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### **Examining the Experiences of Former D-I and D-III Nonrevenue Athletes**

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*Despite the variability across college divisions, conferences, institutions, and athletic teams, recent post-collegiate athletes share a range of common experiences throughout their careers. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of former athletes from Division I and Division III nonrevenue sports regarding their athletic experiences. Through a mixed methods questionnaire, participants from six Midwestern conferences (n=229) reflected on their athletic and academic careers, major influences, and lessons that have impacted them both positively and negatively. Numerous themes emerged from participants' responses, including overall satisfaction with the college experience, preparedness for life beyond athletic competition, and direct application of work ethic and time management skills to post-collegiate life. The results from this study provide added validation for American colleges and universities to continue the support and improvement of lower-profile athletic programs.*

**B**ased on the latest sport sponsorship report, 430,301 collegiate athletes participated in NCAA sports with championships (NCAA Online, 2012c; Zgonc, 2010). Of these athletes, 74% played nonrevenue sports, suggesting that only approximately one quarter of NCAA athletes play football, basketball, or another revenue-producing sport (Judson, James, & Aurand, 2005). Furthermore, the average NCAA member institution has 406 collegiate athletes, 232 males and 174 females (NCAA Online, 2012c; Zgonc, 2010). In both revenue and nonrevenue-producing sports alike,<sup>1</sup> college athletes invest vast quantities of time, energy, and passion to compete at a high level and represent their institutions. Equally as such, they are required to balance their athletic endeavors with academic progress (Paule & Gilson, 2010, 2011).

The majority of research investigating college athlete experiences has targeted athletes before and during their time spent at their respective colleges and universities (Adler & Adler,

1985; Judson, James, & Aurand, 2005; Meyer, 1990; Miller & Kerr, 2002; NCAA, 2011; Paule & Gilson, 2010, 2011; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006). Certainly, these time periods are vital phases to gain athletes' insights for the purpose of recruiting top-quality student athletes, among other reasons. However, it has been shown that the priorities of college athletes changed notably between those entering college and their final year of enrollment (Adler & Adler, 1985; Meyer, 1990; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Over the course of an entire college career, it is not surprising that athletes (and even non-athletes) may change how they prioritize and balance their time.

The college setting, for athletes and non-athletes, is a dynamic learning environment often filled with opportunities and setbacks as each semester and season passes. Students from all different backgrounds are faced with the challenge of adapting to a variety of situations each year—in the classroom, their living environment, and their social lives (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Paule & Gilson, 2010, 2011; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006). With all the new experiences and opportunities to gain knowledge over the course of a collegiate career, gaining college athletes' perceptions of their experiences not only before and during, but also following the conclusion of their careers is paramount to capturing the value of the collegiate athlete experience.

Amidst the present college athlete literature, few studies (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; NCAA, 2011) have been conducted for individuals who have recently finished their collegiate athletic careers. Research in athlete retirement has shown that adapting to retirement is partially dependent on the nature and quality of the sport experiences (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Broad themes have emerged in this realm of research that are substantially qualitative in nature. Therefore it can be difficult to generalize this research towards a broader population. As noted by Coakley (1983),

Factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status and social and emotional support networks shape the manner in which one makes the transition out of sport. Therefore, retirement from sport sometimes may be the scene of stress and trauma but, by itself, it often is not the major cause of those problems. (p. 1)

Despite the act of retirement not necessarily being the primary cause of post-career struggles, Kerr & Dacyshyn (2000) formed the theory that the retirement process included the phases of retirement, nowhere land, and new beginnings. The retirement phase is the actual withdrawal from the sport. For college athletes, this can be considered their expiration of eligibility as a primary reason for their retirement. The second phase, termed "Nowhere Land," is described as the athlete's feelings of disorientation, void, and uncertainty. The final stage comprised of exit and emergence is entitled "New Beginnings." These stages form into a generalized model for coping with retirement from sport.

Furthermore, the SCORE study is a valuable quantitative source to analyze long-term academic outcomes of retired college athletes (NCAA, 2011). Results showed that 88% of D-I athletes received a bachelor's degree by the age of 30, and of this group, 35% earned a post-graduate degree by 2010 (NCAA, 2011). Some key differences found between athletes who graduated college and those who did not were particularly striking. College athletes who did not graduate consistently self-reported giving a lower amount of academic effort, having less academic support from a coach, a lower self-identification with being a student and an athlete, less satisfaction with their overall college experience, and a higher belief of turning pro in their sport (NCAA, 2011). In particular, the findings with coaches' perceived importance of student athletes graduating were significant between those who graduated and those who did not.

Research in athlete retirement issues continues to be a growing body of literature. The sample for this study is unique in regards to athletic retirement because most college athletes do not have the opportunity to continue their athletic careers professionally. Instead, their retirement is forced due to the expiration of NCAA eligibility. By taking into account the unique attributes of former college nonrevenue athletes, this study addresses retirement issues that resonate with the current retirement research.

Additional literature centered on recent college athletes could be profoundly beneficial to present and aspiring collegiate athletes, their families, coaches, fans, and other stakeholders in college athletics across the United States. While it is worth noting that every experience is unique from the rest, post-collegiate athletes can offer valuable insights from their individual experiences that can resonate with and help others who may have gone through similar situations.

In fact, the period within one year following an athlete's retirement from college athletics may be the most important time to assess their careers. This has become an area of focus for the NCAA based on their longitudinal SCORE study (NCAA, 2011). Elite athlete retirement research outside of college athletics has also justified the importance of assessing perceptions once the athletic career is finished (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Tinley, 2002). Compared with the research focused on current college athletes, former athletes are able to address their experiences in a deeper manner. Post-collegiate athletes have had more time to develop holistic perceptions of their athletic and academic experiences, rather than in the hurried moments between, for instance, a current collegiate athlete's biochemistry exam and a conference rival matchup (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Tinley, 2002). Additionally, most post-collegiate athletes have had to deal with the feeling of being detached from a team, which is likely the first time since childhood they have not been part of an organized sport (NCAA, 2011). Despite the range of differences across college divisions, conferences, institutions, and athletic teams, former college athletes have meaningful experiences to share—experiences that can reveal the value of their efforts, and the meaning those memories carry now that they are retired from college sport.

### *Purpose of Study*

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of former athletes from Division I and Division III nonrevenue sports regarding their athlete experiences and the influence of those experiences on their present lives. Specifically, three central research questions were proposed:

1. What are college athletes' overall perceptions of their athletic and academic careers once they have been completed?
2. What influences have most strongly contributed to college athletes' preparation and development for life after college?
3. What perceived similarities and differences exist between the lived experiences of D-I and D-III collegiate athletes?

Previously, a large amount of research has investigated college athletes' athletic and academic experiences (Adler & Adler, 1985; Amorose & Horn, 2000; Bell, 2009; Le Crom, Warren, Clark, Marolla, & Gerber, 2009; Meyer, 1990; Miller & Kerr, 2002; NCAA, 2011;

Paule & Gilson, 2010; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006), comparing divisions within intercollegiate sport in America (Miller & Kerr, 2002; NCAA, 2010a; NCAA, 2010b; Sturm, Feltz, & Gilson, 2011), athletic scholarships, technically called grant-in-aid (Amorose & Horn, 2000; Gerdy, 2006; Judson et al., 2005; Le Crom et al., 2009; NCAA Online, 2012a; Pennington, 2008a; Pennington, 2008b; Ryan, 1977), and athletic retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2001; NCAA, 2011; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Tinley, 2002). By gaining insights from the athletes' points of view, administrators will be able to make changes to improve current and future collegiate athletes' college careers both on and off the field of competition. The more that is known about college athletes' experiences, the more administrators and coaches can work to provide the best possible situation, both on and off the field of competition, for the athletes who commit to participate in intercollegiate athletics.

Experiences of post-collegiate athletes are varied based on a range of factors, including future career choice, location, and continuing athletic opportunities. Along the same lines, it is important to recognize that no two college athletic experiences are alike. Thus, it is a secondary purpose to target and compare certain types of athletes whom have been largely excluded from the literature in an attempt to find general themes that may emerge. These categories include D-I and D-III nonrevenue sport athletes. For colleges facing budget cuts, nonrevenue sports are often among the first to lose funding. Therefore, this research could provide further justification to continue funding nonrevenue athletic programs due to the impact the experiences have on collegiate athletes.

## Method

A mixed method approach was utilized for this study. This approach was optimal because the use of a single methodology would not fully or effectively address the research questions presented. By encompassing both quantitative and qualitative components, this research intended to target concrete findings as well as individualized descriptive responses. While many in-depth studies in collegiate athlete experience research focus on select individuals' experiences through interviews (Adler & Adler, 1985; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Meyer, 1990; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Paule & Gilson, 2010, 2011), an increasing amount of research in this field has utilized a mixed methods approach via the use of questionnaires (Holmes et al, 2008; NCAA, 2011; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006; Sturm, Feltz, & Gilson, 2011; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, and Hannah, 2006). While these latter studies have tended more strongly towards quantitative, which are more conducive for larger sample sizes, various levels of qualitative components have been incorporated in these large-scale studies.

As adapted from Patton (1990), a qualitative design provides insight into the phenomena of participants' individual lived experiences. This study was also distinctive because retired college athletes were asked to reflect back on their experience, compared with most studies that evaluated current collegiate athletes. By having a retrospective design, participants were able to look at their experience as a whole after having time to reflect. The data reported from this study occurred in less than one year since retirement from college athletics. The purpose of this was to allow athletes to have time to reflect upon their experiences and remove any perceived fear (real or otherwise) of telling their truth about their experience as an athlete.

## *Participants*

Participants for this study included male and female former college athletes who were listed as seniors on their athletic rosters during the 2010-2011 academic year. The sample yielded participants from two NCAA D-I and three NCAA D-III conferences in the Midwest. Conferences were selected due to their D-I or D-III membership, their similar location, and the expectation that the study's participants could represent the larger population of D-I and D-III nonrevenue sport athletes at the present time in the United States.

Every former athlete's name from the selected conferences, in all sports other than football and basketball, were compiled from each institution's website if available. Two universities were not included in this study due to the direct connections between one of the researchers and potential participants from these programs. The list of former nonrevenue sport athletes within this criterion reached 2,935 names, 2,046 of whom were successfully recruited to participate in this research study. After gaining human subjects approval, the sample of 2,046 former college athletes was contacted either by e-mail (n=619) or through Facebook messaging (n=1,427). While e-mail was the preferred avenue of communication, many former students' addresses could not be located in their college campus directories. Thus, the researchers identified participants individually through a public profile search on Facebook. After the process of recruiting from this list, a total of 297 former athletes participated in the study, which resulted in a 14.5% response rate. While this response rate is not as high as the researchers would have preferred, previous research found that web based surveys tend to yield a lower response rate than paper surveys (Baruch & Holtum, 2008; Shih & Fan, 2008).

Of those who took part in the research, 68 participants were removed from the analysis because they did not meet one or more of the following profile requirements, which were determined in order to fit the target population and comply with the institutional review board. In essence, criterion sampling was used. Criterion sampling involves selecting participants for the study that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2002). In this study, the criteria were that participants enrolled needed to be between the ages of 21-25. They also must have completed their final season of sport eligibility during the 2010-2011 academic year, which meant the athletes were one year removed from eligibility. The researchers deemed this important in order for athletes to have had a little time away from competing in collegiate athletics but the memories would still be recent enough to recall. Transfer students were only counted in the data if they spent at least two years at the latter institution. If it was discovered that a survey respondent did not meet all these parameters, their responses were not considered in the data analysis. In addition, three athletes were removed when they revealed they had participated in both wrestling and football since it would be incredibly difficult to separate their athletic experiences by revenue and non-revenue sport. After removing these participants, 226 responses were accepted for analysis.

## *Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Data Analysis*

The instrument used for this research study was an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was created by the researchers and pilot tested with a group of athletes that were not included in this study. This pilot test was conducted to ensure the survey would be understood and completed correctly. A total of 20 former athletes participated, but their responses served only as a model for the actual research.

Before the participant could begin, the survey link led to an introduction page. This page included informed consent form. When participants clicked on the “continue” button at the bottom of the page, they implied consent to partake in the research study and proceed to the survey content. At the top of each section, the directions indicated that all questions were optional and participants could provide additional comments in the last section. The survey was estimated to take participants 15 minutes, but it likely took some longer to adequately complete it while others took less time.

The survey contained four sections: demographics, college athletic experience, college academic experience, and overall perceptions. Each section comprised a combination of open and closed questions. The closed questions included categorical and scaled response options. The four portions of the survey with Likert scales were provided either four or five response options, all of which assumed an equal distance between choices. The response options varied based upon the set of questions being asked to the participant.

Examples of the close-ended questions in the college athletic experience section included asking participants to rate their athletic performance, opportunities to compete, and individual contribution to the team. In the college academic experience section, participants were asked to rank how their teammates, coaches, professor, team advisor, support staff, and family each influenced their role as a student.

The 11 open-ended questions interspersed throughout the questionnaire were added to capture each former athlete’s unique recollections and to identify deeper meanings and added descriptions. The open-ended questions were analyzed via methods described by Patton (2002) and Silverman (2001). There were three individuals involved in the data analysis of the transcripts, the two primary researchers and another researcher with qualitative research experience. Triangulation between the research team was used in order “to increase the accuracy and credibility of findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 93). The methodological strategy of triangulating analysts involves “having two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data and compared findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 560). This strategy was employed in order to reduce bias.

The researchers read through and analyzed each response to develop lower order themes using an inductive method (Patton, 2002). Inductive analysis occurred next, which included identifying themes within the transcript and then compare and contrast those themes in the other transcripts. After the researchers achieved consensus in the grouping of lower order themes, an identical process was utilized to categorize lower order themes into high order themes. The process of identifying and constructing themes continued until all the raw themes were combined to form the main themes.

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics using SPSS software, which provided a breakdown of responses by frequency and percent. Additionally, a function separated the data between D-I and D-III participants. The primary quantitative analysis included frequencies, means, and the standard deviation from the survey questions. Furthermore, independent t-tests were performed to compare the means of D-I and D-III responses. The quantitative-based questions were analyzed to generalize findings for the broader population of former D-I and D-III college athletes in the United States. The open-ended questions included in the survey were not generalizable, but provided deeper analysis to answer the research questions.

## Results

### Demographics

Total participants included 226 survey respondents included in this study, 62.0% female (n=142) and 38.0% male (n=84), who competed in six athletic conferences. Division I athletes comprised 53.3% (n=122) of the population, while 46.7% of respondents (n=104) had been Division III athletes. Female D-I athletes were most widely represented (36.7%), followed by female D-III athletes (25.3%), male D-III athletes (21.4%), and male D-I athletes (16.6%).

*Table 1* - Total Participants – Gender and Division

			Division		Total
			I	III	
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Count	84	58	142
		% of Total	37.1%	25.7%	62.8%
	Male	Count	38	46	84
		% of Total	16.8%	20.4%	37.2%
<b>Total</b>		Count	122	104	<b>226</b>
		% of Total	53.9%	46.1%	100.0%

All respondents were between the ages of 21-25, with a mean age of 22.57 years. Furthermore, 56.8% of former college athletes attended an in-state institution; 40.6% were from out of state, and 2.6% were international students. The majority of participants graduated in the spring of 2011 (69.0%), while 24.0% graduated the following summer or fall after their athletic eligibility was expired. The remaining responses included graduating in the spring and fall of 2010 (6.6%), which signifies that these students continued their education and still had athletic eligibility. Only one participant did not plan to graduate.

A variety of nonrevenue sports were represented. The largest sport group included cross-country and track (38%), which included two-sport participants as well as only cross country or only track and field. Swimming and diving comprised the next-largest group (13%); followed by soccer (10%); softball and baseball (each 6%); volleyball and golf (each 5%); and field hockey, gymnastics, rowing, tennis, cheerleading, hockey, lacrosse, rifle, synchronized swimming, water polo, and wrestling (each 3% or less). Forty-eight athletes competed in two sports, while just three of these were in sports other than cross country and track. There were also three athletes who listed football along with wrestling; since football is considered a revenue-producing sport, these athletes were removed from the study. The researchers felt that it would be too difficult for the participants to eliminate the existing personal bias. Therefore the final sample for this study was 226 participants.

*Table 2 - Sport Breakdown*

<b>Sport</b>	<b>Total Athletes</b>
Track & Field, Cross Country	87
Swimming/Diving	30
Soccer	22
Softball	15
Baseball	14
Golf	12
Volleyball	12
Other*	9
Rowing	8
Field hockey	6
Gymnastics	6
Tennis	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>226</b>

\* Three or less respondents from the following sports: cheerleading, hockey, lacrosse, rifle, synchronized swimming, water polo, and wrestling.

### *Athletic Experiences*

This part of the survey was intended to gain an understanding of the former college athletes' perceptions of their collegiate athletic career, with components focusing on their own athletic performance, team dynamics, and coach evaluation. As seen in Table 3, the most satisfied elements included teammate support outside of athletics, teammate support within athletics, individuals' opportunities to compete, and individuals' motivation to pursue athletic goals. All four coach ratings collectively resulted in the lowest average ratings, and impact of coach(es) on the team's success received the lowest rating. This mean value reflects that the average college athlete was still "somewhat satisfied" with coach dynamics.

*Table 3 - Perceptions of college athletic experience*

(Rating of 1-4: 1=Very Dissatisfied, 2=Somewhat Dissatisfied, 3=Somewhat Satisfied, 4=Very Satisfied)

Rank	How would you rate:	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1	Teammate support outside of athletics	3.60	0.70	226
2	Teammate support within athletics	3.58	0.71	226
3	Your opportunities to compete	3.56	0.76	226
4	Motivation to pursue your athletic goals	3.53	0.70	225
5	Your individual contribution to the team	3.48	0.69	226
6	Teammate trustworthiness	3.43	0.71	226
7	Impact of team on your athletic development	3.42	0.75	225
8	Your athletic performance	3.31	0.72	226
9	Coach(es) support of your athletic goals	3.23	0.93	226

<b>10</b>	Coach(es) investment in developing your athletic ability	3.19	0.96	224
<b>11</b>	Impact of coach(es) on your athletic development	3.13	0.95	225
<b>12</b>	Impact of coach(es) on your team's success	3.00	1.01	226

The next quantitative section asked participants how they would measure their individual athletic experience, team dynamics, and coach dynamics *overall*. Table 4 depicts the mean and standard deviation of all athletes' responses. Individual athletic experience ranked the highest and was followed closely by team dynamics. Consistent with the specific ratings above, average satisfaction with coach dynamics ranked the lowest in relation to personal athletic experience and their perceptions of team support.

*Table 4 - Overall Perceptions of Athletic Experience*

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>N</b>
Individual Athletic Experience	3.53	0.64	226
Team Dynamics	3.47	0.72	226
Coach Dynamics	2.98	0.97	224

Participants were also allowed to provide open-ended responses to the following questions:

- Who or what most strongly influenced your college career in athletics?
- Is there anything you would have changed about your athletic experience if you had the opportunity? Please explain.

### *Influences on Athletic Career*

The most popular external influences (outside of the athlete) for athletes included coaches (n=111), teammates (n=88), and family (n=47), respectively. Major internal (personal) influences included the sub-themes of passion/drive (n=26), winning/competitiveness (n=21), self in general (n=13), and love of sport (n=11).

Not surprisingly, coaches were former athletes' strongest athletic influence. For many former athletes who explained how their coach impacted them, a common theme emerged that while their coaches were committed to their athletes' potential in the sport, they were equally interested in supporting their off-field endeavors. The following responses encapsulate this theme:

I had fantastic coaches that were willing, and very much wanted to spend time together outside of practice. They wanted to invest personally in you to help you achieve your greatest. They wanted to know what they could do to help make you a better student and athlete. (Athlete #16, Division III)

My coach and assistant coach most strongly influenced my college career. They helped me develop as a runner by slowly building my training each year. They were great

listeners and instilled a lot of trust in my own judgment to know what I should or should not run. They also were involved in my life outside of running. My head coach in particular was notorious for knowing EVERYTHING, good or bad, but that is why he was able to be there for every single one of his athletes. (Athlete #137, Division I)

The second-strongest influence given by former college athletes was their teammates. The following quote illustrates this theme.

The people that were the greatest influence on my athletic career were my fellow teammates who I competed against and were also my greatest friends. The healthy competition between us drove each of us to devote ourselves completely to the team and we pushed each other daily to improve. This also applied to academics as well, where we expected each other to succeed and excel. (Athlete #117, Division III)

The internal, or personal, influences also contributed strongly to many participants' athletic careers. More D-III athletes reported having strong internal influences (16.2%) compared with D-I athletes (9.9%), although a closer percentage of D-I and D-III athletes indicated responses that contained both internal and external influences (14.4% and 17.1%, respectively). The subsequent response highlights the sub-themes within these internal and mixed categories:

The idea of performing better than I had in the past was always my strongest influence. In riflery, it is very easy to tell the difference in your performance between matches. Unlike other sports, it doesn't matter what other players do. The only thing that affects my score is me. I can't blame a bad day on my competitors. It doesn't matter how good or bad they are, if I shoot a higher score than at another match, the difference will always be because of me. I used this to motivate myself to always try to improve, and not worry so much about the other competitors. If I beat them, that was great. If not, I would know why. (Athlete #184, Division I)

### *Changes to Athletic Experience*

Participants next responded to what, if anything, they would have changed about their athletic experience. Responses were broken down based on their external, internal, or mixed nature. Both D-I and D-III athletes were most likely to have only changed an external factor. However, a large percentage (34.0%, n=69) of former athletes would have changed an internal/personal factor during their college athletic career. In addition, 17.2% of respondents (n=35) suggested that they would not have changed anything. It is also important to note that fewer participants answered this question of the survey than any other component (n=202). Whether or not these athletes would have changed anything in their athletic career cannot be discerned since they did not answer this specific question.

Across both divisions, former athletes most widely referenced coach or program management as the leading aspect they would have changed (63 total responses of 203, 31.3%). The following analysis targets the external coach/program dynamics, team dynamics, and other miscellaneous themes that developed from the data.

Former athletes in D-I and D-III programs were displeased with an assortment of staff issues, including poor relationships with other coaches, lack of vision, inexperience, and lack of perceived athlete support. The most prominent topic within this sub-theme, however, was coach turnover and the negative impact it had on athletes at the time. The following quote reflects this:

[Our] head coach was fired in the middle of the year, which made it difficult for all athletes to change from one coach's workouts to another coach's workouts. (Athlete #37, Division I)

Next, the researchers examined the internal/personal regrets participants had. The most common internal/personal regret cited by participants was that they should have made more of their athletic experience by working harder physically, showing more dedication to the team, or displaying more maturity. Most of these statements were brief, such as this one:

I wish I would have been more dedicated when I was an underclassman. (Athlete #168, Division III)

In contrast, some athletes felt they had taken their experience too seriously and wish they had relaxed and embraced their athletic experience more:

I would not change my experiences, only wish I had taken the time as a freshman and sophomore to truly enjoy it. (Athlete #29, Division I)

A group of athletes (n=31) also expressed the desire to have spent more time with the team and be part of the team longer, such as in the case of some transfer students. These athletes seemed to have recognized their college experience had gone by too fast and wished they had not taken anything for granted:

More time with the team. I was blessed with supportive and knowledgeable coaches, great friends on the team and I only wish I had more time with them... (Athlete #115, Division III)

Finally, a large portion of former college athletes indicated that they would not have changed anything about their athletic experience. A total of 17.2% (n=35) participants expressed the simple phrase, "no", or expanded upon their decision like the following:

No, I loved every minute. I think I would have loved a small school and smaller division just as much but I am glad I went D 1. It's fun when you are actually ranked as a team. It feels cool, I guess. To me, it's not about that anyway. I bet D3 would have been fun too but I don't know if I would have reached my individual potential there. (Athlete #139, Division I)

This analysis of external and internal themes concluded the athletic experience section of the questionnaire. The next two sections assessed former athletes' academic perceptions and overall feelings as they evaluated their college athletic experience with their present situation.

### *Academic Experiences*

When former athletes were asked whether they believed they received a high-quality education, 97.4% (n=223) answered yes. In fact, only five D-I athletes and one D-III athlete did not think they received a good education.

Participants were also asked to what extent a teammate, coach, professor, program advisor, athletic support staff member, and family member influenced their role as a student. This was analyzed by assigning a Likert scale as follows: Negative influence – 0, None/Minimal influence – 1, Limited but positive influence – 2, Helpful and positive influence – 3, Substantial influence, would not have succeeded without them – 4. The order of average influence, from highest to lowest, was a family member (m=3.22), professor (m=3.06), teammate (m=2.67), coach (m=2.53), program advisor (m=2.42), and athletic support staff member (m=2.13).

The most influential people in the sample's academic careers were from the athlete's family (84.7%, n=194), a professor (81.2%, n=186), and/or a teammate (63.3%, n=145). The least influential included athletic support staff (62.4%, n=143), a program advisor (47.2%, n=108), and a coach (42.4%, n=97). It is worth noting that not all programs may have had athletic support staff available, particularly at D-III institutions.

### *Overall Experience and Present Situation*

The final section of the survey was intended to pinpoint the impact of how the participants' athletic and academic experiences have shaped their development now that they are "retired" from college athletics.

For the quantitative component of this section, participants rated five overarching elements of their college experience. Table 5 shows the mean values of D-I, D-III, and total responses.

For college experience as a whole, an independent t-test revealed a significant difference,  $-3.867(204) = .000$ , ( $p < 0.05$ ), with D-III athletes ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $s = .473$ ) reporting higher values than D-I athletes ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $s = .758$ ). For overall academic experience, the t-test also showed a significant difference,  $-3.34(221) = .001$ , ( $p < 0.05$ ), with D-III athletes ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $s = .588$ ) reporting higher values than D-I athletes ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $s = .789$ ). Additionally, for overall athletic experience, the t-test revealed a significant difference,  $-2.719(226) = .007$ , with D-III athletes ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $s = .691$ ) reporting higher values than D-I athletes ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $s = .853$ ).

For level of preparedness felt for life beyond athletic competition, an independent t-test failed to show a significant difference,  $-1.931(226) = .055$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), yet D-III athletes ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $s = .718$ ) reported higher values than D-I athletes ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $s = .839$ ). For satisfaction with how the college experience shaped their present situation, the t-test failed to show a significant difference,  $-1.725(227) = .086$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), yet D-III athletes ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $s = .677$ ) reported higher values than D-I athletes ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $s = .877$ ). Lastly, all five responses combined revealed a significant difference,  $-3.522(214) = .001$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), where D-III athletes ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $s = .572$ ) reported higher mean values than D-I athletes ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $s = .645$ ).

In every component, D-III athletes averaged a slightly higher response than their D-I counterparts. Both D-I and D-III athletes reported being most satisfied with their college experience as a whole, and the average response across both divisions was 4.55 (between "Good" and "Excellent", with a stronger leaning towards "Excellent"). The lowest average response overall was a tie between overall athletic experience and academic experience ( $M =$

4.31). All mean responses fell between the “Good” and “Excellent” category, with the D-I overall academic experience reported the lowest mean ( $M = 4.17$ ) and the D-III overall college experience reported the highest mean ( $M = 4.67$ ).

*Table 5* - How would you rate the following elements of your college experience?  
(Rating of 1-5: 1=Poor, 2=Fair, 3=Moderate, 4=Good, 5=Excellent)

Item	D-I	D-III	Total	Significant? ( $P = .05$ )
College experience as a whole	4.40	4.72	4.55	Yes
Overall academic experience	4.17	4.48	4.31	Yes
Overall athletic experience	4.18	4.46	4.31	Yes
Level of preparedness you feel for life beyond athletic competition	4.32	4.52	4.42	No
Satisfaction with how college experience has shaped your present situation	4.29	4.47	4.37	No
All five responses	4.27	4.53	4.39	Yes

**Was it worth it?.** While this question was purposefully broad, it was asked to determine whether former college athletes believed their commitment to the collegiate athlete lifestyle was a meaningful investment of time and energy as they reflect back on it. The vast majority of study participants (89.92%) found their athletic experience was indeed worthwhile.

Of the open-ended comments that followed, 36 responses contained the word “absolutely”, while 21 included “definitely”. The responses below illuminate some of the positive sentiments former athletes felt about their experiences, encompassing championships, life skills, memorable moments, and other lessons:

Of course. I have the greatest memories from playing at (name of University). I have friends that shared the same aspirations and goals as I do. The senior class all come back certain weekends to see each other and get ready for the pro season ahead. It also helped me accomplish my lifelong dream of being drafted and winning a (name of conference) Championship. I was also able to do things and accomplish things that non-athletes do not get a chance to. (Athlete #1, Division I)

Yes. Life is all about the experiences, and the experiences I had as a competitive student-athlete were amazing. I also learned how to work hard, accomplish goals, and balance my time. Those are skills that I will carry with me throughout life. And looking back, I think

that being an athlete kept me from making poor choices in my social life. (Athlete #52, Division III)

Other athletes commented on having a positive experience overall, but now are dealing with feelings of retirement discord:

I think being a student-athlete has taught me how to be resilient and to manage my time. Even though I sometimes feel lost without the high competition I do think that athletics has impacted me positively in my life currently and hopefully in the future. (Athlete #154, Division I)

As a whole, each athlete reflected upon different aspects of their experience that, for the most part, made their efforts worthwhile.

**What can you apply now?** Next, participants were asked what aspects from college they have been able to utilize in their life at present. Due to the nature of these responses, results were analyzed by finding the frequencies of common words found in the 220 total answers given, which are provided in Figure 20. The top 30 words used included many character traits and qualities, with “work”, “time”, and “manage” unequivocally topping the list.

**Table 6** - What aspects from your college experience have you been able to apply to your life now? (top 30 words reported, including their variants)

Rank	Word	Total	DI	DIII
1	work	123	74	49
2	time	113	62	51
3	manage	84	47	37
4	team-	53	25	28
5	skill	46	22	24
6	lead-	26	18	8
7	dedication	23	13	10
8	communicate	21	14	7
9	everything	21	10	11
10	coach	17	8	9
11	ability	16	9	7
12	motivation	16	9	7
13	goal	15	9	6
14	balance	15	5	10
15	discipline	14	9	5
16	stress	14	7	7
17	organize	13	7	6
18	task	8	7	1
19	develop	7	3	4
20	priority	7	3	4
21	responsible	7	2	5
22	focus	6	2	4
23	social	6	2	4

24	support	6	0	6
25	commit-	5	2	3
26	confidence	5	2	3
27	perseverance	5	2	3
28	patience	4	3	1
29	plan	4	3	1
30	relationship	4	2	2

The following excerpts from some of the participants bring to life some of the key themes presented from these responses:

I am currently a grad student...pursuing my Master's in Sport Psychology. Almost every aspect of my college experience has been applicable to my life now, especially in regards to consulting athletes and the mental skills techniques I am learning now. I know what it is like to be an athlete--I've been through the stresses, the highs, the lows. I know what it takes to reach a peak performance and how to set strong, effective goals. Most importantly, I was able to take my discipline and dedication from college and apply it to my life now and that has truly made a huge difference. (Athlete #197, Division III)

Communicating with people from all backgrounds is much easier for me since being a college athlete. I could go from a classroom of really smart peers and have to talk all intelligently, then go down to practice and totally change my communication style to get my point across. You really learn the nuances of communication firsthand this way. (Athlete #182, Division I)

From the combination of demographics, academic and athletic experiences, and overall perceptions, this survey was intended to gain the feedback from a large number of former college athletes. While the results from qualitative responses may not be generalized to the broader population of nonrevenue sport college athletes across the United States, there have been themes uncovered that can contribute to the knowledge base of how both current and former college athletes are evaluating their college experience.

## Discussion

This study was intended to explore athletes' post-collegiate experiences both on and off the field of competition, while focusing on how they have been influenced by their athletic careers once they were, in most cases, recently retired from their sport. Through participants' responses, both statistical data and individual reflections covered a variety of themes and issues that highlighted or detracted from overall positive experiences. These findings support previous research of college athlete satisfaction with their college careers (Emerson, Brooks, & McKenzie, 2009; Miller & Kerr, 2002; NCAA, 2011; Paule & Gilson, 2010; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006; Ryan, 1989; Umbach et al., 2006). In addition, this study contributes a new perspective on this realm of research by its focus on nonrevenue sport athletes and comparison between D-I and D-III, while also providing further research questions to gain additional knowledge. At minimum, this study supports the continued presence of nonrevenue sport programs on college campuses. Both the tangible and intangible elements have impacted post-

collegiate athletes due to their deep connection to the sport they love (and without much of the recognition the big-time sport athletes receive). These principles should make a convincing case for institutions to provide nonrevenue sport programs in the long term, and, if possible, increase athletic opportunities at the collegiate level.

### *External influences: The impact of coaches, teammates, and academic excellence*

The reported athletic experiences encompassed a spectrum of topics; among the top involved the influence of coaches. An interesting theme emerged with participants who mentioned their coaches - former athletes either commented or rated their coaches as major positive influences, or they were very critical of their coaching staff and program management. In both situations, it became evident that the coaches' impact on post-collegiate athletes was unmistakable. Of respondents who said a coach was their strongest influence, approximately half specifically mentioned their head coach; the remainder included assistants, the general coaching staff, or a previous coach. These findings, similar to the 2010 GOALS summary (NCAA, 2011), point to the importance of the athlete-coach relationship; whether coaches contributed positively or negatively to a collegiate athlete's development, it grew clear that coaches played a major role in their current and former athletes' lives.

The next most popular external influence participants mentioned was that of their teammates. Post-collegiate athletes ranked their teammates' support both outside and inside the athletic field as the top ranked athletic component, and of those who listed social support as a primary stress outlet, the majority (61%) turned to their teammates before anyone else. These themes show how important social support is for the college athlete. Whether it is accountability, encouragement, or even the mere presence of another person, these external influences have a significant impact on collegiate athletes even following their college experience.

From the academic side, an overwhelming majority (97.4%) believed they had received a high-quality education, while most also believed that being an athlete helped their academic performance. These findings support the belief that academics and athletics can go hand-in-hand and are consistent with previous research (Bell, 2009; Gayles, 2009; Meyer, 1990; NCAA, 2011; Paule & Gilson, 2011; Richards & Aries, 1999). Despite these sources that support the collegiate athlete dynamic, Adler & Adler (1985) and the Knight Commission (2010) suggest that academic performance suffers when paired with athletics. Perhaps these views have more weight with revenue-producing sports; but if this generalization is correct, it should be reiterated that 74% of collegiate athletes compete in traditionally nonrevenue sports (Judson, James, & Aurand, 2005). Similar to previous studies (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Paule & Gilson, 2010; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006), this study found that most collegiate athletes found that their athletic experience were substantially beneficial to their educational development.

### *Internal motivations: Moving on past college*

From the internal responses given in the survey, the feedback that was internal—that is, controllable by the individual and not directed towards others—suggested some promising findings. Over one-quarter of respondents addressed something about themselves as a primary athletic influence, and over one-third wished they could change a personal aspect about their athletic career (i.e. take their experience more seriously). Over half of the participants resorted

to internal stress outlets first; while the top overall intangible lessons learned from being a collegiate athlete included hard work, time management, leadership, and dedication. The open-ended questions were intentionally broad, which led to considerably rich and unique responses surrounding athletes' internal motivations to compete. With former athletes sharing these personal reflections, it is all the more encouraging that their experiences do have meaning and worth even though their collegiate career is finished. These qualitative responses show that post-collegiate athletes have not only taken away many positive memories, but they have also recognized their personal motivation and growth along the way.

While some negative responses attacked outside influences, those who addressed personal responsibility acknowledged that no one is perfect, including the participants themselves. College development has been studied by many scholars (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Gayles, 2009; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Kissinger & Miller, 2009; Pascarella, 2006; Simmons & Freeman, 2006). Simmons & Freeman (2006) address personal development as the most important attribute to the collegiate athlete experience. By admitting their faults in the process, many within this population portrayed a high level of reflection and maturity that has undoubtedly contributed to personal development.

On a similar note, the dominant theme of recent experiences as a college athlete proved to be overwhelmingly worthwhile. Since concluding their collegiate careers, former athletes in this study moderately fit the generalized coping process with sport retirement as formed by Kerr & Dacyshyn (2000). With all the participants having been within one year of retirement from collegiate competition, common perceptions included personal regret and "nowhere land"—in other words, a lack of direction for the future. However, based on the aspects to apply to life outside of sport, along with the quantitative means from the preparedness and satisfaction on present situation categories, results showed that former college athletes have been equipped with the tools and personal growth to move forward beyond the scope of their previous athletic roles.

The transition period can be difficult to adjust to once the athletic and academic expectations are taken away. Many participants expressed mixed feelings about the future and a longing to continue being part of a team. Therefore, former athletes must learn to take the lessons and experiences they have accumulated throughout their athletic careers and, in most cases, channel the same passion and determination into the new challenges and opportunities they will encounter. For many respondents, this new challenge will be graduate school or a full-time job search. The reported aspects they applied to their present lives will certainly help them through their next stage of life—although they will need to learn how to directly apply themes like "hard work" and "time management" to the new opportunities and challenges they will face.

The athlete's coaches and/or athletic administrators can aid in this transition period from collegiate athlete to retired athlete. These athletes have given four, sometimes five, years to the institution and could greatly benefit from programming the athletic department could provide to the athletes. The coaches and athletic administrators could bring in former athletes to offer transition advice on how to enter the world of athletic retirement. These former athletes, having gone through the same thing as the current athletes, will be able to explain how the skills the athletes learned while playing their sport will be able to help them in the transition and the "real world".

### *Division I or III?*

The missions governing D-I and D-III have differing goals within the scope of recognition and athlete support (NCAA, 2010a; NCAA, 2010b). Even with the dissimilarities in missions, D-I and D-III athletes shared an array of perceptions, major influences, and meaningful experiences when compared separately. Before suggesting which experience is best, it is vital to reiterate that from both divisions, a substantial amount of evidence supported the positive associations and reflections experienced by post-collegiate athletes, no matter which division they competed. (The same statement can be made for separate conferences, nonrevenue sports, and gender.)

In many of the questions asked, D-III athletes exhibited more positive feelings. In particular, D-III athletes rated all quantitative elements encompassing the overall experiences and present life circumstances higher than D-I athletes. In addition, the findings within overall athletic experience, academic experience, and college experience as a whole were statistically significant. Therefore, in this population, D-III athletes reported higher levels of satisfaction with their athletic experience than D-I athletes.

Based on these findings, it is suggested that D-III nonrevenue athletics be given continued support on their respective campuses and a broad-based programming structure that fits the mission and feasibility of the institution. If D-III athletes have more positive experiences than D-I athletes, these programs should certainly not be threatened with program cuts. Since the D-III mission emphasizes the impact of the sport on the participants (NCAA, 2010b), administrators need to ensure the student fees and outside funding that directly supports the athletic budget are directed toward sustaining and improving the athletic programs. D-III athletic departments make little, if any, revenue directly from their programs; nevertheless, it is up to athletic administrators to portray how the post-collegiate impact of the athletic experience rises above the financial costs.

Even in dismal economic conditions, D-III institutions need to protect and improve participation opportunities for the sake of enrollment. On average, collegiate athletes make up 20% of the student body at D-III institutions (NCAA Online, 2012b). While on the surface it may appear that pumping money into athletic programs would hurt the institution, without these programs students who base their college decision on athletics will take their talents and tuition dollars elsewhere.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

A few limiting factors from this study first include the unequal responses in regards to the athletes' genders, conferences, and sports. For example, 44% of D-III participants competed in cross-country and/or track, which is a larger proportion than the nonrevenue population. Another unavoidable limitation was the inherent response bias in questionnaires; voluntary participation can lead to extreme responses that may not reflect the general perception of the typical former college athlete. Due to the large amount of data provided through this study, further analysis could offer additional insights to the collegiate athlete experience, which may be conducted in future studies.

The data is also likely skewed in a more positive light for all college athletes because the sample did not include those who failed to complete all four years of athletic eligibility. Therefore, the participants' previous teammates who may have quit prior to their senior seasons

were not recruited for this study. The sample represented former collegiate athletes who successfully completed all four years of athletic eligibility, and, in most cases, graduated in that time frame as well. Thus, findings can be generalized toward the population of collegiate athletes who complete their athletic eligibility, but not necessarily for all collegiate athletes in the NCAA.

As referenced in Gayles (2009), the majority of studies in collegiate athlete research are self-collected by individual institutions on single occasions. The NCAA-sponsored research encompassed a range of institutions, but suggested an increased focus in athlete reflections of how college contributed to personal growth (NCAA, 2011; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2006). This study attempted to find a middle ground and broaden the participant pool by having former athletes from multiple conferences take the questionnaire.

It is important to note that no two college athletic experiences are alike. Even though the authors attempted to gain a wide range of experiences by initially contacting 2,046 former athletes, it may be possible that the athletes who chose to respond are the ones that had more positive experiences and feelings toward their athletic participation.

By having a retrospective design, participants were able to look at their experience as a whole after having time to reflect. While this was an important design tool of this study, it could also be considered a limitation since an athlete's recollection of his or her experiences may change with time.

In order to gain a better grasp on the long-term outcomes of collegiate athlete experiences, more longitudinal research is needed rather than a one-time assessment. While the benefits of conducting a study so soon after an athlete graduates include more clear memories of their sport experiences there are also drawbacks. For instance, as an athlete continues life post-college, he or she may develop new insights based upon life experiences that change their feelings about their collegiate athletic experience. This is where the benefits of a longitudinal study would occur. Beneficial assessment time periods could include the summer before a college athlete's freshman year (demographic section only), within one year following expiration of eligibility (identical with this study), three years following, five years following, ten years following, and every decade beyond. Paule & Gilson (2010) raise the question whether time away from the sport impacts the accuracy of former athletes' perceptions. With retrospective data, it would be insightful to compare the changes in former college athletes' perceptions based on the length of time since retirement from the sport.

Another necessary research gap to fill includes gaining NCAA D-II, NAIA, and revenue-generating sport athletes' perceptions and the post-collegiate impact of their college experiences. Similarly, additional conferences should be surveyed that include geographic locations outside the Midwestern region of the United States. By studying an expanded range of collegiate athlete experiences, further evidence could bolster or dispute the findings from this study.

Finally, it would be important to address athlete's experiences and perceptions of their athletic experiences post-graduation while analyzing their responses in regards to race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. These expressions are critical to the experiences of athletes at all levels, in all sports, and in different regions of the country. Thus, it would be important to examine these factors in relation to athletic experiences.

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### Notes

1. It should be understood that most programs, whether termed revenue or nonrevenue, do not actually generate profits for college athletic programs.