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Advancing College Athlete Development via Social Support

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Given the increased attention on college athlete well-being, effective athlete development has emerged as a timely and relevant topic to empirically study. Moving beyond physical and sport-specific advancement, the authors examine how college athletes' social support is critical to their development. Utilizing the sport development frameworks, specifically the retention stage of elite athlete development, the mechanisms that provided social support were revealed through a two-phased study. Survey data from 776 college athletes (Phase One) were utilized to inform focus groups (n=31; Phase Two). The researchers identified Openness and Honesty, Equal Treatment, Intentional Programming, and Informal Interaction as essential best practices in retaining college athletes. The critical role of organizational planning in lessening stress while improving well-being and athletic advancement is demonstrated with practical examples that can be applied by athletic department administrators. Further, the researchers highlight that the various forms of athlete well-being (e.g., physical, mental, social) are not independent, but interconnected and must be intentionally pursued by stakeholders.

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Increasing attention, in both resources allocated and research undertaken, has been given to the all-around development (e.g., physical, academic, social) of college athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Sport Science Institute, 2018; Warner, 2016; Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010). In any sport system, once athletes have begun their sport participation stakeholders (e.g., athletic department leadership and staff) must be able to support the intensified commitment that higher levels of competition demand (Dean & Reynolds, 2017; Green, 2005). Both research and practice have demonstrated that these processes to support athletes require intentional efforts by stakeholders¹ based on empirically established principles. While there are many factors that facilitate the retention of athletes, social support, or a sense of community, consistently has been identified in literature as a crucial consideration that must be appropriately managed (Baker, Horton, Robertson-Wilson, & Wall, 2003; Berg, Fuller, & Hutchinson, 2018; Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008; Kidd, Southall, Nagel, Reynolds, & Anderson; 2018; Warner & Dixon, 2011).

College athletes are one group that demands further attention related to how social support can impact their retention experiences. Specifically, it is vital to understand how athletes feeling that support is available at a group level is fundamental to their experience and whether they stay committed to a university and/or a sport. Across universities there is strong emphasis on the need for all students to be integrated into healthy communities (Warner & Dixon, 2013; Warner, Sparvero, Shapiro, & Anderson, 2017). For students it is well established that a strong sense of community is associated with enhanced well-being (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996) and improvements in campus participation and academic performance (Albanesi et al., 2007; McCarthy, Pretty, & Cantano, 1990; Townley et al., 2013). Furthermore, experiencing a sense of community has resulted in reduced incidences of student burnout (Olds & Schwartz, 2010), substance abuse (Mayberry, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009), and delinquency (Battistich & Hom, 1997). While college athletes, who are also students, will have various supporting stakeholders, the athletic department under which they train and compete arguably has the most prominent influence on their development (Czekanski & Turner, 2015; Sartore-Baldwin & Warner, 2012). When university athletic departments create a strong sense of community, they are meeting an essential and innate need for their athletes (Warner, 2016). This does not guarantee successful athletic performance, but research clearly supports it is fundamental to athlete retention and overall well-being (Berg, Warner, & Das, 2015; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013; Warner & Leierer, 2015).

The Challenge

Like other units on college campuses (e.g., campus recreation, social clubs), the out-of-class experiences that athletic departments create helps integrate and establish ties that have been directly linked to student retention and persistence (Elkins, Forrester, & Noël-Elkins, 2011; Thomas, 2000; Townley et al., 2013). Although a sense of community is vital for all students,

¹ “Stakeholders” and “social influences” are used throughout this manuscript to identify key socializers. Because of the Sport Development framing, we used these terms to be most consistent with that literature base.

building and maintaining it can be challenging. University campuses are microcosms of society and following trends in the larger U.S. population, a sense of community is diminishing while social isolation is increasing (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Olds & Schwartz, 2010; Warner & Dixon, 2013). As a result, reported loneliness is now being thought of as a public health epidemic (Gerst-Emerson & Jayawardhana, 2015; Low, 2018) and universities are seeing similar reports on their campuses. According to the American College Health Association (2018), over 60% of college students reported “feeling very lonely” in the last 12 months. This lack of community and social isolation is thought to be contributing to the increasing mental health issues being observed (Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010; Xiao et al., 2017). University counseling centers have been overwhelmed with requests for services and students continue to experience long waitlists (Prince, 2015). Thus, it has become even more important for administrators to understand how to provide social support and build community on a college campus (cf. Boyer & Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990).

Providing this social support is especially necessary for college athletes, as they have been shown to face greater stress due to their sport participation (Beauchemin, 2014; Cranmer, 2018). In fact, it is estimated 10% to 15% of college athletes (compared to campus-wide averages of 8% to 9%) experience psychological issues that could warrant professional counseling (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Researchers have suggested that mental health risk is further exacerbated when athletes are in a new environment and report low social support (Dean & Reynolds, 2017; Gouttebauge, Frings-Dresen, & Sluiter, 2015; Rice et al., 2016). College athletes experience unique stressors and additional demands due to their athletic status, such as time away from campus to travel to competitions or coping with the uncertain ramifications of an injury. Unfortunately, college athletes are also less likely to seek help to address mental health issues or cope with various sources of stress (Birky, 2007; Delenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012). The NCAA’s Sport Science Institute (NCAA Sport Science Institute, 2018) has acknowledged mental health, which is influenced by social support, as a critical current issue for overall athlete well-being. Thus, to address overall well-being and mental health issues, the need for understanding best practices for creating and maintaining a supportive community for college athletes is becoming increasingly important.

When athletes are able to successfully reach and continue to compete in elite level competition, it is not only a substantiation of their dedication to training and innate sport talent, but also the synchronized efforts of several stakeholders (Baker, 2003; Burgess & Naughton, 2010; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008). For example, stakeholders (e.g., coaches, support staff of sport organizations, national governing bodies) will often ensure that there are coordinated strategies in place to maintain a culture of success as new athletes join and become embedded in the sport organization (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Brouwers, De Bosscher, and Sotiriadou (2012) and Cranmer (2017) noted the importance of sport organizations proactively assisting athletes’ adjustment to a new setting and being prepared to manage unpredictable challenges the athletes may encounter, such as burnout, injury, or coaching staff changes. Sport development researchers have illustrated that elite athletic excellence does not solely require physical or sport-specific enhancement, but also the social development of the athlete (Baker et al., 2003; Martindale, Collins, & Daubney, 2005).

A greater awareness is needed by stakeholders (e.g., athletic department leadership and staff) to support college athlete performance *and* well-being. For instance, research has demonstrated that social support is critical to decreasing stress that leaves athletes more vulnerable to experiencing an injury or recovering from an injury at a more delayed pace (De

Groot, Weaver, Brown, & Hall, 2018; Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010; Williams & Andersen, 1998). Beyond injury, social support has been shown to assist college athletes' ability to cope with changing circumstances and adversity that may emerge (e.g., death of a loved one, academic struggles; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). This adaptability, as Morgan and Giacobbi noted, not only increases the likelihood of success in college athletics, but can also benefit college athletes once they conclude their competitive careers. Significant social influences can affect college athletes' social health. Because they will likely have the most recurrent interactions, certain individuals can have a profound impact on athletes (Berg et al., 2018; Cranmer, 2017; Dixon, Warner, & Bruening, 2008). Significant social influences will vary for each college athlete, but examples include parents, siblings, friends, teammates, and previous coaches. In college athletics, instrumental social influences with whom college athletes interact with also include university athletic department staff, such as administrative leaders, coaches, and academic support personnel. To effectively support college athletes, athletic department staff will need to inquire and know who the key social influences are for each athlete.

Thus far in the sport development literature the critical role of social support in a college athletics setting has been limited (Sotiriadou et al., 2008) and best practices to facilitate such support have remained ambiguous. The purpose of this study was to illustrate how college athletes experienced a sense of community and demonstrate the critical role of social support in elite sport development practices, particularly at the retention stage. To provide context for the study, a review of the sport development frameworks and social support in college athletics will be presented.

A Sport Development Framework

As Shilbury, Sotiriadou, and Green (2008) explained, the fundamental consideration of sport development research and practice is to recognize the issues that support sport participation and the most effective methods to promote the opportunities and positive outcomes of participation. In order to achieve broader policy goals, sport development decisions continually have been adopted by sport governing bodies, governments, and other policymaking authorities, including athletic departments (Green & Oakley, 2001; Houlihan & Green, 2008). The sport development frameworks consist of three stages: Attraction, Retention, and Transition. Attraction signifies the conditions by which individuals begin their participation in a sport (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Due to the length of participation in their sport and elite athletic talent attained, college athletes are beyond the attraction stage for their sport once they reach the college level. Retention denotes participants advancing from merely sampling a sport and converting into regularly engaged and dedicated athletes. Transition signifies how athletes progress to other settings for sustained sport participation or obtain advanced training that is customized to improve the likelihood the athletes are successful in national and international competitions (Brouwers, Sotiriadou, & De Bosscher, 2015). For purposes of this study the retention stage is the primary focus as this is the most relevant stage college athletes are experiencing while competing for their universities. In order to effectively support and develop elite athletic talent in any college athletics setting, the intricacies of the retention framework need to be recognized and further considered (Sotiriadou et al., 2008).

Social Support in College Athlete Development

If continued participation and commitment are to be realized (i.e., retention stage), athletes must enjoy and place importance on the benefits derived from their sport participation. While some college athletes may not have a high level of intrinsic enjoyment of their sport, benefits for college athletes may include a scholarship funding their education or the opportunity to form a desired social identity. Commitment reasons differ for each person and, therefore, benefits of athletic involvement must be repetitively experienced and highlighted while in a program to increase the chances that a large portion of college athletes will be retained (Chambliss, 1989; Gould & Carson, 2004; Green, 2005). However, with a focus on training methods and success in competition, social support and interaction through sport participation have been shown to be overlooked as a crucial outcome by program leaders (Sotiriadou, Wicker, & Quick, 2014).

From the viewpoint of athletes, along with potential for success in their sport, Stevenson (1990) observed that elite athletes' dedication to a sport was mostly influenced by ongoing positive relationships with their most significant social influences. This provided opportunities for desirable social identities and self-identities to be more likely formed. Socialization is the process in which athletes are prepared to be functioning members of their organization or team by learning the knowledge, skills, values, and norms deemed appropriate by members of that organization or team (Cranmer, 2017; Marx, Huffmon, & Doyle, 2008; Woolf, Berg, Newland, & Green, 2016). Effective socialization, as Benson, Evans, and Eys (2016) and Cranmer (2018) noted, is crucial for the benefits it provides both the athletic department (e.g., increased retention rates, higher levels of commitment) and the individual athlete (e.g., increased perceptions of belonging or fit, reduced role ambiguity). As part of the socialization process, it is essential that stakeholders recognize athletes validate their identities with the sport, which is vital to retention efforts (Cranmer, 2018). Green (2005) explained that an athlete's identity and motivation resulting from socialization experiences are not static, but must persistently be reinforced. Thus, continued encouragement from important social influences, recognition and rewards for exceptional efforts in training and competition, team social functions, emphasizing skill development, noting progress toward educational attainment, and mentoring are some of the activities in a program that need to be intentionally coordinated by athletic department personnel (e.g., coaches, academic support staff, athletic directors) in order to improve performance outcomes, increase acceptance of organizational expectations, and reduce role ambiguity or conflict among college athletes (Benson et al., 2016; Cranmer, 2018; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; MacPhail & Kirk, 2006; Sotiriadou et al., 2014). If applied, as the athletes' involvement with the sport program is reinforced, retention will be more probable (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Green, 2005).

College Athletics Contextualization

In this study, the social development and sense of community processes of college athletes will be examined. The retention framework from the sport development literature is used to analyze how these social experiences impact college athlete development. Given that less than 3% of high school athletes advance to participate at the top college level, NCAA Division I, this context is well suited for studying elite athlete development (Lyons, Dorsch, Bell, & Mason, 2018; NCAA Research, 2018). As Brouwers et al. (2015) described, this use of the retention

framework addresses multiple research gaps. First, research is necessary from a variety of national settings as the sport development frameworks have been mostly applied to an Australian context thus far (e.g., Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hinckson, 2016; Sotiriadou et al., 2014). As exceptions, Berg et al. (2018) and Warner, Tingle, and Kellett (2013) offered contributions from a U.S. context, while Phillips and Newland (2014) considered both Australian and U.S. contexts. Despite the potential to offer valuable insights, the sport development frameworks have not been used to examine and consider the experiences of college athletes. Further, when the sport development frameworks have been used to empirically study elite athlete experiences, limited insight has been derived directly from the athletes themselves, who are the principal stakeholder of a sport organization or system (cf. Berg et al., 2018). Marx et al. (2008) noted that effective research and practice should continually account for the subjective perceptions of college athletes, regardless of the significant measures taken by an athletic department to minimize various sources of stress. These research gaps are addressed as we widen the utilization of the sport development frameworks by (a) employing the United States as the national context, (b) using college athletics as the elite sport setting, and (c) collecting data directly from college athletes to better understand best practices.

The following research questions directed this study: what social support, or sense of community, best practices were experienced by the college athletes at the retention stage; and how did this social support assist the athletes while they were in the college sport system? By applying the retention framework to a distinct elite athlete context, lasting management principles that will help improve the social development practices that assist the modern college athlete can be gleaned.

Method

In an effort to address the research questions a mixed method study was conducted. Phase One consisted of an online survey to collect data on the social support college athletes report and was primarily used to help in participant selection and to guide Phase Two. The second phase consisted of qualitative investigation with focus groups of college athletes conducted at institutions that scored the highest on the survey (Phase One). The focus group data in Phase Two provided the authors with vivid description of the most effective policies and practices carried out at the high-scoring institutions and were utilized to answer the research questions.

Phase One Instrument

The online survey consisted of the Sense of Community in Sport (SCS) instrument (Warner et al., 2013), demographics, and three open-ended questions regarding the participants' athletic experience. The SCS is based upon Warner and Dixon's Sport and Sense of Community in Sport Theory (Warner, 2016). This theory was built upon college and recreational sport athlete data (Warner, Dixon, & Chalip, 2012; Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013) and the SCS was then validated in an adolescent youth sport context (Warner et al., 2013). The SCS has been utilized to measure a sense of community in a variety of settings. Although specifically based on college athlete experiences, it has been successfully used to measure a sense of community among event volunteers (Kerwin, Warner, Walker, & Stevens, 2015), group fitness participants (Pickett, Goldsmith, Damon, & Walker, 2016), and social organizations (Warner et al., 2017). The validated 21-item SCS consists of six subscales: Administrative Consideration (four items),

Common Interest (three items), Competition (three items), Equity in Administrative Decisions (three items), Leadership Opportunities (four items), and Social Spaces (four items). The SCS items were randomized and utilized an eight-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). The three open ended questions included: How has your student-athlete experience impacted your current overall well-being and health? If you could change anything about your sport experience, what would it be? How, if at all, has your participation in sport helped prepare you for your future career? The ultimate goal of this phase was to assist with participant sampling for Phase Two and identify high scoring institutions. Participants were also asked to provide contact information if they were willing to participate in a focus group on their campus.

The SCS demonstrated acceptable levels of internal consistency as indicated by high values for Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted (AVE), construct reliability (CR), and construct validity (as indicated by the correlation coefficients and AVE which confirm convergent and discriminant validity; Warner et al., 2013). The SCS provides a scientifically sound and practical tool to measure the social benefits of sport participation and gauge how well the sport environment surrounding the participants fosters a sense of community.

Phase One Participants and Procedure

After IRB approval was obtained, researchers contacted representatives (e.g., academic support personnel and faculty athletic representatives) at 12 institutions in the American Athletic Conference (AAC) for assistance with distribution of the online survey. This conference funded the research to gain a better understanding of issues affecting college athlete well-being. While the researchers had the freedom to study college athletes in other conferences, institutions from the AAC were selected to provide the most relevant results to that conference. An initial email and then one reminder two weeks later were sent to athlete listservs at 10 of the 12 conference institutions. A total of 776 completed surveys were returned, which represented approximately 14.5% of total athletes in the conference. Most respondents were on an athletic scholarship ($n = 529$) and were female ($n = 429$). The number of respondents by undergraduate academic class status was equally distributed (152 freshmen, 160 sophomores, 186 juniors, 155 seniors, 21 graduate students, and 102 preferred not to answer). Across the 10 participating institutions, an average of 19% of athletes participated in the study. The researchers required a minimum of 10% athlete participation to be considered for Phase Two; all 10 AAC universities met this threshold. The responses of individual athletes were aggregated at the institutional level, and descriptive statistics (i.e., mean scores on each SCS subscale) were then generated. Once the mean for each factor of the SCS was calculated for each athletic department, the 10 institutions were ranked based on their performance on the scales and grouped by percentiles. Open-ended responses from Phase One were used to help create the semi-structured interview guide for Phase Two. Two institutions emerged as having a higher sense of community than the other eight participating universities. See Appendix A.

Phase Two Participants and Procedure

After analysis of Phase One data, Phase Two was then conducted at the two athletic departments that emerged during Phase One to identify best practices at the high-scoring institutions. Using contact information provided by respondents in Phase One, current athletes from the two high-scoring universities identified in Phase One were asked to participate in a

focus group at their university (see Appendix A). The focus groups were conducted by the two primary researchers and audio recorded after informed consent forms and demographic information were collected. Six total focus groups averaging 45 minutes were conducted on the two respective campuses with a total of 31 college athletes (20 females; 11 males in group sizes of seven, three, five, seven, three, and six) from six sports (track and field, golf, women's basketball, volleyball, softball, and swimming). The focus group data were then professionally transcribed and the researchers listened to all focus groups to ensure accuracy of the results.

Because these athletic programs received the highest scores on the SCS subscales, it was important to know what strategies, practices, and policies were utilized within the athletic department to identify best practices that other athletic departments could implement. To accomplish this, semi-structured focus groups were conducted. The interview guide is provided in Appendix B. A qualitative phenomenological inquiry via semi-structured and focus group format was chosen to ensure data were derived directly from the athletes themselves (Moustakas, 1994). By using a phenomenological approach, we were able to obtain data that sought to understand the personal and social experiences of the participants who shared a common experience. Inglis (1992) further provided justification for this approach and the use of focus groups, specifically:

Focus groups should be used in situations where listening to and understanding people's experiences and perspectives will add to the meaning and/or action that may result from such research. This will enable valid interpretations that address the needs of the people we are committed to serve. (p. 177)

Consequently, a phenomenological approach was taken to better understand the experiences of college athletes and how they can better be served. The use of focus groups allowed the authors access into each athletic department to interview a larger quantity of athletes for this study. Focus groups are a reliable form of data collection that allows researchers to triangulate other data, confirm or adjust theoretical frameworks, and offer recommendations for practical application (Fern, 2001).

Phase Two Analysis

The data were initially independently analyzed using NVivo 11 by both researchers. First, the experiences or viewpoints of the participants were classified by type and assigned one or multiple code names during the opening coding line-by-line process (Patten, 2014). Both deductive and inductive analyses were utilized to confirm or differentiate from prior empirical studies while remaining open to new or unexpected results. The research team was cognizant of previous research in sport development (Houlihan & Green, 2008; Shilbury et al., 2008), specifically the retention framework (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008) and social support needed by athletes (Baker, 2003; Martindale et al., 2005; Warner, 2016). Employing the framework from the outset of analysis, deductive coding established how stakeholders affected retention experiences and the mechanisms that supported the college athlete participants. With the retention framework used from the beginning, the researchers were able to more efficiently focus on the stakeholders or issues that were most significant to the participants (Royse, Thyer, & Padgett, 2010). The research team, however, was also open to new findings emerging from the

data, which can often be among the most revealing results in empirical inquiries (Murchison, 2010).

The researchers compared their findings until it was clear the data were saturated and more narrow themes clearly emerged. Using NVivo's map function, the researchers then independently placed the themes into several iterative diagrams to visually represent what was happening in the data. That is, the emergent themes were then put into integrative diagrams or conceptual maps to help describe the phenomena (Strauss, 1987). The process and several map iterations continued until 100% agreement was met between the researchers on the emergent themes.

Results

Phase One

Mean scores for each athletic department were calculated for each of the six SCS subscales. One athletic department ranked the highest on five of these six subscales. The athletic department with the highest score on Common Interest, ranked second on the Equity in Administrative Decisions, Administrative Consideration, and Competition subscales and third on the two remaining subscales (Leadership Opportunities and Social Spaces). It was clear that these athletic departments qualified for further investigation in Phase Two as their athletes reported a stronger sense of community when compared to the other institutions in the conference. See Appendix A.

The open-ended questions were also analyzed using NVivo 11. The vast majority of these text responses ($n=560$; 75.3%) contained phrases or terms that the athletes' experiences studying at their university and competing in their athletic department positively improved their overall well-being and/or health and perceived social support. However, 18.9% of the responses suggested a negative impact on their mental health as a result of their participation. Of these responses 11.8% of the overall sample specifically mentioned "stress." These results further pointed to the importance of better understanding the social support factors that are aiding college athletes at the retention stage given the important role of social support in alleviating stress and mental health problems. Upon completion of independent coding by the researchers and identification of emerging themes in the open-ended questions (Patten 2014), these data were then used to provide additional context for the researchers as they formulated their semi-structured interview guide and prepared for focus groups in Phase Two.

Phase Two

The results from the intercoder concurrence of the qualitative data collected during the second phase are visually depicted in Figure 1. At the retention stage, four specific social support factors emerged from the data. Broadly, these principle themes indicated that athletic department staff were willing to support the college athletes and foster a sense of community by working with them on an individual basis. This personalized attention signified an interest in the athletes' complete well-being, which assisted their retention experiences at their university. The four principle themes that emerged directly from the college athletes themselves were: Openness and Honesty, Equal Treatment, Intentional Programming, and Informal Interaction. With examples presented from the athletes, the themes demonstrate the athletic department culture that resulted

in a high sense of community score by the athletes in Phase One. The quotations that best exemplified and summarized the strong social support received according to the college athletes are provided. As guaranteed to the participants and to encourage candor, the identities of the athletes, athletic department personnel, and universities involved have been kept confidential.

Openness and Honesty

The first theme of Openness and Honesty referred to the athletic departments' willingness to ask the athletes for feedback while also allowing them to ask direct questions. This theme indicated that athletic department staff had regular dialogue with the athletes to ensure that major decisions or strategies would be understood, well-received, and approved by all sport stakeholders. This resulted in the athletes feeling appreciated, identifying more with the athletic department under which they trained and competed, and clearly sensing the personalized support offered by the staff. For example, one athlete stated:

They're [administrators] not afraid to ask us if something's wrong. That's the big thing, is they hear when we have problems and they respond, and then they ask us, "Is this still bad or is it good?" The fact that they're not afraid to ask us if something is wrong, I think shows that they care about us and they want things to be the right way for us.

The athletes were comfortable being candid with most of the staff, including the top leaders of the athletic department. The athletes recognized and valued this being central to the culture of the athletic department at their university. Further, the athletes felt socially supported because they were able to approach personnel in the athletic department (e.g., the athletic director, academic support staff, coaches) to discuss numerous issues related to athletics (e.g., resource allocation for all sports), academics (e.g., struggling in coursework), or personal life (e.g., relationship problems). For example, one athlete described the support provided by coaches:

I came here for my coaches. I felt that there was a family aspect . . . They're understanding. They don't just see you as an athlete. They actually see you as a person. And then you have other stuff and they just care about this other stuff not just your athletic performance. They tell you that every day.

It should be noted that the athletes did not have every concern addressed. Yet by having the athletic department personnel take the time to explain policies and procedures to them, the athletes had a more accurate understanding of how the athletic department operated and there was a reduced likelihood of assumptions or misperceptions occurring.

The culture of Openness and Honesty clearly increased the athletes' desire to remain at their university. One athlete shared:

Anyone can talk to our SWA (senior woman administrator)... A freshman can come in and just talk to her about just life or their sport, or academics, and they feel like they're being supported in that way, and that's rare, for just a random student-athlete to walk up to the SWA's office and just say, "Can we sit down and talk?" Here, we can do that... You feel that you can talk to anyone, and I feel like that's half the reason why a lot of us have come here and we see that with everything that we do.

Another athlete described how the college athletics experience was enhanced when the athletic department staff supported preparedness for the future with discussions and assistance on career interests:

I can genuinely say that if there's people or companies you want to talk to, she [staff member] would go out and make connections for you. . . Hearing “no” here isn't really a thing. It's always, “yes, what can we do to ensure that our student-athletes, one, have the best experience, and two, ready for the real world”, because there is life after college and you get all the help you need.

One athlete explained how Openness and Honesty with coaches helped solidify relationships and minimized issues that could distract from the focus on talent development:

I would even say I would be comfortable going to my coach about the problem first. I think that is something that a lot of athletes don't experience in their college... If I had a problem, if I was offended, or anything in practice, I would walk up to coach right after practice. . . And he'll send me his schedule...and it is a face-to-face, the door is open, there's no threat involved... rather than make it this big issue that now has to fester in the relationship or communication in between us... and I've felt like that since we got here, too.

Thus, the willingness by university stakeholders to be candid and inclined to engage in dialogue played a critical role in providing effective social support to the college athletes.

Equal Treatment

The second theme of Equal Treatment signified how the sense of community was enhanced when the participants perceived that all athletes received the same level of benefits and there was no favoritism towards a particular sport. This practice contributed to the social support that is critical at the retention stage. For instance, one athlete stated, “They find a really good way of celebrating *all* the student-athletes too and making sure that everybody feels not only that they’re just here to be a student-athlete, but that they’re important every day.” Another explained:

They have a fuel station downstairs that is for Olympic athletics. So that’s something that really shows that they care about other sports, also that new dining hall they opened upstairs is open to every sport as well. They try to do a lot of things with that “One Team” culture in mind... There’s a lot of things that are just uniform across the athletic department... And everybody sees that too. I mean every sport knows that, typically, when something gets done, it’s going to affect all the sports. It’s not just for one team.

The awareness of Equal Treatment assisted the sense of support and community the athletes perceived as they could more easily identify with their fellow athletes in other sports. The participants discussed how the equal distribution of items, such as backpacks or apparel, played an important role in the social interaction throughout the athletic department:

If you ever just spend a day here, you'll see everyone wearing a book bag on campus, or we all wear the same gear. We kind of know each other on campus, and when you see each other on campus, you always say "hi" to each other. The social aspect is there.

Another athlete further described:

Like you get your bag tag (i.e., luggage tag) and your name tag and everything. Every student-athlete has that. Everyone walks around with their Under Armour gear. We all have the same warm-ups. So you see every single person, not just the bigger teams, basketball and football are getting these things... Everyone is just like, "Every team is equal," and it really is just strengthened unity and "One Team".

When there were exceptions to Equal Treatment in the athletic department, the athletes noted that there was usually pilot testing with a particular team or one team needed special accommodations. One athlete stated:

You don't see one team getting the majority of the things. One team might be a pilot program to see if it's working... It's just because one team did it, they saw it worked, it benefited the whole team, it's gonna benefit student-athletes and other teams.

As a result, the athletes did not perceive any significant disadvantages as they pursued competitive success in their sport, even in limited cases when other teams may have been provided with more resources. It was evident that Equal Treatment was noted by the athletes and fundamental to their perceived social support at the retention stage.

Intentional Programming

Intentional Programming denoted how the athletic department planned opportunities for athletes to interact with each other or for the athletic department staff to interact with the athletes. This went beyond annual awards banquets, which are common at many universities, and the issuing of standard apparel or backpacks. Examples of this purposely sought interaction included monthly breakfast meetings with the athletic director or panel conversations to generate discussion among the athletes on some of the most significant issues in college athletics. Descriptions of these planned activities included: "First Wednesday of the month, and you show up in the cafeteria, and you swipe your [meal] card, and you get to meet with administrators, and ask any question... Nothing's ever off limit." Another athlete expounded:

And they, every year, host two panel discussions... We have amazing people like [athletic department staff members] who run these programs that allow people to bring up issues or bring up different topics that they want to discuss with all the student-athletes.

Another example of Intentional Programming comprised encouraging all athletic department members to attend a specific sport event together in order to have a visible presence in support of the "One Team" culture. This demonstration of solidarity and community was particularly valued by athletes who competed in sports that regularly had little attendance at their events. The athletes also noted how the intentional efforts were apparent in the way athletic

department staff used various programming offerings to increase the sense of community. One athlete detailed this by stating:

The administration is setting in place so many places where we can get to know each other, see each other's faces, and really buy into the "One Team" policy. We put it on our shirts, but we really do, at the end of the day, exercise it. We see each other every day, we go to each other's events. To me, that's pretty much the sign we are one team.

The ability of the athletic department to coordinate opportunities for social interaction, both among athletes and with the staff, resulted in an environment that allowed for a more enriched retention stage and concentration on athletic and academic pursuits at the college level. An athlete characterized these issues by attesting:

I think I am able to speak for all of the student-athletes when we say the sense of community and family is totally different here than any other school. We have this slogan called "One Team," and we really go by that. That's pretty much the backbone and body of what the [athletic department] is like. The support system. . . we have the support system everywhere. Whenever you first come here, it's told everywhere is a safe zone, and it's one team, it pretty much means one family, and that's literally what we are.

The above quote also highlighted a critical issue for college athletes and the adjusting roles of key social influences. For athletes in this study, the Intentional Programming was fundamental to ensuring their elevated sense of community through providing planned social activities.

Informal Interaction

Informal Interaction was the final theme noted as important for socially supporting the college athletes. While there needs to be intentionally programmed times when members of the athletic department can interact with each other, there also needs to be times or spaces where those members can interact spontaneously in a relaxed environment. The athletes described the importance of athletic department staff being present and relatable. One athlete explained:

If you walk around, they know your name, or they're always saying "hi" or, "How'd you do at this game?" I was doing rehab and our athletic director was on this treadmill, and he was cheering me on doing rehab after practice. It's just things like that make your experience better, 'cause you're like, "Okay, you're an athletic director, and you actually know who I am, and you're working out where we're working out. You're doing what we're doing." . . . He has his face seen and comes to as much things as he can.

Not including coaches or trainers who were expected to attend, the athletes repeatedly noted how meaningful it was to see athletic department staff attend a practice or competition. Such presence indicated a higher level of interest in the athletes beyond the basic job requirements of the staff. The athletes also expressed that many athletic department staff members were more relatable if they had been college athletes at some point. One athlete detailed why this issue made unplanned meetings with her coach an effortless occurrence:

I think my coach is a really big help in supporting me because she's been through the whole athletic process before and the collegiate stress, so having her as my mother away from home has really helped me in many aspects: personal, academic, just in life in general. I really feel like I can reach out to her and help her help me even more.

Once at their university, many athletes are living away from their families and hometowns for the first time. This quote illustrated how athletic department staff were viewed as quasi-family members who supported the participants while they trained and competed at their university.

Based on how athletic facilities were designed, the athletes noticed that there were spaces available to allow for informal interaction to take place among anyone in the athletic department. An athlete explained:

I feel like [the university] does a great job, especially this athletic department, that there are always some chairs around or couches. I feel like that gives you space where you can sit down, just hang out in between classes, and I feel like that gives us all an opportunity to just connect between classes or when we just want to hang out.

Another factor in this informal interaction was simply the availability of athletic department personnel and their willingness to discuss any matter whether it was related to athletics or something more personal. There was a clear comfort level among the athletes in being able to approach the athletic department staff. For example:

I would say, for me, is especially with [academic advisor]. I can go in and I know they're for academics, but I feel like I have a person I can talk to, that listens to me with basically all my problems, whether it's personal, whether it's with school, how I can deal with it better, how I can juggle school, and competition, and all that.

Thus, the unplanned and casual interactions experienced on a regular basis with the athletic department staff were valuable to the athletes in their retention processes.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest several implications for research and practice. The retention framework (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008) was applied to novel contexts, both national (i.e., United States) and competitive setting (i.e., college athletics), in order to examine how social support, or a sense of community, specifically influences elite sport development practices. From a theoretical perspective, such application reinforces the relatively contemporary sport development frameworks and indicates that, regardless of national or competitive context, social support will continue to be an essential consideration for athlete development. This study bolsters previous research (Brouwers et al., 2015) demonstrating that organizational planning and support play a crucial role in assisting the sport development process while lessening various sources of stress that can hinder college athletes' well-being and athletic advancement. Offering data directly from college athletes, we augment the sport development literature with a utilization of the retention stage in a college athletics setting.

The athletic departments in Phase Two of this study effectively provided various forms of social support, as detailed in the four principle themes, and resulted in the athletes feeling

comfortable asking for assistance to address a source of stress, something with which elite athletes commonly struggle (Birky, 2007; Delenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2012). This study confirms previous research showing that such activities as team social functions, recognition and rewards for exceptional efforts, and mentoring can significantly affect the social support college athletes perceive (Benson et al., 2016; Cranmer, 2018;; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; MacPhail & Kirk, 2006). However, the data extend this area of research by demonstrating characteristics of that social support that are likely to be highly valued by college athletes and facilitate retention efforts. Specific qualities of the athletic department, such as a willingness to have open and honest dialogue, equal treatment, purposeful efforts to create opportunities for social interaction, and easy opportunities to casually interact, were important to the athletes and indicate the department's valuation of the athletes' well-being during their time at the institution. While Openness and Honesty, Equal Treatment, Intentional Programming, and Informal Interaction are all supported by the job satisfaction and community building sport literature (Dixon & Warner, 2010; Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013), this work demonstrates how these mechanisms are fundamental to the college athlete experience.

Other implications from this study are likely to remain relevant in the current college sport system. For example, significant social influences continue to be critical (Stevenson, 1990). The participants shared that the crucial support of athletic department personnel were key to their retention and allowed them to manage their elite talent development, which is another essential consideration for modern college athletes (MacPhail & Kirk, 2006; Newhouse-Bailey, Dixon, & Warner, 2015). While parents, siblings, and friends remain important, once an athlete moves up to an elite level, the sport organization under which the athlete trains or competes will likely become more central in providing the necessary support for the athlete to flourish at the higher competitive level. Given that the vast majority of college athletes in the United States will not continue professionally in their sport after their degree is obtained, it is socially responsible of athletic departments to assist their athletes not only while they compete at the college level but also as they prepare for their post-athlete careers as well. In assisting athletes' retention at the institution, coaches, academic counselors, and administrative leaders were identified as being valued influences on the college athletes' sport development experiences.

The motivation and influence of coaches remain paramount in modern athletic careers, especially in regards to the ways in which athletes stay motivated and commit to the more rigorous training demands of a higher competitive level at the retention stage (Baker et al., 2003; Burgess & Naughton, 2010; Cranmer, 2018; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Without the support and dedication of coaches as a fundamental resource, it is highly improbable that elite athletic achievement can be realized in modern sport (Sotiriadou, 2009). This is due to the numerous ways coaches can support athletes at the retention stage, such as encouraging time off to avoid burnout and overuse injuries or assuring the athletes that their dedication to their sport will be rewarding. Further, Berg et al. (2018) found that coaches at the retention stage can identify and direct talent that is unknown even to the athletes themselves and serve as a critical source of social support during difficult periods as an athlete (e.g., homesickness). Along with other athletic department staff, the importance of coaches discussing realistic expectations and what college athletes will experience are critical socialization considerations in supporting college athletes thriving at the retention stage (Benson et al., 2016; Cranmer, 2017; Marx et al., 2008).

Beyond coaches, however, the results demonstrate the critical role other staff in the sport organization (e.g., academic counselors, administrative leaders) can play in supporting college athletes. As the participants shared, staff members were often viewed as a quasi-family that

helped fill the social support void the athletes experienced at the college level and were away from the sources of support they had traditionally experienced (e.g., family, friends, previous coaches). As the results indicated, when college athletes are away from their home environments and adjusting to new roles, expectations, training routines, coaching styles, time-management demands, and relationships, the athletic department will assume a critical stakeholder role that has the most frequent and immediate influence on the athletes' socialization. This consideration has relevance for stakeholders supporting college athletes at other universities as these issues are likely experienced not just by the athletes at the two institutions in this study, but numerous college athletes across the United States. Healthy social support permits athletes to manage various sources of stress and commit to the requisite amounts of advanced training that are needed to develop and maintain their elite talent (Cranmer, 2018; Baker et al., 2003). However, as Berg et al. (2018) noted, it is fundamentally vital to recognize that elite athlete development practices must be directed differently as distinct considerations are merited at each sport development stage. Thus, best practices by athletic departments will need to be adjusted to provide effective social support when working to retain athletes and reinforce their identity and motivation versus assisting athletes transitioning into or out of that competitive setting. For example, for incoming athletes arriving to the university, athletic department staff may discuss and monitor with the new athletes how they are adjusting to the college environment, with such common issues as adapting to more rigorous academic coursework, establishing a sense of belonging with their team, and discovering possible career interests. At the retention stage, after a healthy adjustment has been made by the athletes, athletic department staff should shift their attention to ensuring the athletes remain motivated in their academic and athletic pursuits, help foster a strong sense of community among their team, and take the necessary steps to prepare for their post-athlete careers. These forms of support can be accomplished through Intentional Programming or Informal Interaction with the athletes.

The data indicate several other practical considerations for sport managers to implement. If the college athlete is the primary stakeholder of an athletic department, it is necessary to allow such a stakeholder to have meaningful input (i.e., Openness and Honesty). This does not suggest that every request by the athlete must be granted, but a willingness to be transparent and engage in dialogue will be valued as a significant indication of social support and complete interest in the athlete. As best practice, athletic department staff should provide all athletes opportunities to inquire about any topic they desire and hear candid responses from senior leaders in the department. This should be done at least monthly and may be accomplished in a variety of formats (e.g., meeting over breakfast or lunch, question and answer forums). Such a practice would not only be valued by the athletes, but allow the athletic department staff to more precisely understand the issues most important to the athletes. Additionally, Equal Treatment across an athletic department is necessary beyond legal or ethical reasons. Previous research has indicated that Equal Treatment of all athletes is valued and will result in a higher level of identity with the department and university (Mahony, Riemer, Breeding, & Hums, 2006; Sartore-Baldwin & Warner, 2012; Warner & Dixon, 2011). Our work builds upon this previous research by identifying specific best practices for administrators to consider. Perhaps most encouraging for athletic departments that have limited resources or are constrained by budget considerations, providing social support to athletes does not require significant resource allocation. While some athletic departments can devote considerable resources to provide new apparel, frequent social events, or more effective social spaces for the athletes (i.e., Intentional Programming and Informal Interaction), the results demonstrate that many supportive practices necessitate little to

no new resources. The college athletes in this study repeatedly identified the staff's openness, availability, and preparedness to support the athletes on any issue, even those not pertaining to athletic performance, as a demonstration of care for the athletes' overall well-being. Best practices would include welcoming unplanned meetings with the athletes or athletic department staff having a visible presence at training or competitions. Thus, these practices can be carried out in almost any college sport context. Importantly, these practices can inform non-elite sport managers as well.

Limitations

Despite their establishment, extensive examples of the sport development frameworks being applied in various settings are needed (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008). As a limitation of this study, it was not feasible to compare the U.S. sport system to the sport systems of other countries. However, this study remains relevant to a broad range of sport practitioners and researchers given that athlete development practices are regularly copied from one context to another (Houlihan & Green, 2008; Newland & Kellett, 2012). For example, Sparvero, Chalip, and Green (2008) noted that advances in sport science research have been incorporated globally and adjusted how athletes are coached and cared for by sport organizations. When endeavoring to reproduce sport development policies or strategies from other sport settings, sport stakeholders will need to recognize contextual differences (Brouwers et al., 2015). While the retention framework was applied across multiple sports in this research, an additional limitation of this study is that the sport development practices for each sport, which are often distinct, could not be examined more extensively. Further, Phase Two did not include participants from men's basketball or football, which are often the highest revenue-generating and publicized sports at many universities. The social experiences of athletes in these two sports and the most effective practices to support them could diverge from athletes in other sports. Additionally, empirically studying college athletes and athletic departments that measure low on perceptions of social support or community would be relevant future research. Different characteristics of college athletes, such as role on the team, grade point average, parents' educational attainment, or state of residence, can affect the social experiences of college athletes and need to be examined in future research. Because social support is critical and this study considered best practices, future researchers should also consider specific best practices for maintaining a sense of community after an athlete graduates and transitions out of sport.

Conclusion

Sport development continues to be a worthwhile subdiscipline in the sport management field, offering both compelling research and innovative practices to better support athletes. Our analysis described the retention experiences of athletes in a competitive setting (i.e., college athletics) that although distinct when comparing other sport settings globally nonetheless can offer management insight. Given this, future research should continue to examine elite sport development experiences of college athletes in an effort to improve sport delivery systems. By specifically demonstrating the critical role of social support in sport development practices, we detail the importance of developing college athletes beyond athletic or academic dimensions. Further, it is critical to recognize that the various forms of athlete well-being (e.g., physical, mental, social) are not independent of each other, but clearly interconnected and must be

intentionally pursued by supporting stakeholders. This is not only relevant nationally to various types of stakeholders that support college athletes (e.g., family, coaches, athletic departments), but also timely. As college athletics is faced with various scandals and reprehensible misconduct and the repercussions of mental health issues are being pushed to the forefront, sport managers have an important role to play in addressing these issues. Even if athletic achievement is the prevailing focus of the athlete and other stakeholders, the neglect of other types of well-being will likely impede the full potential in sport performance from being realized. College sport researchers will need to habitually examine how the athletes react to stakeholder efforts, including the social support and community provided. Such reactions can have a noticeable effect on athlete motivation and enjoyment, which are two of the most crucial issues for how athletes are able to thrive in each sport development stage (Berg et al., 2018).

Sport development processes are not trivial. Rather, they can have a profound impact not only on elite sport performance, but overall athlete well-being. Sport development best practices, refined by researchers and implemented by supporting stakeholders, will significantly influence future college athletes' sport experiences and well-being. If athletes are indeed central to stakeholder efforts, the insight obtained through this study can enlighten sport development practices and policies in college athletics, particularly in regard to social health. As a result, college athletes will be better served by the sport system for which they are supposed to be the primary stakeholder.

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Appendices

SCS subscales by University		Admin	Interest	Equity	Leadership	Social Spaces	Competition
1	Mean	25.52	19.42	22.77	15.87	25.13	18.67
A Institution	N	60	60	60	60	60	60
	Std. Deviation	2.891	1.778	3.903	2.849	4.115	2.575
2	Mean	24.23	18.6	22.53	15.99	24.39	18.41
B Institution	N	134	134	134	134	134	134
	Std. Deviation	4.882	3.372	5.301	3.901	4.445	3.139
3	Mean	22.33	17.61	19.76	14.12	23.79	17.26
C Institution	N	66	66	66	66	66	66
	Std. Deviation	5.481	3.229	5.86	3.849	4.168	3.05
4	Mean	24.13	17.64	21.66	14.55	24.18	17.84
D Institution	N	56	56	56	56	56	56
	Std. Deviation	4.068	3.159	4.84	4.156	3.428	2.775
5	Mean	24.01	18.5	21.57	14.76	23.19	17.81
E Institution	N	74	74	74	74	74	74
	Std. Deviation	4.308	2.366	5.147	3.693	4.4	2.803
6	Mean	24.2	18.45	22.13	15.64	25.16	17.6
F Institution	N	55	55	55	55	55	55
	Std. Deviation	4.946	2.734	5.722	3.679	3.382	3.72
7	Mean	23.92	18.29	22.18	15.1	21.98	17.8
G Institution	N	49	49	49	49	49	49
	Std. Deviation	3.259	2.151	4.065	3.362	4.657	2.7
8	Mean	21.68	18.03	18.64	13.73	23.16	16.74
H Institution	N	74	74	74	74	74	74
	Std. Deviation	5.803	2.961	7.35	4.393	4.725	4.128
9	Mean	22.84	17.55	19.83	13.28	23.31	16.92
I Institution	N	64	64	64	64	64	64
	Std. Deviation	5.316	3.621	5.461	4.548	5.33	4.184
10	Mean	25.87	19.06	24.34	16.55	25.25	18.98
J Institution	N	143	143	143	143	143	143
	Std. Deviation	2.768	2.17	3.287	3.36	3.038	2.228
Total	Mean	24.07	18.41	21.85	15.19	24.11	17.96
	N	776	776	776	776	776	776
	Std. Deviation	4.594	2.864	5.373	3.923	4.244	3.191

Green = highest; Yellow = 2nd highest; Orange = 3rd highest

B: Semi-Structured Focus Group Guide

1. Student-athletes at your institution indicated that administrators express care and concern for them, can you tell me why that may be?
2. In what ways do athletic department administrators demonstrate concern for student-athletes at this university?
3. Student-athletes at your institution indicated that there were social spaces available for them to interact with other student-athletes. Would you agree or disagree? Why?
4. Why do you think student-athletes at your university seemed to think the social spaces at this university seem to foster interaction?
5. What kind of leadership opportunities are available for student-athletes at your university?
6. Student-athletes at your university indicated that they felt that equitable decisions were being made. Is there anything the administration is doing to help this perception? What does that look like in practice?

Figure 1

