

## **“There’s no way I can do all of this”: The Perceived Impacts of Stress Exposure on the Academic Development of Collegiate Athletes**

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*Literature on collegiate athletes’ academic engagement suggests that athletes’ exposure to competing and contradictory role expectations and an institutional prioritization of athletic excellence may negatively impact athletes’ academic and professional development. Few, however, have examined this possibility from the perspective of the athletes themselves. Using qualitative data collected from a sample of collegiate athletes, this study examined athlete perceptions of their stress exposures and how those impact their academic engagement and growth. Findings indicate that athletes across sports experienced role-related and institutional strains that impacted their academic development and professionalization. Specifically, athletes felt that their athletic role obligations and efforts interfered with their academic performance. Institutional scheduling constraints and academic advising practices were perceived to put athletic activities ahead of academic efforts, sometimes altering athletes’ academic trajectories, and some athletes perceived that their academic interests and professional goals were not necessarily being cultivated within the institution. As a result of the institutional and role-related constraints they faced, a subset of respondents felt that they were missing out on certain educational and professional opportunities including high impact practices (see Kuh, 2008) that they believed would help prepare them for life after college.*

*Keywords: college athlete, academic engagement, stress exposure*

**R**esearch on the collegiate athlete experience has yielded important findings with regard to athletes' personal and academic development. For example, studies indicate that athletes' exposure to numerous and conflicting expectations associated with their institutional roles can negatively impact athletes' academic development and overall well-being (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1991; Humphrey, Yow, & Bowden, 2000; Hwang & Choi, 2016; Sack & Thiel, 1985; Selby, Weinstein, & Bird, 1990; Settles, Sellers, & Damas, 2002). Additionally, demanding athletic schedules and an institutional focus on athletic activities leave athletes little time for academic efforts and participation in high quality educational experiences (Adler & Adler, 1991; Comeaux, Speer, Taustine, & Harrison, 2011; Gayles & Hu, 2009). Given that these findings appear to be at odds with the mission of higher education, scholars have called for reform to the structure of collegiate athletic programs and a greater institutional focus on athletes' academic development (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019). Still, research suggests that athletes remain at a disadvantage relative to their non-athletic peers in terms of their academic and professional growth (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Eitzen, 2009), and studies have identified a number of barriers preventing athletes from participating in high impact educational opportunities shown to foster intellectual development (Comeaux et al., 2011; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Ishaq & Bass, 2019).

While research has long acknowledged the intersecting relationships between athletes' exposure to competing role demands, institutional pressures that prioritize athletic endeavors, and limited academic engagement and access to educational opportunities, few studies have examined these relationships from athletes' perspectives (for exceptions, see Singer, 2008, and Kidd et al., 2018). Filling this gap in the literature, this study examines how athletes on different sports teams perceive their experiences with role-related and institutional stressors to impact their academic engagement and development. Drawing on social stress theory (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981), this study contributes to the literature by highlighting potential points of intervention for scholars and practitioners seeking to reduce stress exposure, improve support, and foster greater academic and personal growth among athletes.

## **Theory and Background**

Research consistently finds that athletes are exposed to a number of stressors as they strive to meet considerable and, at times, contradictory role expectations within institutionally imposed time constraints (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1991; Hatteberg, 2015; Humphrey et al., 2000, Sack & Thiel, 1985). This body of literature has also identified institutional strains to which athletes are exposed such as cumbersome schedules, isolation from the broader student body, and institutional surveillance of and control over athletes' daily activities, including academic efforts and decisions (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Hatteberg, 2018; Southall & Weiler, 2014). Drawing on and extending these findings, the academic engagement literature shows that athletic role obligations and time commitments interfere with athletes' academic efforts and can keep them from developing their academic potential (Comeaux et al., 2011; Comeaux & Crandall, 2019). To contextualize these findings and to situate the study at hand, I draw upon the stress process model, a theoretical framework developed by social stress theorists to illustrate the sociological and temporal nature of individuals' stress experiences (Pearlin et al., 1981). In applying this framework, this study highlights how athletes' exposure to and attempts to cope with external

strains can influence their personal and academic development. Additionally, this research aims to identify areas in which strains might be reduced or coping and social support processes improved to increase athletes' academic engagement and educational opportunities.

### *Social Stress Theory*

As described above, the purpose of stress theory is to bring attention to the socially structured nature of individuals' stress experiences, which are often viewed from a psychological perspective (Pearlin, 1989). According to this theory, individuals' exposure to stressful circumstances can generate adverse physical and psychological responses if stressors and/or their effects are not alleviated through effective coping or social support (Pearlin et al., 1981; Pearlin, 1989; Pearlin & Bierman, 2013). Stress theorists (Pearlin et al., 1981) further contend that individuals' social statuses shape the stressors they encounter, the coping resources they can activate, and the ways that they respond to stress, therefore providing insight into the sociological underpinnings of the stress process.

As the dominant model employed in stress theory research, the stress process model (Pearlin et al., 1981) is ideal for the study of different types of strain because it highlights the temporal and dynamic process through which stress is often experienced. For example, the model maps out how individuals exposed to strain, will likely activate coping strategies in an effort to reduce or offset their physiological or emotional reactions to stress, while also allowing for the possibility that individuals may at any given time, be simultaneously exposed to multiple stressors, engaged in multiple coping behaviors, and responding emotionally or physically to stressful circumstances. Notably, this model and related research articulates how stressful circumstances can generate additional, "secondary" stressors that have the potential to be more or less severe than the primary strains from which they emerged (Pearlin, 1989) and how any given stressor may require multiple or refined coping strategies to offset its effects (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), therefore demonstrating the cyclical and dynamic nature of the stress process. The stress process model is applied in this study because it provides the flexibility needed to understand individuals' stress experiences which can be messy, dynamic, and complex, and the structure needed to identify potential points of intervention.

According to stress theory, a stressor is any situation or event that by way of being perceived as a threat, can produce a negative reaction (Pearlin, 1989; Thoits, 1995). While there are many different types of stressors identified within this literature, role strains and ambient strains are most relevant to the lived experiences of collegiate athletes. As a category of role-related stressors, role strains are defined within this paradigm as chronic strains emanating out of one's numerous social roles or relationships (Pearlin, 1989). As such, role strains might include feeling overrun by extensive obligations from within one or many roles (role overload), experiencing difficulty in meeting the contradictory expectations of different roles (role conflict), and interpersonal difficulties within role relationships (Pearlin, 1989). Thoits (2013) has further argued that pressure associated with the successful performance of a given social role can also operate as a role strain insofar as it involves a role that is important to an individual's social identity. Ambient strains are another type of chronic strain identified by stress theorists. Ambient strains are those ongoing threats that infiltrate all aspects of an individual's life and social roles and which may be perceived as inescapable, such as poverty (Pearlin, 1989).

In addition to defining stressors, the stress process model identifies a variety of coping and social support resources that individuals, faced with stress, may rely upon to manage strains

or to resist their effects. For example, in their efforts to cope, individuals might attempt to get rid of a stressor, reconceptualize its meaning, or adjust their reactions to it (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Similarly, when seeking social support for their stressful circumstances, individuals might solicit support focused on addressing the stressor, its meaning, or its perceived effects (House & Kahn, 1985; Thoits, 2011). Finally, although conventional studies of stress outcomes (the third component of the stress process) have focused primarily on the physical and mental health effects of stress, more recent studies have expanded outcome conceptualizations to include broader indicators of well-being such as status transitions and work performance (Wheaton, 2010), which can also be impacted by individuals' exposure to stressors. Applying this logic, I argue that academic engagement and professional development are important indicators of student well-being that could be negatively impacted by individuals' exposure to stressful circumstances, further underscoring the importance of this study.

### *Stress Exposure in Collegiate Athletics*

Collegiate athletes' exposure to role strains such as performance difficulties, role conflict, and role overload has been well established in the sports literature, particularly among revenue-generating male athletes, the majority of whom are Black (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1985, 1991; Kidd et al., 2018; Singer, 2008). For example, in one of the earliest, in-depth qualitative analyses of athletic role strain, Adler and Adler (1985, 1991) found that despite starting college with ambitious academic goals and expectations for academic success, the men's basketball players they studied became progressively consumed by their athletic roles, prompting them to disengage from their academic roles and expectations. Faced with considerable time and energy constraints from within their athletic roles (role overload), athletes experienced great fatigue and found it difficult to meet their academic obligations, leading to poor academic performance (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1991). Unmet academic goals coupled with the institutional emphasis on athletics over academics, as signified through athletic department operations and positive feedback for athletic performance from coaches and other network members (e.g., teammates, boosters, and fans), operated to "engulf" athletes within their athletic roles, thus reducing the importance of their academic achievements and aspirations (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1991). While Adler and Adler (1991) went on to describe how athletes' experiences of role engulfment led them to adopt a "glorified" version of the self that reflected their growing athletic celebrity, the Adlers' work also brought to light the disappointment and despair athletes experienced in the process, particularly with regard to their inability to fulfill their academic aspirations.

Other studies of role strain expanded analysis beyond men participating in revenue-generating sports and have found that women and non-revenue generating athletes are also prone to role conflict and role overload, though to different degrees (Lance, 2004; Sack & Thiel, 1985; Settles et al., 2002). While male athletes participating in revenue-generating sports appear to be at greatest risk (Lance, 2004; Sack & Thiel, 1985), female athletes have been shown to experience greater role conflict than men participating in non-revenue-generating sports (Lance, 2004). Additionally, athletes who hold scholarships or play in more competitive NCAA divisions are at heightened risk for role conflict (Sack & Thiel, 1985).

More recent studies have considered how these institutional and role-related strains can impact athletes' academic growth and their transition out of sport. For example, Singer's (2008) study of Black male football players at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) found that disproportionately high athletic role demands coupled with arduous athletic schedules had

detrimental consequences for athletes' academic development. Though he found that study respondents experienced relatively positive transitions out of college sport, Singer concluded that the educational and psychosocial costs to African American athletes outweighed the benefits of college sports participation. Recently, Kidd et al. (2018) found that male, revenue-generating athletes' experiences of role engulfment also had negative implications for athletes' academic development and transition experiences. For example, over half of their study respondents regretted not having been able to invest more time and effort into their academics and most lacked meaningful relationships with professors and other academic personnel, a high impact learning opportunity (Kuh, 2008) that has been shown to positively influence athletes' academic development (Comeaux, 2010). Kidd et al.'s (2018) findings also revealed that respondents had little chance to complete internships and other extracurricular opportunities, further illustrating how role strains may limit athletes' access to and participation in high impact practices.

Athletes' exposure to institutional strain has also emerged in studies of the institutional structure of collegiate athletes (e.g., Southall & Weiler, 2014; Hatteberg, 2018). In recognizing in collegiate athletic programs characteristics of a Total Institution as defined by Goffman (1961), scholars have highlighted how pervasive institutional structure, scheduling, and surveillance operate as "ambient" institutional strains that control virtually every aspect of athletes' lives, including academics (Southall & Weiler, 2014; Hatteberg, 2018). Again, studies show that such control is more common among male athletes participating in revenue-generating sports who are more likely to be Black (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Southall & Weiler, 2014).

Recently, the NCAA too has focused greater attention on the unique exposure athletes have to institutional and role-related stressors through their 2014 release of the "Mind, Body, and Sport" report. Within this 112-page report, scholars, physicians, and practitioners discussed the mental health challenges athletes face with particular attention to how role-related time constraints and sleep deficits generated by athletes' attempts to meet their various academic and athletic role obligations may increase their risk for distress (Kroshus, 2014). Corroborating this, sports scholars have identified time constraints, performance expectations, athletic obligations, and academics, in general, as the primary sources of stress athletes face (Giacobbi et al., 2004; Hwang & Choi, 2016; Humphrey et al., 2000; Selby et al., 1990). Of these interrelated stress experiences, "academic stress" appears to occur most often, with one study reporting that around ninety percent of athletes experienced stress associated with academic performance on assignments and exams, classroom material missed because of athletes' travel schedules, and the inability to effectively prepare for coursework given the energy and effort dedicated to sport (Humphrey et al., 2000). Test anxiety and fear of academic failure also contribute to athletes' perceptions of stress (Humphrey et al., 2000; Hwang & Choi, 2016), further highlighting the interconnectedness of athletes' stress exposure and their academic achievement.

### *Athletes' Academic Development and Educational Opportunities*

Research on athletes' academic engagement and success also indicates that collegiate athletes may not be developing the academic identities they had planned (Eitzen, 2009). For example, male athletes participating in revenue-generating sports at institutions with "big-time athletic programs" (Coakley, 2009) have lower graduation rates than female athletes, non-revenue generating athletes, and their non-athletic counterparts (Eitzen, 2009). This pattern is more pronounced for Black athletes participating in revenue-generating sports at Predominantly White Institutions who have significantly lower graduation rates than their non-athletic male

peers (Southall, Eckard, Nagel, & Randall, 2015). Athletes' academic engagement and educational trajectories are also shaped by institutional messages about the unimportance of academic matters (Benson, 2000) and academic advising practices which have historically focused on keeping athletes academically eligible as opposed to fostering academic engagement or intellectual curiosity (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019). As a result, athletes may find themselves in particularly easy classes or undesirable majors (Comeaux, 2010; Eitzen, 2009). Among Black athletes, academic development is further undermined by institutional personnel who in treating athletes through a "deficit lens" (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019, p. 79), harm their intellectual growth and confidence (Benson, 2000; Comeaux & Crandall, 2019). Together, such institutional practices perpetuate a culture of low educational expectations and biased and uninformed messages about athletes' academic adequacy (Benson, 2000; Comeaux, 2010; Comeaux & Crandall, 2019).

Athletes' participation in "high impact educational practices" (Kuh, 2008) sheds additional light on athletes' academic engagement, yet it has yielded inconsistent results. Some studies suggest that as a subpopulation, athletes' participation in educationally purposeful activities does not differ significantly from the greater student population (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006), while others indicate there are barriers to athletes' participation in certain high impact practices outlined by Kuh (2008) (see Ishaq & Bass, 2019). With a focus on intensive involvement, educationally purposeful activities have been defined as those which involve meaningful interaction with faculty and fellow students, regular and detailed feedback, an extensive time commitment, embracing diverse perspectives, and active engagement, all of which have been shown to impact individuals' long-term growth and development (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Kuh, 2001). And while studies indicate that athletes can benefit greatly from involvement in these types of activities (see, for example, Gayles & Hu, 2009; Comeaux, 2010), access to and the relative benefit of these activities are not evenly or consistently distributed among athletes (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019; Gayles & Hu, 2009).

In their 2009 study of athletes' academic engagement, Gayles and Hu (2009) found that while athletes scored relatively high on indicators of interaction with non-athletic peers, their mean levels of interaction with faculty members, participation in certain academic activities, and involvement with student groups and organizations were markedly lower. Additionally, athletes participating in visible, revenue-generating sports tended to score lower on most of these activities, though the difference was only significant for non-athletic student interaction and cultural values and beliefs (Gayles & Hu, 2009). Comeaux and Harrison (2007) also found that the relative impact of student-faculty interactions on academic performance depended both on the type of interaction and race, with White athletes benefitting from three different types of student-faculty interactions and Black athletes experiencing benefits from only a single type of interaction. Overall, these studies indicate that there is a continued need to provide more equitable access to and better understand the uneven benefits of such educational opportunities.

Studies of athletes' involvement in other high impact educational practices are more limited. Similar to the purposeful educational activities discussed above, high impact educational practices such as first-year seminars, writing-intensive courses, internships, undergraduate research opportunities, service learning, and study abroad programs are thought to foster greater academic engagement and achievement because they require extensive time commitments and cognitive investments, promote mentorship and collaboration with faculty members, and increase exposure to diverse people, cultures, and environments (Kuh, 2008). However, Ishaq and Bass (2019) found that coaches, athletic time commitments, and funding difficulties all operated to

prevent high impact practices from being implemented within athletic arenas, thus, limiting athletes' involvement.

Although research into collegiate athletes' experiences with stress, academic engagement, and participation in high impact educational opportunities continues to grow, relatively few studies have examined these interrelated topics from athletes' perspectives. Thus, the primary objective of this study is to explore how athletes perceive their exposure to institutional and role-related strains to impact their academic engagement and development.

## Methods

Data for this analysis was derived from in-depth interviews conducted with a sample of NCAA Division I collegiate athletes for the purpose of better understanding athletes' stress exposure and support seeking behaviors. Specifically, this analysis is based on the experiences of 56 athletes from four different sports (one revenue-generating and one non-revenue generating team for both men and women) at a large, Division I research university in the Midwest referred to henceforth as Large Midwestern University (LMU).<sup>1</sup> The four sports teams invited to participate in this study were selected with the help of athletic department personnel who facilitated initial contact with teams and potential participants. Eligible individuals were later invited to participate in interviews via email and in-person announcements made at athletic activities being observed by the researcher as part of the larger study design.

In person interviews were conducted between December 2013 and May 2014. Interviews were voluntary and lasted approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. Interview questions revolved around athletes' experience with role-related stressors, their coping behaviors, and their perceptions and use of social support resources. Before beginning the interview, respondents underwent an informed consent process in which they were informed of the study purpose and procedures. Respondents were encouraged to skip any questions they felt uncomfortable answering and were asked for their permission to record the interview. All respondents who agreed to participate signed a statement of informed consent before starting the interview.

All interviews and observations were conducted by the author, a young White woman with a relatively athletic frame who had spent time observing athletic activities as part of the larger research study for which these data were collected. Given this, as well as my experience as a former collegiate athlete, interview participants seemed to perceive me as somewhat of an insider, presuming me to be knowledgeable about the schedules they kept and the strains they faced. Still, I relied upon probing techniques to elicit more elaborate responses from respondents' perspectives to reduce the possibility of misinterpreting their perceptions and/or their lived experiences. Despite not being the primary focus of the interviews, the athletes in the study expressed concerns regarding their academic performance, choice of major, academic and professional aspirations, and educational opportunities. These issues emerged as important aspects of athletes' stress experiences, thus forming the basis for this analysis.

### *Study Participants*

This analysis is based on the interview responses of 56 athletes from across four sport

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<sup>1</sup> These data were collected as part of a larger research effort. Additional information on the broader research design is available upon request.

teams. Just over half of all respondents were female (n=30/56), approximately two-thirds (n=39/56) self-identified as Non-Hispanic White, and about twenty percent identified as Non-Hispanic Black or African American. Seniors were slightly overrepresented, making up about 34% of the sample, relative to other classes which ranged respectively from 15-27% of the sample. Almost half of all respondents reported being on full athletic scholarship, about one-fourth reported being on partial athletic scholarship, and the remaining fourth reported no athletic scholarship. Additionally, about 45% of respondents (n=25) participated in a revenue-generating sport such as men's football, men's or women's basketball, or women's volleyball. Respondents reported a variety of majors, but exercise science was most common (17.85%), followed by general studies (14.3%). Other common majors included health administration, psychology, telecommunications, premedical tracks such as biology, chemistry, and neuroscience, and various sports-related majors (e.g., sport management and marketing). As a group, the athletes in this study held a 3.01 cumulative grade point average.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Interview transcripts were deidentified and analyzed using ATLAS.ti. For confidentiality purposes, respondent names were replaced with pseudonyms and other identifying markers. Sports played were replaced with more generic placeholders. Data were analyzed following an inductive, grounded theory approach to coding (Charmaz, 2014). Such an approach aims to give voice to study participants, and in doing so, allows their beliefs, perceptions, and personal experiences to guide the development of theoretical frameworks (Charmaz, 2014). Accordingly, transcripts were first coded using an open-coding technique in which the author wrote memos and identified a variety of emergent themes and keywords. As patterns began to emerge, themes were organized into categories and codes into families. Themes of strain, including both role-related and institutional strains, became evident in initial passes through the data. Upon recognizing themes of academic engagement and development within excerpts coded for these strains, subsequent passes through the data were taken to more closely explore how athletes perceived such strains to be influencing their academic pursuits.

## **Findings**

Consistent with previous research, role-related and institutional strains emerged as primary stressors to which athletes reported being exposed. Further, as will be discussed below, respondents' discussions of these strains revealed ways that they were perceived to impact athletes' academic engagement and development. A third theme that emerged was a general sense of how, as a result of their institutional and role-related obligations, athletes missed out on certain high impact learning practices and other educational and professional opportunities they felt were important to their professionalization and future career advancement.

### *The Perceived Impacts of Role-Related Strains*

Perceptions of conflict between their numerous academic and athletic role obligations and expectations emerged as a main source of stress in athletes' responses. More often than not, discussion of role strain tended to focus on how athletic role obligations and efforts infringed upon athletes' ability to meet academic obligations, thus harming their academic performance



and engagement. Specifically, respondents across all teams described feeling pulled in multiple directions by their academic and athletic role expectations, which were perceived to be in direct competition with one another for athletes' time and energy.

As respondents described difficulties they experienced balancing their many role responsibilities, several explained that their academic performance suffered as a result of their athletic obligations. For example, respondents reported falling asleep in class, not having the energy to study, neglecting or skipping homework assignments, having concussions or other injuries that detracted from their ability to perform academically, and missing or altogether dropping classes during their sports' seasons when their grades seemed to fall and/or they were at risk of failing classes. Most commonly, athletes complained that they lacked the motivation or focus to complete academic tasks during or after a grueling day of physical activities. For example, when asked which aspects of her role as a college athlete were most stressful, Ilona explained, "I stress about getting things done. Like, after practice, at night, like that's when I have time to study, but I'm so tired, I can't focus." Continuing with a comment about how she could probably manage her time a little better, Ilona highlights how fatigue from the day's physical athletic activities hampered her ability to focus on academic tasks. Similarly, Caleb explained that the most stressful aspect of his role was "definitely balancing, just time and exhaustion in general for academics is difficult... you're just, in general, tired all the time, and trying to work up the desire to get your work done is difficult."

In addition to describing how fatigue from strenuous physical demands of their athletic roles limited the effort athletes put into academic tasks and their ability to stay awake in class, respondents described the dangerous cycle by which fatigue and conflicting role obligations could easily lead to academic troubles. For instance, having faced challenges related to his academic standing, Nelson, a member of the men's non-revenue generating team, explained:

Well [in sport] like we have a lot of morning, you know, 6 in the morning wake-up calls. We have to go run, and stuff like that. That can really, you know, set the tone for a day, and you can be a lot [more tired] during the day and sometimes you have the desire to miss classes and you know, you don't want to [go]. Oh this class is not that important today, they're not checking attendance. And doing stuff like that just really makes you fall behind, so.

Like Nelson, many respondents described how the rigor of their athletic demands came at the expense of their academic engagement and rarely was it the other way around. For example, never did a respondent report skipping or falling asleep in practice because of the time and energy spent on academic obligations, nor did they describe skipping workouts on account of academic strain, though there were incidents of arriving late, having a bad workout, or sleeping through morning practices on account of exhaustion.

In explaining how they coped with the conflicting expectations of their academic and athletic roles, respondents seemed to take a few different approaches. Some described having to make difficult decisions on a near daily basis about which set of obligations to prioritize. For example, Gabrielle, a member of the women's non-revenue generating team explained,

It's just really stressful managing, like, "Oh, well, do I wanna go sleep, and be prepared for the next practice, or do I want to do my homework and be prepared for class?" It's kind of a really hard decision. For me, sometimes I'll sit down and do my homework, and

I'm just like, I literally cannot keep my eyes open, because I'm so exhausted. So that's really stressful, like, being torn between that. Like, "Oh, do I go make a cup of coffee at 6:30 at night so I can stay up and do my homework, or do I just, like, give in and go to sleep," you know? That's really, really stressful.

As highlighted here, decisions about which role obligations to prioritize and when, were perceived as stressful by many respondents, especially those with salient academic identities or who described themselves as "caring about school," because they knew that choosing sleep over academics could have implications for their grades and academic achievements. Still, for many respondents, the need for sleep often won out and unfulfilled academic expectations emerged as a secondary source of strain.

Other respondents, faced with conflicting and overwhelming athletic and academic demands, and especially the tendency for athletic role obligations to interfere with academic tasks, described coping with such role strains by learning to settle for poorer academic outcomes. Many of these such respondents described adjusting their academic aspirations downward, and putting less effort toward school-related tasks, rationalizing that they were doing "well enough" academically. For example, when asked to estimate the number of hours per week that she dedicated to her coursework, Victoria, a freshman member of the women's non-revenue-generating team explained:

I used to try to do over, like—I was a *try-hard*, I'm not gonna lie, in high school, but now with like [sport] and stuff, I kind of just do the necessary amount and not really more than I have to. (laughs)

As shown here, some athletes believed that strain posed by their extensive athletic role obligations almost necessitated a decreased commitment to their academic roles, leading some to invest only the bare minimum in their academic pursuits. Substantiating previous research on the topic (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1991), this finding demonstrates how some athletes' experiences with role conflict led them to disengage academically.

Still, other respondents did not mention much about their academic development in relation to their discussion of role strain, treating their academic obligations as intersecting and taken-for-granted components of their roles as collegiate athletes. As such, some respondents explained that they managed their considerable and conflicting obligations based on years of experience as students and as athletes, or that they had always prioritized their athletic roles over their academic roles, and were therefore somewhat unconcerned about their academic performance relative to the efforts necessary to fulfil their athletic goals.

Overall, these findings suggest that while some athletes were content with the current balance of their academic and athletic role obligations, others experienced significant difficulty coping with their obligations. This led to increased stress and tough decisions about how to best meet academic obligations, decisions that were perceived as a secondary source of strain. Finally, others coped with these role strains by making adjustments to their academic goals and expectations.

### *Institutional Strain: Scheduling, Academic Oversight, and Institutional Priorities*

In discussing the various stressors to which they were exposed, respondents also

described strains related to the structural organization of the institution and its operations. For example, consistent with previous research, athletes described strain related to the numerous and tightly scheduled activities they were expected to complete each week and the perception that activities were closely monitored by the athletic department. In addition to their workout schedules, which included practice as well as strength and conditioning activities, athletes' daily schedules were filled out by meetings, treatments, team meals and activities, recruitment events, community outreach efforts, study hall, and class. Athletes also traveled regularly, causing them to miss class and disrupting their regular study habits and environments. As they described stress associated with such packed schedules, several athletes commented on how the mandatory nature of their athletic-oriented events and activities took time away from their studies.

Illustrating this, Gabrielle explained that the most stressful experience she has had as a collegiate athlete involved finding time to prepare for a chemistry exam amidst her already hectic practice schedule and three back-to-back days of recruiting events. She said, "I'm just like, 'There's no way I can do all of this,' but like, we were expected to be at everything." This was a common sentiment among athletes who felt that even the "voluntary" athletic activities were mandatory in the eyes of various athletic department staff members. Unfortunately, athletes perceived such packed schedules to often be the cause of poor academic performances. For example, though Gabrielle reported skipping one of her recruitment events to get a few extra hours of study in, she explained that she still ended up getting a D on her chemistry exam because she "wasn't prepared." She concluded by saying, "it happens, so, I did the best I could." Rationalizing that poor academic outcomes are to be accepted, if not expected, among athletes given their many athletic obligations, Gabrielle demonstrates how institutionally mandated activities can be a source of stress and can be perceived to inhibit academic achievement.

In coping with scheduling challenges and associated academic strains, athletes reported consulting their coaches and academic advisors who were perceived to help with time management by advising athletes to make lists of academic objectives and to use planners to help carve out time for school work. Still, athletes experienced tension surrounding the institutional prioritization of their athletic role obligations over academics. For example, while they described having to miss class time due to athletic competition schedules, respondents from different teams reported that missing *athletic* obligations for academic purposes was generally frowned upon within the athletic department. Having explained how his coach joked around about whether they were students first or athletes first, Leonard explained that he and his teammates knew that coaches expected athletic role obligations to take priority, saying:

If we were like, messing up [in practice], or we told him, like, we had [to be at a scheduled course-related activity], [the coach] was just like, "I don't know why you guys do this, you guys are supposed to be here for [sport], blah blah blah," and he was just *upset* at the fact that we're actually like, doing schoolwork I guess. Which makes no sense.

As shown here, athletes like Leonard seemed genuinely confused as to how institutional personnel could be angered or upset by athletes' commitment to their academic obligations given that their roles as collegiate athletes depended on their fulfillment of their roles as students. Abigail, a junior member of the women's non-revenue generating team, also experienced strain as a result of such conflicting messages, explaining that she thought it was supposed to be that

... academics comes before athletics, but I always feel like it's switched, just because like, everything has to work around your [sport] schedule. And then if there's an issue, it's always, like, a big deal if you have an exam during a certain practice, it's always like, "No, no, now you have to do all this thing." Like, you're making me stressed, and I'm like, "Okay, well, I thought academics came first," but yeah, I definitely feel like that is the way it went. (Laughs)

Highlighting how athletic schedules were perceived to be prioritized above scheduled academic activities, Abigail's response underscores how institutional scheduling was seen as a source of stress and could have the perceived consequence of eroding academic engagement.

Strain related to institutional scheduling also emerged in respondents' discussions of their academic majors and related coursework. Specifically, in describing their choice of major or their long-term career goals, respondents from different teams mentioned changing their majors because the coursework required conflicted with their athletic schedules. For instance, when asked what her major was, Kelsey explained that she "bounced around a lot" before settling on a major. Having started as an education major, Kelsey elaborated by saying,

...that was not a favorite of, I guess, through like athletics, because it's very difficult when you get into [a certain phase of the major]... there are only like four classes that you have to take together and they're only offered at certain times, so if you have prior requirements, like, I would have to go to practice and stuff, it might interfere with my practice time and there's nothing I can do about it in terms of schooling.

Similarly, Tristan described changing his major three different times before getting "stuck" with general studies. Asked why he changed his major so many times, Tristan explained:

I changed due to our practice schedule. We had practice from [time 1 to time 2] and according to my academic advisors, it was in conflict with my prerequisites for my biology, my chems, and my organic sciences.

Like Tristan, a few other athletes described feeling discouraged that they were not meeting their academic or professional goals, especially those who reported being unable to major in the field that they wanted or being switched to general studies because of scheduling constraints or progress toward degree requirements. Further, respondents indicated that the general studies major was not viewed particularly favorably among athletes and some were uncertain as to how it would help them professionally after they graduated.

While some respondents found ways around athletic scheduling constraints as described above, for example, taking extra courses in the summer, most reported deferring to their academic advisors to help guide them in selecting their courses and majors. In describing how she solicited support from her academic advisor in an effort to manage her stress, Abigail explained, "he's on the ball, and he'll just do my schedule for me, like, he's pretty cool." While Abigail seemed to appreciate the control her advisor was willing to take over her academic decisions, other respondents expressed concern over what little say they perceived themselves to have over academic matters. For example, in describing why he felt that meetings with his academic advisor were a source of stress, Lincoln explained, "I never really knew *why* I was taking classes, and stuff like that. He never sat down and was just like, "here's the plan," and I

kind of *wanted* that.” Despite these concerns, Lincoln and other athletes described following academic support personnel’s guidance even when it resulted in coursework or an academic major that did not reflect their professional ambitions, either because they trusted their advisors’ intentions or they felt they didn’t have a choice. Still, some athletes expressed frustration and discouragement over changes to their majors given that such changes were perceived to undermine their long-term academic or professional goals.

Perceptions of strain related to academic oversight were also prevalent in respondents’ discussions of academic support provided within the athletic department. For instance, many described wanting more guidance from academic support staff, both in terms of improving their grades and cultivating their academic interests, as some felt that athletic department personnel had little concern for their academic and professional development. Consistent with existing scholarship (e.g., Comeaux & Crandall, 2019), these respondents perceived an institutional emphasis on academic eligibility over fostering athletes’ academic aspirations or achievements. For example, Cody explained that the only time he perceived athletic department personnel to care about athletes’ academics was when their academic eligibility was at stake. Similarly, Caroline, a sophomore member of the women’s revenue-generating team explained that the most difficult aspects of being both an athlete and a student is “A lot of the scheduling, [and] the lack of concern for academic excellence.” When probed about where this “lack of concern” comes from, Caroline continued, saying:

Um just, athletics in general. Like, they want you to do well academically, but not at the detriment of your athletic excellence. So you have a gross amount of [profit athletes and others] who end up having to switch their majors because they don’t have enough classes for their majors because they get duped out of taking the classes they wanna take because their coaches want them to have a high GPA to make their sport look good. At the detriment of them graduating on time and being in the major that they want to be in.

As expressed here, some respondents believed that the institutional practices designed to keep athletes eligible, boost GPAs, and show good progress toward the completion of their major actually operated to undermine athletes’ educational aspirations and in some cases, could prevent them from graduating on time or at all.

Perceptions of an institutional focus on maintaining academic eligibility over cultivating academic excellence was reiterated through respondents’ discussions of their grades and the processes through which grades were tracked. For example, while several respondents reported that their grades were monitored by coaches or academic support staff, especially early on in their collegiate careers, they also reported that grade monitoring dropped off for athletes who met grade thresholds (though exactly what these thresholds were was not mentioned), whereas athletes who struggled academically reported experiencing greater academic surveillance. And while several athletes praised the academic resources to which they had access within the athletic department (e.g., tutors, mentors, advisors, computer labs, etc.), there was a sense that academic guidance was directed largely toward athletes who fell short on grade thresholds and for whom discussions about grades were a source of stress because they could put their athletic roles in jeopardy.

On the other hand, athletes who were performing relatively well in school seemed to experience academic strains apart from academic supervision, perhaps because they perceived their academic achievements to be more self-directed versus being institutionally cultivated. For

example, in describing stressors associated with his role as a collegiate athlete, Kurt said, “I mean, I kind of put a little extra stress on myself because I try to get straight As, but that’s really not necessary stress.... there’s a few of us that try to get straight As, but there’s a – most of the time, most of our teammates, they just try to get decent grades.” Referring to his desire for good grades as an “unnecessary stress,” Kurt’s response further illustrates how institutional ideas of academic success may have been conceptualized as or reduced to a minimum standard of doing “well enough.” Taken together, these scheduling and academic advising and support practices were perceived to reflect an institutional prioritization of athletic achievements over academic engagement and distinction, which several athletes interpreted as stressful aspects of their collegiate athletic experience. Further, these findings indicate that for some respondents, such practices were perceived to erode academic engagement and undermine academic and professional goals.

### *Resulting Consequences: Concerns about Missed Opportunities and Professional Development*

Amidst respondents’ discussions of their collegiate experiences emerged a sense among some that they were missing out on important areas of academic development and educational opportunities, including high impact practices as described by Kuh (2008). For example, though such opportunities were never specifically probed by the interviewer, a subset of respondents mentioned not being able to participate in certain educational activities such as undergraduate research and internships because of their athletic role requirements and expectations. Further, a few respondents emphasized that institutional structure and strains may actually prevent athletes from cultivating their academic interests or professional aspirations. For example, when asked at the end of the interview what advice she’d give to new LMU athletes, Caroline, a member of the women’s revenue-generating team, explained:

This is not a good school to come here and not know where you wanna be. ‘Cause you’re gonna end up graduating with the lowest degree that means the least. Because that’s usually what fits into most athletic schedules. And they’re not gonna say anything to you about it, they’re not gonna press it, they’re not gonna help push that drive for you. So it’s not a good place to be if you’re like, “I don’t know if I want to be a teacher or if I want to paint or if I want to travel the world” this is not a good school to find yourself.

Further emphasizing how the athletic department at LMU was not focused on nurturing athletes’ academic and professional interests, Caroline believed that athletes at LMU had few opportunities to explore such interests. Upon being probed as to why she felt this way, Caroline continued:

Just because I’m an athlete. I feel like, and I get alerts from them all the time, like, you know when I was in [an introductory biology class], which is super early to be getting alerts, I had alerts for like internships, and through wildlife research studies. I got alerts for like, work study programs in biology. And I get all of those, like, mini scholarships for stu—stuff like that, things that I *would* do, but I *can’t* do because of my time constraints. So, I feel like it’s mostly just ‘cause of athletics you’re not given the time to find yourself. So.

As indicated here, some athletes lamented that their role obligations and institutional constraints further prevented them from taking advantage of high impact learning opportunities that were available. Additionally, some feared that without these high impact educational opportunities, they would be unable to realize their true interests and aspirations.

Internships were another activity that respondents felt they were missing out as a result of their athletic roles. Without being asked, quite a few athletes mentioned wanting to get an internship to help develop their interests and career prospects; however, only one of the fifty-six athletes interviewed reported actually having completed an internship, and one other, a student in her final year of athletic eligibility, reported having an internship lined up for the summer *after* graduation. For others, internships were a goal for the future. For example, Cassidy, a senior member of the women's revenue-generating team, explained that one of the most stressful aspects of her role as a student-athlete has been athletic performance pressures. She continued by saying:

And also as I've gotten older, realizing that I can't play [sport] forever, but I still have to perform and you know I'm playing my sport, but I also realize that I have to figure out my future when other kids can, they have time to get, you know - [they] can do internships, so like that was, I didn't have the opportunity to, so that was a huge, it's been a huge stress for me.

Envious of students who are able to participate in internships and other career building opportunities, Cassidy also expressed concern that her athletic obligations and performance pressures had put her behind in her long-term career goals, explaining later:

I would like to go to grad school to be a [physical rehabilitation specialist], my plan is for next year. I'm gonna have to take a year and earn some money and get my, you know volunteering hours and maybe an internship and kind of just *experience* what I really want to do, and like, shadow and stuff like that, and then I'll apply next fall to grad schools around the country.

Although she seemed to have devised a plan to get the educational experiences she had not been able to have as a college athlete, Cassidy indicated that those high impact learning opportunities (i.e., service learning, internship, and shadowing experiences) were pertinent to her figuring out the exact direction of her career trajectory, and thus, comprised one of the key reasons she was putting off graduate school by a year.

Beyond internships, respondents expressed concern that extensive role demands coupled with the structure of collegiate athletics limited the opportunities athletes had to build professional relationships or to learn about professional opportunities that might exist. As Jason, a senior member of the men's non-revenue generating team and an active member of the student-athlete advisory committee explained:

... we have general body meeting once a month and we'll bring, you know, career service people in there so try to get the athletes things that, you know, as a student, you have a lot more time to learn about, you know, to build your professional life, and as an athlete, a lot of that's given up because you're like, you have school and you have your athletics,

and so, you're not gonna take any class outside of, you know, that you don't have to.

While these types of concerns were not expressed often in the data, the *way* they were described seemed to suggest such limitations were common knowledge within athletic communities, as suggested here.

Travel opportunities such as study abroad programs were another high impact opportunity in which athletes didn't seem to be participating. Like undergraduate research, service learning, and other high impact practices (Kuh, 2008), study abroad programs were rarely mentioned by respondents, though some athletes described wanting the opportunity to travel. For example, Brandon explained that one of his main goals for after college was to travel because he hadn't yet had many travel opportunities outside of sport. He continued by saying "And I really just want to enjoy and experience different cultures and sightseeing a little bit." Acknowledging that his sports participation did offer him some travel experience, Brandon craved greater exposure to different places and cultures.

Surprisingly, the only time a study abroad program actually came up in interview transcripts was in discussion of athlete turnover. In describing the process by which walk-ons slowly disappeared from the men's non-revenue generating team's roster, Mark said:

Then also with our incoming class there were [several] walk-ons. Of those [several], there's only 1 left. He's currently in Rome, studying abroad. He's still on the team. 'Cause he's a walk-on, Coach didn't really mind, he's more of just kind of a [practice participant], he's never gonna start or anything.

As signaled here, respondents seemed to believe that study abroad programs were not even an option for "serious" athletes, as it appeared to be understood that coaches and perhaps other institutional staff would be unlikely to approve of starters or scholarship athletes being away for such an extensive period of time. Lending potential support to Ishaq and Bass's (2019) findings that coaches may act as a barrier to high impact practices such as study abroad programs, these findings indicate that athletes may not even explore the possibility of such programs because they assume that they already *know* what the athletic department's position on the matter would be. On the other hand, it is possible that the lack of mention of study abroad programs was indicative of athletes' prioritization of their athletic goals over such educational opportunities and thus, not a concern.

## Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that there are a variety of ways that institutional and role-related strains are perceived to impact athletes' academic engagement and development. Physically exhausting training schedules and extensive and contradictory athletic role obligations drained athletes of the time and energy they felt they needed to successfully meet their academic obligations and performance goals. Although previous research has suggested that role conflict may be more common among men participating in revenue-generating sports, the majority of whom are Black (Lance, 2004; Sack & Thiel, 1985), findings presented here show that men and women across sports (i.e., revenue- and non-revenue generating sports) regularly contended with conflicting role expectations.



While some athletes were indifferent about their inability to successfully fulfil academic obligations, others felt it necessary to make decisions about or adjustments to their academic aspirations and expectations. Consistent with Adler and Adler's early findings (1985, 1991), some athletes coped with such role strains by decreasing their personal academic expectations and goals and investing just enough effort to meet those goals. However, contrary to Adler and Adler's early findings, many other respondents remained frustrated by the ways athletic role obligations, through their effects on athletes' time, energy, and focus, hampered respondents' ability to complete academic tasks. As these respondents described having to make stressful decisions about whether to forego academic efforts in favor of sleep or relaxation, their experiences illustrated how, by threatening athletes' academic achievements, role conflict could produce and expose athletes to secondary strains.

Institutional stressors such as athletic schedules and advising practices were perceived to have different sorts of impacts on athletes' academic engagement and development. For example, these constraints were perceived to limit the courses athletes could take, the majors they chose, and the time they were able to commit to academic activities, all of which athletes described as frustrating and/or stressful aspects of their collegiate experiences. Such rigid scheduling constraints coupled with conflicting messages about institutional priorities gave athletes the perplexing and uneasy sense that their academic outcomes and achievements were not highly valued by the institution. This was stressful for athletes who reported high levels of academic engagement and achievement because they wanted greater academic guidance and support, but felt their educational interests and professional development were somewhat insignificant to the institution or support personnel. On the other hand, athletes who reported lower levels of academic achievement indicated that academic oversight was an additional source of stress because it decreased respondents' sense of mastery and control, and often disrupted their educational and professional aspirations through changes to their majors and coursework.

Generally, strains related to scheduling and academic advising practices were perceived to reflect an institutional emphasis on athletic excellence and/or the maintenance of academic eligibility over academic achievement, lending support to existing literature which has documented athletic department cultures that disregard athletes' academic aspirations and achievements (e.g., Comeaux & Crandall, 2019; Eitzen, 2009). These findings are also consistent with academic clustering research which shows how NCAA progress toward degree requirements combined with an institutional prioritization of athletic activities and schedules can lead to changes in athletes' majors and substantial proportions (e.g., 25% or more) of a team's participants becoming progressively concentrated in a single major (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987; Fountain & Finley, 2011; Paule-Koba, 2015). As with clustering research, which indicates these practices can impact athletes across gender and sports teams (e.g., Case et al., 1987; Paule-Koba 2015, 2019), findings presented here show that both men and women participating in different sports types (i.e., revenue-generating and non-revenue generating sports) perceived an institutional disregard for their academic goals and were frustrated by the ways they perceived institutional strains and academic guidance to impact their academic development. Further, these findings highlight how in deferring to the guidance of academic support personnel, some athletes ended up in majors that deviated from their academic interests or occupational aspirations. This corroborates Paule-Koba's (2019) findings which documented among approximately one-third of athletes surveyed, discrepancies between academic major and professional goals, and identified academic support personnel as an influential voice in athletes' selection of their majors.

Beyond these consequences, athletes' interview responses revealed concerns they had about their futures. Specifically, a few athletes lamented not having gotten to participate in high impact educational opportunities such as internships, undergraduate research, and service learning opportunities because of their roles as athletes. While most accepted this reality, rationalizing that they would be able to participate in such activities after their collegiate careers were over, a few regretted not being able to take advantage of these opportunities sooner. Overall, however, the lack of mention of such high impact learning practices appeared to signify the taken-for-granted notion that such opportunities were simply not available to collegiate athletes who perceived that their priority was to be athletics.

While it has now been more than thirty years since Adler and Adler (1985, 1991) first wrote about athletes' experiences of role strain and the consequences those strains posed for athletes' academic development, findings presented here contribute to the literature by suggesting that athletes, both men and women participating in different sports, still struggle with how institutional and role-related strains impact their academic growth and engagement. By applying a sociological lens to athletes' lived stress experiences, we can better understand how the institutional structures and internal support systems might be altered to intervene in the stress process in a way that improves athletes' academic development and overall well-being.

### *Implications and Recommendations*

These findings have important implications for athlete development, as they suggest collegiate athletic programs may be falling short in their educational promises to athletes. However, findings also signal potential points for intervention should the NCAA and its member institutions be interested in developing specific steps that could be taken to improve the academic experiences of athletes. Though it may require ideological shifts in perceptions about the overarching purpose of college sport participation, as well as organizational modifications to collegiate athletic programs and support centers, it seems that the first step toward improving athletes' academic engagement would involve finding incremental ways to relax institutional constraints on athletes' time and activities. Relaxing such constraints, even modestly, could increase the time and energy that athletes can devote to cultivating their academic identities and to better caring for themselves during times of stress.

Additionally, applying the insights of stress theory (Pearlin et al., 1981), which suggest that coping and social support resources are an effective way to reduce stressors and their consequences, collegiate athletic departments could aim to reduce the physical and psychological effects of strain and improve academic outcomes by enhancing the coping and support resources to which athletes have access. As findings suggest, athletes seem to *want* additional academic guidance and/or support that moves beyond the grade monitoring and academic planning that was perceived to be the norm within the academic support center. While instrumental, problem-focused support (i.e., that which is directed at addressing a stressor directly) is certainly warranted to assist athletes at risk of becoming academically ineligible, findings indicate that other types of problem-focused supports might also be effective at reducing athletes' exposure to strain and its academic consequences. For example, implementing department-wide policies that 1) prioritize athletes' academic obligations and 2) excuse athletes from athletic activities for formal academic opportunities that might emerge, could both reduce strain and provide athletes with reassurance that their academic efforts are recognized and valued. Similarly, findings highlight a need for improved informational support and mentorship for athletes wanting to more

effectively cultivate their academic interests and professional goals. To enhance the support academic advising personnel already offer, athletic departments might consider drawing upon other resources to provide more tailored mentorship opportunities. For example, athletic departments could activate community relationships and alumni networks to connect athletes with mentors whose careers and academic experiences align with athletes' specific academic goals and professional interests.

Consistent with recommendations put forth by Paule-Koba (2019), findings also suggest a need for athletes to be more directly involved in their selection of courses and majors, especially given the implications these decisions could have for athletes' long-term professional outcomes. To meet these needs, academic support centers might consider integrating comprehensive career planning services into advising practices early on in athletes' collegiate careers if such services are not already in place. Coordination between career planning and academic advising could help to better identify and anticipate course-related conflicts and other unforeseen challenges to the successful completion of athletes' chosen majors. Identifying and troubleshooting such difficulties in advance could help to reduce the likelihood of unwanted or unexpected changes being made to athletes' academic trajectories and consequently, their career paths. Additionally, such early intervention could help athletes and support personnel develop creative strategies through which athletes can more effectively meet their academic goals and obtain greater access to various educational opportunities.

Finally, in line with existing research on athletes' academic engagement (e.g., Comeaux et al., 2011; Comeaux & Crandall, 2019), findings indicate that collegiate athletic programs should look for innovative ways to involve athletes in meaningful educational opportunities including high impact practices. Understanding inequitable educational experiences and outcomes across race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and sport type is critical to developing strategies to effectively and meaningfully involve all athletes in these activities (Comeaux, 2013; Comeaux & Crandall, 2019). To this end, athletic departments should implement data driven tools such as the Career Transition Scorecard (Comeaux, 2013; Comeaux & Crandall, 2019) that have been developed to help athletic department personnel identify institution-specific educational inequalities, and to design institutionally tailored plans for improving athletes' educational opportunities (Comeaux, 2013; Comeaux & Crandall, 2019). Additionally, athletic departments must embrace the importance of athletes' participation in high impact educational practices. From there, athletic departments can get creative with the resources to which they have access through their various campus and community connections. For example, athletic departments could activate networks across campus to find flexible research opportunities in which athletes across sports could engage during summers or off seasons. Similarly, they could draw upon alumni networks and local community resources to identify internship opportunities that might accommodate athletes' specific schedules and constraints. Athletic departments could also coordinate with colleges and universities abroad to develop exchange programs that would allow athletes to continue their athletic training with coaches and other teams while studying abroad. In attempting to provide all athletes with greater access to various high impact practices, institutions are likely to improve athletes' educational and career prospects, while also improving athletes' overall satisfaction with their college experience.

While some of these recommendations may seem unrealistic, they refer directly to areas in which athletes perceived a need for change. Faithful attempts on behalf of the institution to reduce the number and severity of the strains to which athletes are exposed, to improve the support resources to which athletes have access, and to increase the educational opportunities

available to athletes should all serve to enhance athletes' academic development, while also promoting health and well-being.

### *Limitations*

It is important to note that this study was limited in a few important ways. First, analysis was based on data collected from a sample of collegiate athletes at a single institution and findings do not necessarily reflect the perceptions of athletes in other institutional contexts and NCAA divisions. Second, this study was based on data gathered in an effort to understand athletes' perceptions of stress. As such, questions were focused on athletes' negative experiences within collegiate athletics and were unlikely to elicit responses regarding the positive educational opportunities athletes may have had. It is quite possible that the concerns athletes raised within this research are counteracted by other more affirmative educational experiences offered within the institution and through athletic participation. This study, nevertheless, offers valuable insights as to key areas in which athletes believe their stress could be reduced, social support improved, and their academic development enhanced, thus aiding in our continued understanding of the college athlete experience. By taking a more holistic view of athlete well-being, we can better understand the impacts of stress and academic engagement on athletes' long-term personal and professional development.

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