Woolf et al., 2016). This process, often referred to as socialization, offers one representation of why athletic administrators play a significant role in the support provided to college athletes. If socialization is effectively practiced in an athletic

department, benefits have been shown to be experienced by both the individual athlete (e.g., less role ambiguity, greater sense of fit or belonging) and the athletic department (e.g., increased levels of commitment, better retention rates) (Benson et al., 2016; Cranmer, 2018). Rather than remaining static, Green (2005) noted that athletes identities and motivations resulting from socialization experiences must be continuously reinforced. Therefore, ongoing encouragement from significant social influences, mentoring, noticing advancement toward educational achievement, organization or team social events, acknowledging and rewarding outstanding efforts in training and competition, and noting skill development are examples of activities that need to be intentionally managed by athletic department personnel (e.g., athletic directors, academic support staff, coaches). If practiced, college athletes will experience less role conflict or ambiguity, greater acceptance of athletic department norms, and improved performance results (Benson et al., 2016; Cranmer, 2018; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; MacPhail & Kirk, 2006; Sotiriadou et al., 2014). As the athletes' membership in the athletic department continues to be reinforced, their retention is more likely (Berg & Warner, 2019; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Green, 2005).

In this study, effective practices for athletic administrators offering social support to college athletes will be examined. With the exception of Berg and Warner's 2019 work, researchers have not examined sport development in the distinct United States (U.S.) context of college athletics, which may offer novel insights into well-being and development practices of high-level athletes. Berg and Warner's study was significant for collecting data directly from college athletes, but they were unable to collect data from athletic department leadership and staff who are critical stakeholders in the social support and well-being experienced by the athletes. While there is increasing acknowledgement from stakeholders (e.g., athletic departments, researchers, sport governing bodies) on the importance of social support, Brouwers et al. (2015) emphasized that little is known about how stakeholders provide strategies and services that shape elite athlete development. Therefore, by (a) expanding the use of a U.S. setting, (b) employing college athletics as the context to study elite athletes, and (c) collecting data directly from athletic administrators to better understand effective practice, we widen the application of the sport development frameworks and their practical utility to better fill such research gaps.

This study applied the retention stage to a distinct sport context to identify enduring management principles that will help enhance the social support offered to college athletes. The research questions that guided this study were: what are the best practices for socially supporting college athletes currently being implemented by athletic department administrators; and what factors facilitate or inhibit athletic department staff from carrying out best practices to enhance social support and the retention of college athletes?

Method

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013) was used to learn more about best practices for supporting college athletes. The philosophical underpinnings as suggested by Bradshaw et al. (2017) were referenced to help maintain methodological congruence, from the research design components through the thematic analysis decision process. This overall approach was chosen because we sought to better understand proficiencies of the participants who share the common experience of being in a college athletics administrative role, which is relatively understudied (Berg & Warner, 2019; Brouwers et al.,

2015; Nordstrom et al., 2016). Further, Bradshaw et al. (2017) espoused the utility of qualitative examination (such as thematic analysis) when seeking a richer description about a little-known phenomenon from those who are uniquely positioned to offer "emic knowledge" about their professional experience. As Shaw and Hoeber (2016) explained, using participants daily experiences allows for alternative policies and practices to be considered, whether those are incremental or seismic in nature.

Procedure

After institutional review board approval was received, athletic administrators were recruited from 12 institutions in a NCAA Division I conference using both purposive (Bradshaw et al., 2017) and snowball sampling. The conference was not among the Power Five conferences (i.e., Atlantic Coast Conference, Big 10, Big 12, Southeastern Conference, Pacific 12) in college athletics. More specifically, the researchers communicated with athletic administrators via their personal networks to gain assistance in contacting athletic department staff who have frequent off-the-field contact with college athletes. With the project funded by a conference office, a concerted effort was made to ensure representation from each conference member institution and a small incentive (i.e., $25 gift card) was offered for participation. A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) was used to ensure there was consistency across all interviews. Questions were based on Berg and Warner's (2019) similar questions presented to college athletes, but with the goal of better understanding the administrator perspective. Sample questions included: "What are the most effective approaches to supporting college athletes? What strategies do you use to increase the likelihood that they remain at this university?". When possible and convenient for the participants, individuals took part in a group interview (n = 4), but the schedules of most participants required individual interviews (n = 14). The 18 total individual and group interviews among the 24 participants were conducted via videoconference or phone and averaged approximately 45 minutes in duration. Interviews continued to be conducted until saturation of the data was achieved, which is to say there were diminishing returns for interviewing more participants and novel information ceased to be generated (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Weiss, 1994). The interviews were professionally transcribed, and the researchers verified the accuracy of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews are a trustworthy method to integrate multiple perspectives, describe processes, policies, and systems, and gain a depth of understanding for the motivations, influences, and social contexts of the participants actions (Sanger, 1996; Weiss, 1994).

Participants

A total of 24 NCAA Division I athletic administrators ranging from those in senior leadership (e.g., athletic director, deputy athletic directors) to those in specialized positions supporting college athletes (e.g., assistant directors of academic support, coordinators of athlete development) took part in either individual or group interviews. Ten of the 12 institutions within a NCAA Division I conference were represented. The sample included 14 females and 10 males, while 16 were White and 8 were Black. See Appendix B for participant information. As anonymity was assured to the athletic administrators to encourage candor, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and the location of their athletic department's university is not disclosed in the reporting of the results.

Berg, Warner, Walsh & Wells

Analysis

Deductive and inductive thematic analyses were employed to substantiate or differentiate from previous empirical research while welcoming unexpected or new results (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The research team was mindful of prior sport development studies (Berg et al., 2018; Shilbury et al., 2008), specifically the retention framework (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008) and social support needed by athletes (Berg & Warner, 2019; Martindale et al., 2005; Warner, 2016). Utilizing the framework from the beginning of analysis, how athletic administrators affected retention experiences and the mechanisms that supported college athletes were established through deductive coding. By using the sport development framework, particularly the retention stage, from the outset, the research team was able to focus on the issues that are most important to administrators (Royse et al., 2010; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). However, the team was also receptive to emergent findings in the data as these can be the most insightful results in some studies (Murchison, 2010). Using QSR International's Nvivo 12 software, our research team independently identified patterns and selected themes through a comprehensive, detailed, and thorough coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to determine best practices. Further, peer reviews increased trustworthiness by asking each research team member to look at preliminary results and offer suggestions or ideas that may have been missed from the original data set, including disconfirming evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patten, 2014). This practice lessened researcher bias while generating a complete and consistent analysis, rendering themes that are internally coherent and distinctive (Berg et al., 2018; Berg & Warner, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Goulding, 2002; Shaw & Hoeber, 2016).

Results

Seeking to better understand how athletic department leadership and staff foster environments in which college athletes feel socially supported at the retention stage, four overarching themes were identified following data analysis. The four principal themes derived directly from the athletic administrators themselves were: Developing Trusting Relationships, Intentional Support, Reprioritizing Athlete Well-Being, and Adapting to Athlete Needs. Quotations are offered below that best summarized and exemplified data collected from the athletic administrators.

Developing Trusting Relationships

Across all participant interviews, administrators emphasized how critical it was for college athletes to perceive athletic department staff as authentic or sincere to cultivate trust. Jane explained authenticity with college athletes when she said:

> I just want to learn who they are, what they're about, and what their goals are, what they think will help get them there, and I listen to them… I'm as open with them as I expect them to be open with me. That also opens up a lot of doors with them. I share with them my story. I share with them when I'm sad. I share with them when I'm happy.

Luther further echoed the need for authenticity and transparency to be perceived when he described his experience working hands on with college athletes and developing personal relationships with each athlete:

> They have to truly believe that okay, this person is really 'for real' looking out for my best interest. This person is really getting to know who I am… They [administrators] actually took the time to speak to me, to get to know me… Student-athletes need to feel that you are being transparent with them, that you are honest with them. And ultimately, your goal is to develop a relationship with them. So, it has to start off by you doing the work to really get to know them, to really establish a connection with them, so they know and feel as though that you have their best interest.

Ashley agreed when she expressed "They [college athletes] feel comfortable around us. I think at the end of the day, they want to know that we care." Kennon concurred by stating "We have to allow our student-athletes some space where they can feel confident, they can feel supported, they can feel a level of anonymity to be able to come forward and address issues."

Coupling authenticity and transparency, along with intentionality, through multiple interactions helps build supportive relationships. Hillary described how developing such trusting relationships with college athletes requires concerted effort over time:

> But that takes a certain level of trust and you have to earn that. When I first got here in 2016, it wasn't something that was going to happen just because of my title, just because I asked them to. You have to earn trust from everyone, but certainly from 18- to 22-year-olds.

Emma corroborated:

> I think some of our student-athletes struggle with them feeling like they're pawns and not people. So, if they see that, 'I see you and then this is what we are going to do together,' I think it helps to break down barriers, build trust, and then also helps them want to develop themselves beyond just their sport.

Rachel described how she builds the rapport by "giving them [college athletes] multiple touch points within the athletic department to build relationships." Finally, Tim elaborated on how relationships with a diverse group of college athletes can be formed and the opportunities allowed:

> Working with the students, developing effective and appropriate relationships with all of them, meeting them where they are, learning about who they are, establishing a rapport. From there, I feel like from my philosophy that's where motivation can happen, where you have students from all different places. You know what makes them tick. You know of information about them. They have a respect and a trust for you and with you.

Thus, there was widespread consensus among administrators that trusting relationships needed to effectively support college athletes, based largely on authenticity and transparency, must be consistently pursued by all athletic department staff.

Intentional Support

The participants stressed providing an atmosphere of strong social support for college athletes requires intentionality when events, programs, and even personal conversations are generated for the athletes. "You've got to be intentional with what you do, where you are, and how you interact with your student-athlete" Rachel declared. Jennifer explained how everyone in the athletic department needs to be intentional in providing support by stating "That goes for coaches, that goes for support staff, that goes for senior leadership. It's really intentional planning that we have put in place that benefits the student-athlete experience, that benefits the department as a whole." The intentional tone and commitment to holistic athlete development have to be encouraged by leadership, particularly by athletic directors and coaches, as Emma noted "I firmly believe in trickle-down leadership. If it's important to the athletic director, it's going to be important to the administrators and coaches. Then if it's important to the coaches ... it's important to student-athletes." Tom echoed:

> Everything starts at the top. The administrator has to set the tone, but when the coaches lead in that way, and they get the program to the point where their players or student-athletes are really taking that on, and they're doing it themselves so that they build that culture around each other, they're supportive of each other, that's where the biggest impact happens.

As Brandon reflected on his career in collegiate athletics, he likewise recognized a theme across institutions:

> I think you have to be very intentional about it. I've been on five campuses at this point in my career… I think the athletic director of said institution has to be very intentional about creating a space where... and you'll probably hear this a thousand times... but where the intention is about holistic development, right? And so, I think when the AD is intentional about it, everybody else takes it seriously.

The intentional outreach begins prior to a college athlete's first year, as it starts during the recruiting process while an athlete is deciding whether to attend and compete at the university. Claire and Tim also noted how much time they invest "talking to them during the recruiting process, helping them get vested in whatever their interests are."

> One, it starts with the recruiting process, and the outreach. We're sending letters to the students hand in hand with the orientation, walking them through, when they get here...we're the ones onboarding. We're doing pre-registration before they get to campus. We're really setting the tone that we're someone who's going to be important to you from that perspective. (Tim)

Participants mentioned the importance of setting the tone during the orientation programming efforts. "All of our freshmen have one-on-one meetings with our counselors their freshman year, just to develop that relationship and get to know them, understand what they want to do, and what their aspirations are" Adam stated. The first-year experience deliberately assists

administrators with critical information about each athlete, while enabling the college athletes as well, as Hannah noted in her example:

> I think that freshman experience course really helped set the tone for forcing them to get to know other student-athletes and then allowing that class, so to speak, to grow up together through the department, and we try to put a lot of responsibility on them.

Some administrators discussed how they encourage college athletes to be engaged with intentional programming that is planned for and sometimes by the athletes. Grace described her university's purposeful approach:

> Built in an active recruiting piece where participants have the opportunity at the end of their experience to create content and facilitate. They [college athletes] also host a leadership summit for their fellow student-athletes…we charge them with, 'hey, go bring, it can be two teammates.' This is their time to leave their legacy. Some of those intermingling social types of events to get student-athletes really connected to the athletic department as well as the community helps for retention purposes.

Asking for input or feedback from college athletes was a meaningful practice several of the athletic departments used to exemplify their commitment to improving and connecting with the athletes. Gary noted "one of the things that we're getting better at here is student-athlete feedback. I think that's one way they can feel more valued. I also think it's a way that we can really get to the pulse of what it is that we need to deliver to student-athletes." Specifically, Hillary explained the benefit of feedback by stating "… dialogue, education, change. The more dialogue we can have, the more education we're going to absorb, and the more we can affect change." One way her institution created intentional dialogue was by ensuring "every team is represented on the student-athlete advisory committee (SAAC), and that's where their voice is supposed to be heard. That's where you have this platform where your voice can be heard." The importance of having a SAAC body on each university campus and diverse representation on SAAC were mentioned by all the administrators. Gary described "SAAC being one of those where students come together on a regular basis, traditionally monthly, and just talk about student-athlete related issues." Similarly, Claire stated that

> There's a subcommittee and they work with their teams and other athletes to come up with, 'Hey, what are we needing right now?' And it's an open forum for them [athletes], so we really do let them guide us on these are things they're struggling with and giving them a voice. And then we're their support behind making it happen.

Overall, administrators noted how critical it was to intentionally craft opportunities for a sense of community to develop across the athletic department, which included emphasis by leadership, building relationships as early as possible, encouraging athlete participation and ownership of events, programs, and discussions, and soliciting feedback from the athletes.

Reprioritizing Athlete Well-Being

      While fundamental practices to effective social support were provided in the interviews, the participants were also able to identify issues that prevent athletic department staff from creating a sense of community for the athletes. One obstruction administrators discussed was task overload, or an excessive amount of other job foci or responsibilities, that hindered personalized attention to each of the many athletes at a university. Gary's assessment of his university and college athletics addressed this issue:

> …In college athletics I think we probably have not done a good job of that. We're so focused on the competition, and I'm just being straight up with you about it. We're so focused on the competition, the winning, certainly the academic experience is critical, that we have not spent enough time truly diving into what do our student-athletes need from a social perspective…. I know here at [university] we're waking up to it. We're realizing that we've got to do more, and we're committed to that… I've talked to some of my colleagues in other schools that are doing some of the same things. These are things we never really did.

Michael explained how his job duties would need to be adjusted for him to provide better social support:

> I would say just not necessarily stepping outside of what my actual job duties are, which could kind of create some problems that could affect me long-term. I would say probably [it] might be the biggest reason of why I only can go so far and do so much without it eventually coming back and impacting me negatively.

      Related to task overload, a lack of time was the other significant issue that prohibited more attention being given to the social development of the athletes. Tim represented the participants by stating "I think the inhibitors for us, for me personally, it's really time…it takes time to establish relationships." As the athletic director at his university, Tom described the challenges to developing relationships with so many athletes in his leadership position:

> You have 400 student-athletes, it's difficult to connect that way. So that's why it really comes down to the role of the sport administrator or different administrators that have that more day-to-day connection. Then from my chair, I've found that it's really important that I try to at least engage with like our student-athlete advisory council or the captains, kind of leaders of teams, and get some level of connection. Again, you'd love to with all, but you just physically can't do that. It's just not realistic…it always amazes me when ADs say that they know every student-athlete. And I said, well, to what extent can that really happen, right?

Not only did administrators discuss their lack of time to engage the athletes, but how scarce available time was for the athletes. Adam described the difficulty found across institutions with college athletes' time by noting "Once the semester starts, the time commitment between academics and their sport, it really outweighs a lot of their other time, especially during the week, of them doing anything social. The demands are that high, for the most part." Beyond

academic responsibilities and travel to and from competitions, Gary explained how challenging it can be when college athletes are present on their campus:

> …Some of them might practice in the morning, some of them might practice in the afternoon, some of them might practice in the evening, so sometimes when I think of building community it means you've got to get them all in one place at the same time, or as many of them as you can. We found doing that is very challenging, because their schedules are varying so much.

While the administrators were able to identify best practices that facilitate a strong social environment, there was uncertainty in how to manage the obstructions that were commonly experienced.

Adapting to Athlete Needs

Data collection took place during a distinct period in the United States. First, the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic resulted in rampant anxiety and social distancing, including shutdowns of university campuses and college athletics. College athletes were sent home and no longer meeting in-person with coaches, fellow athletes, or administrators. The massive economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic forced significant budget cuts or the elimination of sports in many athletic departments. Finally, heightened awareness of racial injustice and widespread protests across the United States produced an intricate sociopolitical context for administrators to support college athletes, which had to be done in an almost entirely virtual or online format due to the pandemic. The ability of athletic administrators to adapt to unexpected challenges and contexts was fundamentally evident in the data. Gary and Adam emphasized being "much more intentional about that communication than we've ever been before" by getting "more people involved like coaches, and trainers, and all sorts of people, just to keep students involved." Kennon emphasized challenges and opportunities stemming from the sizeable revenue lost during the pandemic:

> …The pandemic and the possibility of lost revenue, how does that affect supporting your student-athletes? What does that look like? Now things that you were able pay for or throw money at, you may not have access to those discretionary dollars anymore. Now you probably got to be more intentional in how you connect with your student-athletes, be a little bit more creative in how you are supporting them…Now, hopefully that means campuses will get more creative and be more collaborative, so now you have more collaborative opportunities within your own campus. Let's use the wealth of knowledge on each campus to then help support each other. Maybe it's more cross programming.

Administrators repeatedly noted the challenges that the virtual interactions had in providing support and the commitment of the staff to carry out such essential tasks. Tim described:

> …Our pivot to online from my staff is nothing short of remarkable. I think it was three days, and we were fully [online], all 400 tutor appointments, all everything. So, the students knew we were still there for them and we'll remain that way.

Adam emphasized the heightened importance of communication with all members of the athletic department interacting online:

> Once COVID hit, it was a struggle. It was a continued struggle with that [because] I think a lot of our staff get to know students. They go out of their way to try to help and present students with opportunities or the resources to try to help. I'll have to commend our staff for being flexible. I thought we did a good job of keeping student-athletes engaged and then keeping coaches engaged with information of who was doing well and who wasn't doing well.

Grace underscored the limitations when supporting athletes in a fully online or remote format:

> I think, with everything that's happening in the world right now, this is a time when obviously you would want to be able to get that face time and really get a sense for how people are doing. And so, the biggest challenge is having to do it virtually and trying to navigate what the vibe is over Zoom, which is much more difficult to do than if you're in a room with somebody and they're like 'I'm fine.' You're not fine. Let's build on this conversation.

Gary explained how the distinct challenges brought by social unrest would influence adaptations in the athletic department:

> One of the things that we're actually really diving into as we speak, due to some of the unrest that is existing today in our society, we're looking to develop, we don't have the name yet but it's some sort of diversity and inclusion leadership group. But then also creating a working group if you will within that, primarily student-athletes but would also be some staff members as well, that can really help us address the concerns, the feelings, the opportunity to be heard from our student-athletes as it relates to some of the social injustices that have become even more apparent in recent days obviously.

As Grace succinctly stated, "…you do the best you can, because nobody has a playbook for what's happening right now." Overall, the interviews occurred during an unprecedented period and the administrators' responses captured the challenges and need for flexibility among administrators to support college athletics as new contexts emerge.

Discussion

The athletic administrators in this study, who represented ten universities, held various job titles, and offered a wide range of experiences, conveyed the best practices for athletic departments to socially support college athletes and the factors that facilitate or inhibit their retention. These best practices include an emphasis on administrators cultivating trust with the athletes (i.e., Developing Trusting Relationships), deliberately focusing and planning to provide effective support (i.e., Intentional Support), reemphasizing athlete well-being amidst other athletic department priorities (i.e., Reprioritizing Athlete Well-Being), and acclimating to unforeseen circumstances to support the athletes regardless (i.e., Adapting to Athlete Needs).

The findings contribute to understanding how athletic department leadership and staff foster environments in which college athletes feel socially supported and suggest some practical recommendations.

One intriguing finding from the data was the principle that there are some tasks that athletic departments cannot effectively outsource. While some areas of an athletic department's operation, such as marketing (Lee & Walsh, 2011) or ticket sales (Lee et al., 2017), can be carried out by a third-party organization, the critical duties of developing relationships, a sense of community, and culture must be achieved by the full-time athletic department staff who interact with the college athletes most frequently (i.e., Developing Trusting Relationships). Further, this finding indicates that having sufficient human resources, in both quantity and quality, may be the most essential resource to ensure college athletes are purposefully supported and developed as humans holistically (i.e., Intentional Support). Through such activities as mentoring and athletic department functions, this study asserts that athletic department staff will continue to be important social influences who can significantly affect college athletes' social health and retention while competing at an elite level of their sport (Berg et al., 2018; Berg & Warner, 2019; Cranmer, 2017; Dixon et al., 2008; MacPhail & Kirk, 2006; Stevenson, 1990). The data extend this area of research, here and below, by detailing the necessities for athletic department staff to effectively offer social support to college athletes.

Participants comments also revealed another significant finding regarding the expectations placed on those human resources. Even with good intentions meant to support and retain the college athletes, athletic department leadership and staff must guard against being overly focused on programs, events, or athlete eligibility. Participants in this study shared that such foci led to task overload for many athletic department personnel, who did not have time for anything beyond their assigned responsibilities, as Taylor et al. (2021) also described. These issues inhibited opportunities to engage college athletes on a more frequent and informal basis. As a result of these challenges, the overarching theme of Reprioritizing Athlete Well-Being was a consistent need expressed by the participants. This finding raises the question of whether college athletics has become excessively professionalized, even in offering social support, that fewer organic personal relationships are feasible within the athletic department. Therefore, this study's findings offer guidance for best practices across college athletics regarding how athletic department staff are deployed and where their time and energy is spent to socially support and retain the modern college athlete. These findings have ramifications for not only retaining athletes, but also the staff who are crucial social influences on the athletes. In their 1995 study of college athletic directors, Copeland and Kirsch highlighted a significant link between task overload, or role overload, and occupational stress. Otherwise, in the sport management literature, research involving task overload in sport organizations is limited (e.g., Doherty, 2009) and represents an issue in need of further empirical study.

The crucial role coaches have in motivating and keeping athletes committed to more rigorous training and competition demands of high-level sport has been well established (Baker et al., 2003; Berg et al., 2018; Berg & Warner, 2019; Burgess & Naughton, 2010; Cranmer, 2018; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). In this study, coaches, along with other senior athletic department leadership (e.g., athletic directors), emphasizing and visibly supporting social support and retention efforts were deemed vital by the participants. Just as it is highly unlikely that elite athletic achievement can be realized without the dedication and support of coaches (Sotiriadou, 2009), the findings suggest that enhancing athletes' social well-being is more likely if coaches and senior leadership encourage opportunities for social development (e.g., attending

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department-wide social functions for all athletes, coaches, and staff, performing community service with other department members, participating in monthly meetings with senior leadership). While it may not be feasible for senior leaders to maintain a personal relationship with each athlete at their university, the emphasis they place on holistic athlete development, including social well-being, will be critical to how effectively the athletic department supports and retains their athletes. Thus, senior leaders in an athletic department should not simply pass the concern or responsibility of athlete social support to other department staff (e.g., academic counselors, life-skills coordinators) without offering tangible backing.

The results of this study allow comparisons to the data collected from college athletes in Berg and Warner's 2019 study. The perspectives of athletic administrators and college athletes are mostly similar rather than significantly divided. This suggests that social support and retention of college athletes can be enhanced and effectively practiced with both stakeholder groups being largely in agreement. Recurrently, athletic administrators conveyed the importance of authenticity in interacting with athletes, viewing each individual holistically as more than an athlete, and staff carrying out each responsibility to purposively develop and retain the athletes. In their data collected from college athletes, Berg and Warner found such attributes were critical to developing trust and openness, demonstrating equal value of each athlete, increasing the participation and usefulness of intentional programming, and facilitating informal interactions between athletes and administrators. Athletic administrators may have been more cognizant of these issues due to the challenges brought by the extensive social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread protests of social injustice (i.e., Adapting to Athlete Needs). According to the administrators in this study, the unexpected emergence of these topics revealed which athletic departments or teams would likely be able to adapt and continue to have the socially supportive atmosphere administrators and athletes mutually desired due to the staffing, structure, and culture that was in place. It was agreed that other athletic departments would likely struggle due to a lack of these best practices in a sociotemporal context in which anxiety and isolation were prevalent, including among college athletes. Adaptability or flexibility in supporting athletes amidst unforeseen circumstances was viewed as a critical best practice, which is not confined to the social development of athletes. For instance, athletic departments will need to adapt to opportunities for college athletes through new name, image, and likeness policies.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study filled research gaps by applying the sport development retention stage (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008) to college athletics, a distinct U.S. sport context, and collecting data from administrators to understand strategies and services for supporting elite athletes, which has been predominantly lacking in empirical study. There is agreement on the factors that are critical to support elite athlete development (Brouwers et al., 2015), but this study is among the first to address *how* that support is provided. The data also revealed challenges to providing effective support to athletes. This study reinforces prior research substantiating that the support of athletic administrators, a key stakeholder group on university campuses, play an essential role in aiding the sport development process while reducing varying sources of stress that can inhibit college athletes retention and well-being (Berg & Warner, 2019). The sport development frameworks are relatively contemporary and indicate that, regardless of sport, competitive level, national setting, or historic period, social well-being must be prioritized for athlete development (Berg et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The significance of social well-being, mental health, and athlete retention will not be short-lived trends in college athletics. Athlete well-being is a multifaceted research area that necessitates additional empirical study and invites cooperative input from scholars of various fields. Sport researchers can contribute to the discourse on supporting and retaining athletes given that numerous scholars study at least one aspect of athlete well-being. Using the distinct context of college athletics, this study provides data to begin to explain how athletic administrators socially support and retain athletes. It is hoped that the finding of this inquiry will encourage future sport development research that further enhances athlete well-being, whether in college athletics or any other sport context.

The results of this study reveal opportunities for future research. One contribution scholars can make to athletic departments and other sport organizations is measuring the intangible moments or benefits of a socially supportive culture. It is quite common and simple to assess organizational effectiveness through wins and losses, revenue generated, average grade point average, or graduation rates, which the data confirmed are areas where administrators' attention are inclined to be drawn. However, more research is needed to offer practical methods for supporting stakeholders to know they are cultivating a strong sense of community, developing trust with the athletes, or experiencing benefits of achieving a high retention rate. Such evaluation tools may also allow athletic departments to recognize effective use of staff who are not being consumed with task overload that distracts from the primary focus on the relationship-driven nature of supporting the athletes. Self-determination theory (SDT) is a possible future framework in studying how elite athletes are socially supported and retained. SDT directs researchers to focus on individual's "inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration, as well as the conditions that foster those positive processes" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). By focusing on needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, scholars have used SDT to examine optimal well-being and adaptive social functioning to enable interventions that support the realization of athletic potential while ensuring athlete health and well-being is maintained (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Holmberg & Sheridan, 2013). SDT represents a prospect for collaboration with the psychology field and the interdisciplinary partnerships that have been advocated by sport researchers (e.g., Chalip, 2006; Chalip et al., 2010; Costa, 2005; Doherty, 2012). Future studies focusing on better time management for college athletes, which may enable enhanced social support, are also needed for both research and practice.

One limitation of this study stems from the sizeable and ongoing resource disparity found in NCAA athletics. On an annual basis, athletic departments in the Power Five conferences generate far more revenue than athletic departments without membership in the Power Five. For instance, between 2010 and 2019 median generated annual revenue for Power Five athletic departments increased from $66.91 million to $109.81 million (NCAA, 2020). Conversely, for the remaining athletic departments at the Division 1 Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level, median generated annual revenue rose from $11.73 million in 2010 to only $14.23 million in 2019. The disparity is wider between the Power Five members and athletic departments at all other levels of the NCAA. Due to a greater level of resources, the analysis from this study may have significantly differed had data been collected from Power Five athletic departments, which could have contrasting variances in culture and experiences than those found in non-Power Five conferences. Social support of college athletes can be effectively practiced without large

expenditures towards such areas as facilities or events (Berg & Warner, 2019). However, the data indicate employing more full-time staff may be critical to ensure consistent, personalized relationships between administrators and athletes, which both stakeholder groups agree is essential to athlete well-being and retention. If additional personnel are not feasible, athletic departments should identify nonessential uses of time that can be eliminated to allow staff to focus on the essential duties of athlete support and development. Future studies that can help non-Power Five athletic departments, with considerably less generated revenue, determine how to efficiently allocate human resources and regularly implement the best practices identified in this study would be a valuable contribution to the research literature. From a policy standpoint, the NCAA should consider earmarking additional revenue distributions to non-Power Five athletic departments that would allow for an adequate level of athletic department staff who can primarily focus on the social health and retention of athletes at all levels of college athletics.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What are the most effective approaches to supporting college athletes? What strategies do you use to increase the likelihood that they remain at this university?

2. Do you think the college athletes here feel that they receive adequate social support? Why or why not?

3. What factors facilitate or inhibit athletic department staff from providing a strong sense of community to the athletes?

4. In previous research, college athletes indicated that an athletic department culture of openness and honesty was important to them. Based on your experience, what are the practices you use to ensure such a culture is cultivated?

5. In previous work, equal treatment for all college athletes was also noted as a critical component to their well-being. How do athletics department staff ensure the athletes feel like they are equally treated or valued?

6. What kind of programs or events do you have in place to ensure that athletes feel a sense of community or belonging while at this university?

7. How would you describe the informal interactions between athletic department staff and the athletes at this university? What kind of instructions or direction are athletic department staff given regarding their interaction with the athletes?

Appendix B: Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Title
Jennifer	Female	White	Executive Associate Athletic Director/Senior Woman Administrator
Gary	Male	White	Deputy Athletic Director
Kennon	Male	Black	Associate Athletic Director – Athlete Well-Being
Tom	Male	White	Athletic Director
Adam	Male	Black	Associate Athletic Director – Academic Support
Emma	Female	White	Director of Athlete Development
Hillary	Female	Black	Deputy Athletic Director
Brandon	Male	Black	Deputy Athletic Director
Kristen	Female	White	Associate Athletic Director
Jane	Female	White	Assistant Director - Academic Support
Laura	Female	White	Assistant Director – Academic Support
Nici	Female	White	Senior Associate Athletic Director/Senior Woman Administrator
Rachel	Female	White	Director of Compliance
Hannah	Female	White	Director of Athlete Development
Claire	Female	White	Senior Associate Athletic Director/Senior Woman Administrator
Luther	Male	Black	Director of Athlete Development
Grace	Female	White	Assistant Director of Athlete Development
Michael	Male	Black	Assistant Director – Academic Support
Tiffany	Female	Black	Director of Athlete Development
Grant	Male	White	Senior Associate Athletic Director
Shayla	Female	Black	Associate Athletic Director – Athlete Well-Being
Ashley	Female	White	Associate Athletic Director – Academic Support
Tim	Male	White	Senior Associate Athletic Director – Academic Support
Cody	Male	White	Deputy Athletic Director